



BOOK 12

**The
Path
of
Truth**

Bible Lessons for Youth and Adults

The Path of Truth, Vol 12

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Presentation

Education for young people and adults should be aimed at developing strategies that facilitate the learning process. Although The Path of Truth is intended to be used in informal spaces (Sunday school, small groups, cell groups, etc.), it's designed for permanent and continuous formation. Thus, it's expected that people have a process of learning the Bible as complete as possible, where they can also recycle their knowledge, sharing their experiences lived through the years.

In this book, The Path of Truth 12, we present the first quarter "Tips for Life," with some prominent themes that we find in the book of Proverbs. In the second quarter, we look at the theme of "Responsible Stewards," doing a study and reflection on the theme of stewardship in the light of the Bible. In the third quarter, "Teachings and poetry," we'll look at the books of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. And to end the year, we'll dedicate the fourth quarter to "The church: model for the world," looking at 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

Teaching adults and young people carries a great responsibility. But it's also very satisfying when you can see the growth in their life of faith. The time and creativity you use for your classes will show when you teach the lesson and will motivate students to learn and then return.

Have no doubt that your preparation and dedication to this valuable work will pay off in time. Take heart in this new year of teaching. Ask God for grace and wisdom to fulfil this wonderful task that the Lord has entrusted to you.

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters," (Colossians 3:23).

Patricia Picavea
Editor of Ministerial Publications

Recommendations

The purpose of teaching should be focused on helping and guiding people in the knowledge of God and growth in their life of faith so that they live lives that show a living church.

When we share in a class and encourage the participation of the attendees, they find a space to clarify their doubts, tell of their experiences and grow together with other brothers and sisters in Christ.

For faith to stay alive, it needs food, and part of this is found in communion with God and with the community of faith. It's also found in the Word. For this reason, we encourage you to see the biblical teaching space as a fundamental space for your students where together they can enrich their lives.

Some suggestions:

1. Goals and prizes: You can offer a simple prize for the attendees of the group or class who during each quarter learn all the memory verses and say them in front of the class and attend on time.
2. Certificate: if you wish, you can give a certificate to those who were faithful or didn't miss more than one or two classes in the quarter. This emphasizes the fact that they are making progress in their learning and can motivate others to attend faithfully.
3. Enjoy the study time and encourage your group do so as well. Trust the Lord and pray that He'll bring the Word to the hearts of those who attend the class or study group.

Lesson preparation and presentation:

1. Begin by praying that the Lord will help you to prepare well and give you wisdom and grace to get the message for your own life first.
2. Read the lesson several times during the week to deepen your understanding of it.
3. Gather your work materials. A dictionary, a Bible dictionary and to the extent possible, apart from your Bible, versions of Bibles other than the NIV that we use in this book. Also have pencils, erasers, and paper.
4. To begin preparing the lesson, read the Purpose of the lesson and keep it in mind as you prepare the lesson.
5. Be sure to find and read all the Bible passages in the lesson.
6. Take a sheet of paper and copy the outline of the lesson. Write at each point a guide to help you when teaching the class.
7. Follow each point as indicated in the book, ask the class questions and make the lesson as participatory as possible. The participation of the class members is of great help in the learning process.
8. Each lesson has a Memory Verse. Have it memorized yourself before coming to class, and take time during the class for people to memorize it.
9. End the lesson with prayer, being on the lookout for a student's need that arose from the lesson and pray for him or her.
10. Maintain contact with everyone in your class or study group. Use all available means, and make them feel that they are important to you and God and that you are praying for them.

Tips for Life

First Quarter

The benefits of wisdom
Tips for a balanced life
What pleases God?
Adultery isn't an option
Be careful how we speak!
The mathematics of generosity
Anger management
Tips for parents and children
Four things God hates
A life without alcohol
Beware of deceitful people
Lessons from three small and wise creatures
A woman who fears the Lord



The benefits of wisdom

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

Study Passage: Proverbs 2:5-22

Memory Verse: “For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding”
Proverbs 2:6.

Lesson aim: To get to know God’s benefits for those who live wisely.

Introduction

You can start the class by asking your students to give examples or testimonies of wise and foolish decisions, and their respective consequences. As they respond, help them recognize that we all make decisions every day. Some of them are so important that they change our lives forever, like when we ask God to forgive our sins and recognized Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Other decisions are made in the area of our everyday lives as we choose to go out to study, work or perform a task.

Every decision inevitably has consequences: positive if the decision is wise, or negative if we choose foolishly. Taking as reference the shared examples and testimonials, divide your students in groups to create a proper definition of wise and foolish decisions.

Then ask each group to choose one of their members to read the results while you write them on the whiteboard. Conclude the activity by explaining that in the biblical sense, a wise person not only is someone who knows (the word “wisdom” has a Semitic root from the Assyrian meaning “to know”), but also one who puts that knowledge into practice. In today’s changing world full of challenges, living wisely is essential. We need to know Christ and live as He lived, always applying the truths of the Word of God. This is the way that we can experience the benefits of the wise life, which we’ll develop in this lesson.

I. Knowledge and the wisdom of God (Proverbs 2:5-7)

The book of Proverbs is an anthology of Hebrew wisdom that wasn’t merely intellectual or secular, but teaches us to apply the principles of a revealed faith to tasks of daily living. The search for wisdom inevitably

leads us to God, the source of all knowledge and intelligence (v.6).

Therefore, the first benefit of living wisely is having communion with Him, enjoying the blessing of being able to dwell in His presence, finding our guidance and comfort in His Word, and receiving the power to live in holiness and serve Him. Today, gurus, philosophies and materials promote self-help programs that promise people the knowledge necessary to live wisely. However, the reality is that it’s not possible to find healthy wisdom outside of the true source that’s God. As we face life’s challenges and conflicts, many of which we cannot easily explain rationally, we believers have the wonderful experience of communion with God, an experience that encourages us to walk in integrity, make wise decisions and walk through this life under the powerful protection of our Lord, becoming agents of transformation of the reality that surrounds us. “This way, wisdom becomes the ability given by God to intelligently deal with varied life experiences, resulting in blessing for all those involved” (Taylor, Richard. Theological Dictionary Beacon. USA, 1995, p.611).

Wisdom is a gift from God (v.7a; James 1:5). We need to search for it with sincerity as we advance down a difficult path, but whose reward is victory over temptations and the divine intelligence to live according to His will.

While all aspects of wisdom aren’t manifested immediately in our lives, as we trust, honour and have fellowship with God, we’ll go through a process of constant growth that will encourage us to make better and better decisions according to God’s purpose for our lives. In this process we’ll learn to seek the will of God, be guided by His Word, and grow in prayer and faith as we make new decisions daily.

Questions:

- Where does the search for wisdom take us?
- How can we access wisdom?

II. Understanding the right path (Proverbs 2:8-11)

The second benefit of wisdom is getting understanding and freedom. It's God himself who takes care of granting us the necessary power to live righteously and walk on the right path (v.8). One of the keys to a victorious life is found in the ability that God grants us to understand reality from His point of view, the perspective of holiness. When we give God our all and walk in holiness, we'll journey through life safely and in victory. In addition, the experience of walking in holiness allows us to live in freedom, as John says: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). So, the sort of wisdom we need to long for isn't the sort obtained through human reflection, but rather by divine revelation. This wisdom is embodied in Jesus Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). "In His followers, the signs of wisdom are humility, holiness and likeness to Christ (James 3:13-18)" (Taylor, Richard. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.612).

James 1:5-6 says: "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind." We should ask in faith that God will supply us with wisdom, knowing that He'll give it to us. Therefore, when we ask for wisdom, we'll receive one of the greatest treasures that God has kept for His children who walk in righteousness: The ability to build a full, good and abundant life under His divine protection.

Wisdom enables us to develop a life built on the values of the kingdom of God. These values are biblical values, which form the foundation for individual and community fulfillment. Although similar values exist in the world around us, only the Creator can transform them by granting them a broader perspective, His purpose for humanity - wise living.

The book of Proverbs exalts the value of wisdom, self-discipline, education, and provides guidance on different aspects of social, civil and personal life. For this reason, this passage shows the need to discriminate

between values, the foundational axiom being the fear of God.

Although in society, practices and values contrary to those of the Kingdom of God are promoted, we believers who live wisely will have the understanding and the strength not to negotiate or compromise the values that God himself engraved in our hearts, enabling us to travel on the right track.

Questions:

- What are the signs that wisdom lives in us? Give practical examples.
- How is integrity related to acting justly and speaking the truth from the heart?

III. Freedom from bad company (Proverbs 2:12-15)

The third benefit of wisdom is prevention from taking the wrong path (v.12). Every day we hear news in the media of people who have chosen paths opposite to the path of righteousness and holiness. These stories reflect human failure of those who have moved away from God and are going along paths that are enslaving them to sin and death. But those who choose God's path of wisdom will receive the necessary power to reject the attractions that these worldly roads offer us, attractions that end up in ruin. This passage describes the character of the 'wicked people' who speak perversely. They walk along dark paths, rejoicing in the wrong and delighting in pulling other people along that same perverse path with them. Their paths are crooked, that is, contrary to what is truly and morally right (Chapman, Purkiser, Wolf and Harper. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 3. USA: CNP, 1985, p.351).

Wisdom enables us to correctly evaluate our actions and spiritually interpret the consequences, thus avoiding the company of foolish and wicked people who are immersed in darkness, who even invite others to enter those paths, seeking through arguments and sinful actions to overturn righteous speech and good behavior.

These foolish people not only do wrong, but enjoy it. They follow their own desires, which they also spread and promote. Faced with a choice between two different paths of life, if we choose wisely God's path of wisdom, we'll enjoy abundant life, peace and righteousness. The wisdom of Proverbs puts God at the center of our lives.

This biblical wisdom finds its full revelation in Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:3), whom the Apostle Paul called “the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). Wisdom, therefore, implies receiving God’s grace, and living daily in harmony with His redemptive purposes for us.

Questions:

- Name three examples of how sinful arguments and actions are promoted. How must the believer face them?

IV. Freedom from the adulterous woman (or man) (Proverbs 2:16-19)

The fourth benefit of living wisely is being delivered from adultery (v.16). This proverb is talking about being trapped by prostitutes or immoral persons. This expression “adulterous woman” refers in the text to a lady “who has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God” (v. 17). This represents the path that opposes the way of wisdom, and whose end is death.

In this advice from a teacher to his young student, wisdom is presented as power to deliver the young person from the trap of the adulteress, not allowing himself to listen to persuasive words (Proverbs 2:16b). Well, as the foolish man abandoned the straight path to follow wicked paths, this woman abandoned her husband, affecting her relationship with God and abandoning the covenant she had made with Him, also affecting her relatives. Whoever falls into the trap of adultery will only find a path of sin whose end is death.

In today’s world, extramarital relationships pose a real temptation, either in the workplace or the neighborhood and even in the church. We need to be aware of these temptations, which will only lead to pain and often broken marriages. God calls us to walk in the Spirit, not satisfying the lusts of the flesh, as described in Galatians 5:16.

Wisdom will then preserve us from falling into temptations that seek to corrupt the body, which is the temple of God’s Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Just as marital infidelity corrupts God’s plan for the family, infidelity to God alienates the believer from the wisdom that allows us to walk in holiness towards eternity. We must wisely resist the temptation of the adulterous person. In the name of “love,” the world promotes sensuality and lust, seeking to divert us off the right path that we’re traveling on.

Questions:

- What concrete steps can you take in your life to be victorious in the face of sexual temptations?

V. A whole and fruitful life (Proverbs 2:20-22)

The fifth benefit of wisdom is that it helps us lead a life which is wholesome and fruitful (v.20). “One of the main themes of the book of Proverbs is personal conduct, where lifestyle should be motivated by ‘fear of the Lord’ (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10), represented in ideas of honesty, integrity, truthfulness, humility, prudence, sexual purity,liberality,self-control,industriousness,compassion, justice and kindness” (Taylor,Richard.Exploring Christian Holiness, Volume III. USA: CNP, 1985, p. 57).

For those who walk in folly and perversion, their ways lead to perdition and death. Whereas for the righteous, life is a path of holiness that prepares us for eternity (v. 21). Following God’s wisdom helps us to have a truly good life, in contrast to those who foolishly take other paths. While the fools that deceive, lie, and promote their perversions, and are even praised for their cunning, the end that awaits them is a future of damnation

(v. 22). But for us as believers, life situations that we have to pass through, even those which are more difficult and complex, will help us experience the first fruits of eternity. Experiences such as the consolation of the Lord in the hard moments of life, the holy life where the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and worship as a lifestyle, will enable the believer to experience today what He’ll live in eternity.

Questions:

- What are three examples of how the believer’s wise life manifests itself in different areas of daily life? (university, work, community, etc.)

Conclusion

We live in the world where we live together with people who, even knowing the right way, live foolishly and promote wicked actions. God gives His children the possibility of get the treasure of wisdom through faith to help us walk along a holy path whose end is eternity.



Tips for a balanced life

Walter R. Rodríguez (Uruguay)

Study Passage: Proverbs 3:1-12

Memory Verse: “Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart” Proverbs 3:3.

Lesson aim: To learn and practice four tips for good spiritual and relational health.

Introduction

There is more than one way to study a book of the Bible, and the same is true for a biblical passage. We can take it in isolation from the rest of the book in which we find the passage, or we can take it as a piece of literature and emphasize literary figures and devices that the writer used, or we can consider it in the context of all the teaching that the Bible provides us.

In this lesson, we'll try to locate the study passage within the biblical context. So, let's find out what these proverbs recommend to us.

Let's start from the conviction that the Bible is more than a religious book. It certainly guides us into having a lifestyle based on righteousness and holiness. As we explore each of the verses from Proverbs 3:1-12, we'll see what God expects of us believers and how we can demonstrate healthy relationships with God, with ourselves and with our neighbors. Let's examine these four good tips that are perfectly aligned with the total teaching of the Bible.

I. Tip # 1: Be a Serious Disciple (Prov. 3:1-4)

In verses 1-4, we find values of coexistence that are supported by a serious and thoughtful relationship with God, both individually and corporately.

A. “... don't forget my commandments ...” (v. 1)

God gave guidelines to the Jewish people during the formative process, from Abraham until the consolidation of the people in the Promised Land. These teachings are summarized in the Ten Commandments, which are expanded and explained throughout the Pentateuch (from Genesis to Deuteronomy). God emphasizes the need to study with interest what He wants us to do. For example: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul... and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “love your neighbor as yourself”

(Leviticus 19:18b). The Lord Jesus Christ quoted these two verses together (Matthew 22:37-39) saying: “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

These passages clearly teach that a healthy and growing relationship with God is supported by three dimensions: spiritual (loving God in every possible way); emotional (loving oneself); and ethical-social (loving our neighbors). In these three instances, loving is much more than a feeling.

In the spiritual dimension, loving means learning God's teachings in the Scriptures, incorporating them as values, and practicing them in everyday life. In other words, our individual conduct bears witness to God's presence in our lives. Matthew 12:34b says: “... For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

In the emotional dimension, loving implies acknowledging and appreciating oneself in a correct measure (Romans 12:3), including self-respect and caring for all aspects of our being (body, soul and spirit). It's being aware of what we're capable of, as well as of our defects, achievements, mistakes and failures. It also implies correcting, forgiving and improving ourselves.

In the ethical-social dimension, loving implies being fair, avoiding the use of a double standard (being demanding of others, and being easy on ourselves). In other words, we have to expect the same for ourselves as we demand of others.

B. “They will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity” (v. 2)

The writer of Proverbs uses proverbs, which are “a short, sententious and axiomatic sayings, whose essence is antithesis or comparison” (Halley, Henry H. Handbook Compendium of the Bible. Editorial Moody, p. 242). This second part, far from being a negotiation in which God promises a reward to those who comply with the first

part (v. 1), is a natural consequence of organizing life around the Father's teachings, instructions and precepts.

C. "Let love and faithfulness never leave you..." (v. 3)

The Message Bible translates this phrase: "Don't lose your grip on Love and Loyalty." Biblical proverbs have more to do with everyday life than with doctrinal statements. So, the recommendation 'to tie them up' and 'Write them down' can be taken literally. In fact, the Jews carried phylacteries: "square boxes, made of leather of clean animals, inside which were kept four passages of the law written on scrolls. Jews tied them to their arms and to their forehead with leather straps" (Nelson, Wilton H., editor. Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1982, p. 231). Verse three refers to characteristics that identify what a person is like. It's not just something that an individual does; rather they are manifestations of our character. When scripture says "...tie them around your neck ...", it implies that they must be seen, and when it says "Write them in ... your heart," they must form a part of our life values.

D. "Then you will win favor and a good name..." (v. 4)

What other things could these words mean? It points to reputation, good name and a righteous identity. Someone who I know recently took a new job. He is a professional and a highly qualified person for that job, in addition to having more than ten years of experience in his profession. Conversing with me, he complained that he didn't enjoy the respect he deserved. We arrived at the conclusion that reputation isn't built on information in a resumé but with the fact that time will show what kind of professional and person we are.

Questions:

- How can you make the Bible stick in your memory and become part of your thinking?

II. Tip # 2: Define the path for your life (Proverbs 3:5-8)

The adult and mature person should have the ability to evaluate the circumstances in which they are immersed. We should know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, which will allow us to go through life so as to take advantage of the alternatives and opportunities that arise.

A. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart ..." (v. 5a)

The term 'heart,' in this context, must be defined. What the writer of this Proverbs had in mind is noticeably different from the meaning of the word today. In the Bible, the heart "is the center of physical,

spiritual and mental life. The Scriptures generally refer to the 'totality of the inner life that includes the thought, feeling and volition '... the heart here refers mainly to moral qualities (Matt. 5:8; Acts 15:9; Prov. 4:23)'" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 156). In other words, trusting God in every possible area of our lives.

'Trust' (v. 5), 'submit to him' (v. 6), 'fear the Lord and shun evil' (v. 7) are all imperatives. They are orders or matters that we must listen to, decisions that must be taken. This proverb offers us the responsibility to find the true pathway through life. Total dependence on God means seeking His advice, recognizing His divine hand guiding us along the way, keeping Him in mind in everything that we do, and turning away from evil.

Our path as believers is necessarily marked out for us because of our relationship with God, which is dynamic, affirmed, and deepens as we get to know Him through studying the Scriptures.

B. "and lean not on your own understanding" (5b). "Do not be wise in your own eyes" (7a).

The writer recognized that the individual can be prudent and wise, which surely contributes to success in life, but still, that isn't enough. He pointed out that the attitude of life should be one of humility and total dependence of God. The writer of the book of Romans said: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you" (12:3). How is this achieved? By considering God in everything we do. We need to read and study the Bible, obeying what is there, and practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation. If we rely too much on our own understanding, we may well take false steps. We need to listen to the Lord's guidance.

C. "... He'll make your paths straight, He'll straighten your paths... This will bring health to your body..." (vv. 6b, 8)

On this path of life, God has given us the ability to make decisions because we have free will and divine grace, which enables us. In the second part from Proverbs 3:6, the writer points out to the readers that the practice of God's teachings, together with a humble attitude that recognizes the need for direction, will bring positive consequences.

When a child begins to care for himself, his parents do well to support and encourage him though maintaining close supervision and surveillance, such as when toddlers

want to eat on their own or start walking. Parents stay with their little ones while they grow and become the autonomous being that they need to be. The opposite attitude may be negligence and/or overprotection, either of the two options don't allow the child to develop successfully. Children should know without a doubt that their parents are there to support, monitor, stimulate and accompany them. God does the same with His children.

Questions:

- Explain verse 5 in a way that can be understood today.
- How would you express what verse 7 says for your community to understand?

III. Tip # 3: Be consistent (Proverbs 3:9-10)

A. "Honor the Lord with your wealth ..." (v. 9)

With this advice, the writer didn't refer only to tithing or promoting generosity in the offerings they brought to the temple. The advice involves all the assets of the individual. In our current context, God should be honored with everything that we highly esteem as appreciable or valuable, such as money, properties, academic degrees, investments, influence, etc. Without a doubt, this third piece of advice points to a consistent relationship with the Lord. God has made us who we are, so all we can do is recognize that everything that's important and valuable to us are gifts from God, and we should use them to honor Him. Using the figure of material goods, the proverb leaves no room for hypocrisy and false religion. There are people who seem to be believers in church, but in reality, they're just wearing façades. Certainly, allowing God's authority over us to include personal property requires commitment and maturity.

B. "Then your barns will be filled to overflowing..." (v. 10)

This sounds like a business transaction 'you give me and I will give you.' Is this a promising invitation to invest? No way. We start from the understanding that 'your barns' and 'your vats' are relative expressions. God said: "...for the world is mine, and all that's in it" (Psalm 50:12b). Referring to this proverb, Earl Wolf says: "The man... is an administrator and everything he has belongs to God" (Wolf, Earl C. Bible Commentary Beacon, Proverbs, Volume III. USA: CNP, 1982, p. 482).

Divine direction leads us to make better decisions, helping us make wise use of those things we consider valuable. Remember the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). While we're not promised prosperity, when we put our confidence in God and are obedient to His will, we'll become more balanced in the way we see

what we own and will be able to develop the qualities that God gives and the opportunities that He himself sets before His children.

Questions:

- Name two or three ways that God can be recognized in the life of the believer.
- Briefly explain the idea of honoring God with what we possess.

IV. Tip # 4: learn from discipline (Prov. 3:11-12)

The last part of the study refers to discipline (v. 11-12). Nobody likes to receive punishment (deserved or not), although here, the advice has to do with the attitude with how we take the discipline. A humble person will ask: "What is the lesson I can learn here? What needs to be corrected?" These questions promote learning, change and growth. All of this strengthens our relationship with God and makes us better people. Even in circumstances that may seem totally unfair and undeserved, we must remember Paul's words: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose..." (Romans 8:28).

This advice doesn't refer to passive, fatalistic acceptance of the discipline that the Lord imposes, but rather to a dynamic acceptance. This attitude has to do with three previous tips: knowing fully what God teaches, fully trusting in Him, and establishing a 'Comprehensive' relationship with Him that encompasses all areas of our lives, in order to understand that there are one or more vital lessons to be learned.

The great temptation in the midst of discipline is to feel like a victim or rebellious, but with those attitudes, there will be no valuable learning for life. If we continue asking ourselves: 'Why me?' or 'why doesn't this happen to someone else?', nothing will change; it will only be a distraction that disrupts personal development.

Questions:

- What things are included in what we are and own?
- How would you explain the idea of punishment, correction, and rebuke that may come from God?

Conclusion

If we pay attention to the teaching of the Bible, and we resist the temptation to transform a book like this into a simple instrument of religion, we'll find the necessary tools to understand what we are here for. It's very stimulating to know where we're going and how to get there, to have a roadmap that helps our life to be fulfilled in the Lord, and to know that we have a mission: To live out Kingdom values that society needs to know.



What pleases God?

Marco A. Velasco (Costa Rica)

Study Passage: Proverbs 6:16-19

Memory Verse: “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to Him” Proverbs 6:16.

Lesson aim: To establish harmonious interpersonal relationships at home, work, and church, abandoning malicious practices that destroy the harmony with whom we relate every day.

Introduction

Hebrew thought views people as relational beings in the physical, emotional, spiritual as well as social areas of their lives. So when we obey or disobey God, we do it with all of our being and not only with a part of it, through interpersonal relationships. In the verses of this passage, we'll see how the way we relate to people in different areas (family, work, church, etc.) will either please or displease God. If we choose actions that the Lord hates, we'll destroy friendships, family and even God's church. But we can choose to stop doing these things that God detests, and do what pleases the Lord. We can be humble rather than proud; instead of raising false testimonies against others, we can choose to use language that edifies people; instead of abusing power to influence others, we can choose the power of love to build interpersonal relationships and contribute to a community that pleases the Lord. If we make these positive decisions, we'll write very different stories from those that we possibly wrote in the past.

Proverbs 6:16-19 is a part of the first section of the book of Proverbs (1:1-9:18). More specifically, it's within chapter 6:1-19, where four poems related to folly appear (vv. 1-5, 6-11, 12-15 and 16-19) (Forestell, T. 'Proverbs', Saint Jerome Biblical Commentary, volume II. Madrid: Christianity, 1971, p.4 19). In Proverbs chapter 6, foolishness is a serious problem that those who want to follow wisdom need to attend to. Foolishness isn't just an attitude, but a path we make with our words and actions. In Proverbs 5:23, mention is made of its serious consequences: “For lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly.”

Because of its style and literary form, Proverbs 6:16-19 is related to a series of 'numerical' proverbs that are

also found in other places, such as in Proverbs 30:15-31. Number proverbs appear also in other parts of the Bible in the Old Testament. So, other examples of numerical proverbs are Psalm 62:11, Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11 and Micah 5:5.

The passage lists the parts of the body: eyes, tongue, hands and feet, as well as the heart. All of these appear in the service of evil in its different manifestations; but this can be abandoned if the path of wisdom is followed (Proverbs 6:20-23).

I. What the Lord hates (Proverbs 6:16)

The word 'hate' is sometimes translated as 'abhor' or 'abomination.' These terms have to do with human relationships and relationship with God, and are the opposite of 'love.' It implies ways of relating and attitudes that distance and harm people. But above all, they affect our relationship with God. When we harm someone by an action or something we say, we'll see the consequences in the type of relationships we have established. Often years of friendship are lost. We may even think that those we thought were good brothers and sisters in the fellowship aren't even Christians. These malicious acts also affect our relationship with God. He considers them to be abominable and detestable. The consequences will be regrettable, not only for the present, but also for the future and eternity.

The second part of verse 16 says: "... and seven that they are detestable to him" (v. 16b). The word 'detestable' implies arousing or meriting intense dislike. The term 'detestable', or 'abominable', was important in the life of Israel. The animals and sacrifices, types of food, such as certain birds or fish, were considered abominable and forbidden as food (Leviticus 11:10, 13

and Deuteronomy 14:3). In our passage from Proverbs 6:16-19, the wisdom writer didn't attempt to give a ritualistic meaning to the terms 'detestable' and 'abominable, but rather underlined the relational dimension in everyday life.

The Lord's attitude toward such acts considered as 'detestable' or 'abominable, also reminded us, His children, that relationships with other people can be mutually exclusive through the values we hold (v. 16b). Such unpleasant actions that the author lists in this passage were given as a warning; folk who insist in acting in a malicious nature won't be able to have a close relationship with God. Deep down this is a matter of holiness. The implicit message is this: "Stop practicing these malicious actions! They are detestable things that God doesn't like."

Questions:

- How do you interpret this expression, "There are six things that the LORD hates, and seven that are detestable to him"?
- How do these things affect our lives?

II. Violence against the innocent (Proverbs 6:17)

Proverbs 6:17a talks about "haughty eyes." The series of numbers begins with the eyes. In some of our countries, there are expressions that talk about our eyes such as: "If looks could kill," or "to catch someone's eye," "keep an eye on someone/something," or two people who "see eye to eye." Our eyes often reveal our attitudes. Proverbs 30:13 says: "those whose eyes are ever so haughty; whose glances are so disdainful." A look can denote an attitude of superiority, haughtiness or pride. Its purpose is to belittle others.

Proverbs 6:17b says: "a lying tongue..." This is the second issue in the number series. Proverbs 12:22: "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy."

There are other proverbs about use of language (12:19,22, 21:6, 26:28). The New Testament takes up the theme of language and goes even deeper. James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, wrote, "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (James 3:6). James continues to underline the problem that the tongue can cause: "but no human being can tame the tongue. It's a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8).

James, however, didn't leave the church without help. As a pastor, he told them that what seemed to be an irremediable problem can be fixed if the church succeeded in listening carefully (James 1:19). He said there are two kinds of wisdom: one earthly and one heavenly (James 3:15-18). They needed to seek the wisdom "which is from above" (v. 17, cf. 1:5). Finally, James told them to draw near to God, make sure that their hands were clean, be single-minded and keep their hearts pure (James 4:8). This is exactly what the church should do today!

Proverbs 6:17c warns against: "... hands that shed innocent blood." This is the third issue mentioned in this series. It's about the abuse of power in family or social relationships. Social inequality creates the conditions that produce the abuse of power of the strong towards the weak. Also, this action of spilling innocent blood violates at least two commandments of the Decalogue; the sixth commandment: "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13) and also the eighth commandment: "You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:15). Violence is on the increase in our countries. What can we do to face it? The prayer attributed to Francis of Assisi says: "Make me an instrument of your peace..." Furthermore, this servant reminded the church that while we're on this earth, we have the mission to announce the peace or shalom of God, which means peace in the broadest sense of the term.

But to have peace, there must be justice and reconciliation between people. David, abusing his power as king, took a woman who didn't belong to him and murdered a man. Violence is closely related in almost all its expressions with abuse of power. We see this in people who abuse the power that culture grants them, parents who abuse their children, mothers who psychologically mistreat their sons or daughters, pastors who abuse their leaders and congregation, and harassing in the office environment, among others. Each of these examples is related to abuse of power. We must ask ourselves: "How can we stop the avalanche of violence that exists nowadays?"

Questions:

- What malicious acts should we avoid in relation to our family, congregation and workplaces according to the verse 17?

III. Evil Scheming (Proverbs 6:18)

The passage talks about a “heart that devises wicked schemes ...” (v. 18a). Now the passage points to the heart, number four in the series. In the Hebrew thinking, the heart was the center of our being, where we make all decisions, and it includes thoughts and emotions (Proverbs 6:14). If something goes wrong with the heart, everything goes wrong.

The Lord rejects each of these actions that have been listed so far, but also, he offers solutions. The first was to hear, listen and obey (James 1:19, 22-23, 25). Secondly, we need to acquire wisdom (James 1:5). James said that we must purify our hearts (James 4:8); and in Matthew 5:8, our Lord Jesus said: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

God’s provision to overcome this evil is to make our ways straight.

Proverbs 6:18b warns against: “feet that are quick to rush into evil ...” This is the fifth item in the numerical series. It’s an image of an attitude that’s born of an evil heart and that sets itself ‘in motion’ to carry out wicked plans as soon as possible. This person’s feet are rushing to do wrong: “Or maybe they are in a hurry to create a place where evil can be done” (Lyons. “Proverbs”, World Bible Commentary Hispanic. Colombia: EMH, 2004, p. 103).

Questions:

- What malicious acts should we avoid in relation to our family, congregation and workplaces according to the verse 18?

IV. Sowing discord between brothers and sisters (Proverbs 6:19)

In the last verse of the passage, we read about “a false witness who pours out lies ...” (v. 19). This sixth element of the series is a violation of the ninth commandment: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). False testimony can simply start with a rumor that later spreads and appears to be ‘true’, destroying people’s reputations and good names. Another way to spread a lie is when we ‘label’ people as a ‘bad person’, a ‘bad boss’, a ‘bad mother’ or a ‘church just for the rich’, among other labels. The surname can mark a teenager’s future if their family (dad, older brother or uncle, etc.) had a bad past. Many of these lies and rumors are told behind the back of the aggrieved one. Ask your students: “What should we do when we hear a rumor? Keep silent and neutral on the case? Or, face up to the situation to ‘defend’ the good name of a person, or family?”

And even if we had all the evidence of the case (sin), what does Scripture call us to do?” (James 5:19-20).

The second part of the last study verse talks about “... a person who stirs up conflict in the community” (19b). This is the seventh malicious act in the series. How common these sins are in the church! The person described in this verse is a troublemaker, a creator of conflict. We can find people like this in our homes, at work, and even at church. James reminded the church about the backbiting: “Brothers and sisters, don’t slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it” (James 4:11). The tongue, with its abominable dimension, puts us in the place of God. “There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?” (James 4:12b).

Read this Illustration to your students and let them comment on it. It applies to today’s values: The mess in the jeweler’s shop.

One night a group of thieves broke into a jewelry store. But instead of stealing anything, they just changed the price tags. The next day, no one could determine what was valuable and what was cheap. The expensive jewels had suddenly become cheap, and costume jewelry, which previously had little value, now had great value. The customers who thought they were acquiring valuable jewels were acquiring fake jewelry. Those who couldn’t pay for items marked with high prices were coming out of the store with treasures. Final reflection: In our current world, someone came and changed the price tags. It’s difficult to differentiate true values from the false ones. The world puts a high price on values that lead to self-destructive actions” (Rice, W. Unforgettable Illustrations. Florida: Editorial VIDA, 2010, p. 76).

Questions:

- What malicious acts should we avoid in relation to our family, congregation and workplaces according to the verse 19?

Conclusion

Our actions and what we say lead to consequences, if not in this life, we’ll have to face the Lord one day. “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows” (Galatians 6:7). Therefore, let’s be prudent and wise in all our interpersonal relationships. Let’s avoid hurting someone!



Adultery isn't an option

César Barco (Ecuador)

Study passages: Proverbs 6:25-29,32-35, 7:6-27

Memory Verse: "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes" Proverbs 6:25.

Lesson aim: To understand that adultery and prostitution are never options; their consequences are lethal.

Introduction

The Bible mentions that adultery arose through the descent of Cain, through Lamech, who had two women: Ada and Zila (Genesis 4:19). And in the story of the disgrace of Dina, we see the word 'prostitute' mentioned for the first time (Genesis 34:31). From then on, adultery and prostitution have been evils that have not been eradicated. In spite of the universal flood (Genesis 7), whose aim was to get rid of existing evil (Genesis 6:11-13), the descendants of Noah fell back into doing what had been done before.

Why haven't adultery and prostitution been eradicated from our societies? Because their power lies in attractiveness of sin that has corrupted sexual relations. Mankind easily forgets the divine order to "Be fruitful and increase in number..." (Genesis 1:28) and the marriage mandate "...That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). The passages to study for this class clearly describe the topic of adultery, prostitution, and its consequences.

I. We must not desire adultery (Prov. 6:25-29)

In these verses we can see the difference between a prostitute and an adulteress. Both are related to illicit sexual acts, but one seeks only economic profit to subsist while the other seeks luxuries or pleasures. Verse 26 says: "For a prostitute can be had for a loaf of bread, but another man's wife preys on your very life." Or as the Message version puts it: "You can buy an hour with a prostitute for a loaf of bread, but a promiscuous woman may well eat you alive."

A harlot or prostitute is a woman who exchanges her sexuality for money, and not necessarily for pleasure. To desire a prostitute is neither healthy for the body or

for the psyche (mind), much less for the spirit. As Paul mentioned in 1 Cor. 6:15-16, 7:2,9 and 1 Thess. 4:3-4, sex is a God-given gift for couples in healthy marriages.

An adulterous woman is someone else's wife or a single lady. In the context of Proverbs, where there were no single people, she would be the neighbor's wife (Proverbs 6:29). Here it's important to clarify the case of a couple who aren't yet civilly married and are living together. The fact that a couple is not married doesn't mean that the man and the woman aren't one flesh if they maintain an intimate relationship. It will be our Christian duty to guide them both to formalize their marriage before God and men. So to be clear, adultery is committed when a married man or a woman has sexual relations with someone who isn't their spouse

Ask: "Why is adultery so common?" One of the factors that affects adultery is that married couples find themselves in difficulties concerning their relationship. This is a real problem and very common.

Proverbs 6:25 gives us another reason – covetousness. "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty or let her captivate you with her eyes." The Hebrew term *khamad* is the same term used for the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife..." (Exodus 20:17). In Proverbs 6:25-26, we see that the neighbor's wife uses her eyes to beguile the precious soul of the man. She uses her sex appeal to attract him, and if he falls prey to her charms, his life will be complicated and probably both of them will be affected.

As Christians, we're called to keep our bodies under control by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, dominating any inappropriate type of sexual desire. It's worth clarifying that entire sanctification doesn't correct inappropriate sexual desires immediately. But as we grow in holiness, they will be controlled until these desires are

corrected with purity of heart. H. Orton Wiley and Paul T. Culbertson comment on this: "Sometimes perverted appetites exist for a considerable time in those who have clean hearts ... However, both natural appetites and the perverted ones are so subject to the power of God that they must be corrected or regulated through faith" (Wiley, H. Orton and Culbertson, Paul T. Introduction to Christian Theology. USA: CNP, 1992, p. 393).

Inappropriate sexual desires must be controlled and not satisfied (Romans 13:13-14). Adultery leads to negative consequences. Proverbs 6:27-29 states: "Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched? So is he who sleeps with another man's wife; no one who touches her will go unpunished." The proverb warns that paying for sex with prostitutes may bring a man to poverty, but the consequences of seeking an adulterous woman may lead to much more serious consequences.

Questions:

- Why do you think a man or a woman commits adultery?
- What will happen to those who commit adultery according to verses 25-29?
- What does Paul mention in Romans 13:13-14 regarding the flesh?

II. The Tricks of Adultery (Proverbs 7:6-23)

Women have a lot of sex appeal, and this demonstrates not only the type of power that they possess, but also the weakness and lack of willpower of some men towards them. In relation to this, the wisdom writer mentioned a series of elements that adulterous women use:

A. She applies her physical beauty (v. 10)

Verse 7:10 states: "Then out came a woman to meet him, dressed like a prostitute and with crafty intent." She knew how to dress with sex appeal; she knew how to get his attention. Christian ladies need to dress in a way that highlight their beauty but with modesty, inside and outside the church. They can enhance their feminine beauty with clothing, but not in a way that awakens lust. Ask your students how they think ladies can dress with modesty? What should they avoid? What about men? Can the way they dress also provoke sinful thoughts?

B. She hugged him (vv. 13, 18)

One of the cutest expressions we can see is when a woman hugs her spouse while he embraces her around

her waist. Unfortunately, the adulterous woman used this romantic element. Verse 13a says: "She took hold of him and kissed him."

C. She played the religious card (v. 14)

This woman appeared to be God-fearing; She told him: "Today I fulfilled my vows, and I have food from my fellowship offering" (v. 14 cf. Leviticus 3). She had paid her vows (Ecclesiastes 5:4). There is a false idea today if the other person is a Christian, then it's OK.

There is nothing spiritual about adultery; don't be fooled!

D. She searched diligently for him (v. 15)

She was diligent and she constantly searched for her lover. This in an effort to create the delusion that he was necessary for her.

E. She prepared her couch (vv. 16-17)

The bed or the couch is the place where couples make love, where mutual delight is found. It's also the spot where reconciliations occur, where children are conceived, and where peace is found. This adulterous woman had prepared well; she told him invitingly: "I have covered my bed with colored linens from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon" (vv. 16-17). Like a spider she was inviting him into her web, a web that could well lead to his death.

F. She had a cheerful attitude (v. 18)

The woman beckoned: "Come, let's drink deeply of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love!" (v. 18). The adulterous woman did her best to be happy and to make her partner happy in sexual love. In other words, she wanted him to enjoy the experience and to be satisfied.

G. She used smooth talk (v. 21) (v. 21)

"With persuasive words she led him astray; she seduced him with her smooth talk" (v. 21). The adulterous woman used kind, loving words and even words referring to the sexual act that led to sexually awakening her lover. This lady used kisses, caresses, romance, words of love, a good attitude, spirituality and an attractive bed. Many marriages don't pay attention to those details through negligence, either due to lack of time, stress, fatigue, etc.

This lack of preparation and romance in marriages often gives rise to the truth of the old saying – "people find outside of marriage what they don't have at home." Verse 7 states that he was "a youth who had no sense." Many times, infidelity breaks up marriages because of a

lack of affection by one or the other. In this face of this lack of understanding, one or other of them may opt to find someone else outside of marriage. This is a big mistake!

Married couples need to bring to the relationship the necessary affection so that there won't be temptation to see adultery as a solution to emotional problems. When these needs are met, the marriage will be full as God desires for us.

Questions:

- Mention tricks that the adulterous woman uses to get a lover, according to Proverbs 7:10,13-18,21.
- How can we avoid this search for someone outside of marriage?

III. Consequences of adultery (Proverbs 6:32-35, 7:24-27)

Proverbs 6:32 says: "But a man who commits adultery has no sense; whoever does so destroys himself." To put it into other words, 'whoever tangles with another's wife commits the worst stupidity: he seeks harm, finds shame, and ends up losing his life!' Then in Proverbs 6:33, the biblical writer described how a man would act when he is betrayed by his wife.

However, the sanctified Christian man and woman shouldn't seek revenge if they have been the victim of an infidelity by his/her partner. While this is certainly difficult, it's not impossible. In Christ forgiveness, reconciliation, and understanding are possible (Matt. 6:14-15, 18:35). The couple needs help in order to understand what has brought them to this situation.

It's not worth corrupting the soul just to experience sexual relations with another partner. Once again, the marriage mandate was given to the first couple, Adam and Eva, before the fall, and it was confirmed by our God and Savior Jesus Christ (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:5).

The writer of Proverbs warns: "Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death" (7:27). Why would someone want to go to a prostitute or be led astray by an adulteress? It will lead to dire consequences. The answer is because it offers pleasures to a person who lives tied to carnal pleasures. Sometimes, as we have mentioned, it may be a result of an unsatisfactory relationship. While the latter isn't justifiable, unfortunately it's the consequence of many adulteries.

With the proliferation of pornography, which has been sold to a whole generation, the idea that sex in a disorderly form shouldn't only be experienced, but also practiced, with devastating consequences for sexual health. We read: "There are more than 200 types of

papillomavirus human (HPV) viruses. About 40 types can infect your genital area (your vulva, vagina, cervix, rectum, anus, penis and scrotum) as well as your mouth and throat. These microbes of HPV are spread during sexual contact..." (Recovered on September 29, 2019 from <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/es/health-topics/sexually-transmitted-diseases/vph>).

The consequences of adultery or participating in prostitution, on many occasions, may end in crimes of passion, and in many cases, they can affect both physical and mental health, since for the most part, adultery produces physical and mental illnesses. It also produces psychological disorders. The person who has a lover, lies to cover up this other relationship. They don't have peace to sleep well. They may well lose financial peace because they spend money on the home and on the lover. They may be grumpy, fighting so much with their spouse and the mistress and children, etc. Everything leads the person to ruin.

The worst of all the above is that adultery can produce spiritual death. Our relationship with God is damaged. Adultery was prohibited in the Decalogue (Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18). Jesus confirmed it again (Matthew 5:27). Finally, Paul said that no adulterer will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21).

Questions:

- According to Proverbs 6:32-35, what are the consequences of spousal betrayal?
- How should a Christian person act if he or she has been a victim of adultery, according to Matthew 6:14-15, 18:35?

Conclusion

The church doesn't escape the reality of adultery. Due to lack of knowledge and holiness, more than a few have practiced inappropriate sexual relationships, resulting in spiritual death and injuries in the family, church, work, etc. Adultery doesn't bring anything good; It promises much, but gives little. It's better to keep our sexuality for marriage, in the holiness of God. Adultery is no longer an option for those who have submitted themselves to Christ.



Be careful how you speak!

Enrique Daniel Sardiello (Argentina)

Bible passages: Proverbs 10:19-21,31-32, 18:21, 21:23

Memory Verse: “Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues”
Proverbs 10:19.

Lesson aim: To understand the importance of paying attention to what we say.

Introduction

There was a young man who continually uttered bad hurtful words and/or expressions. One day, his father gave him a bag of nails, and told him that every time he lost his calm, which led him to say something bad, he had to hammer a nail into the fence behind the house.

On the first day, the teen hammered 37 nails into the wood. The next day it was 7 less, at 30. As the days passed, the number of nails he used decreased. This young man was realizing that he was finding it easier to control what he said to people, and hammering fewer nails into the fence.

Finally, the day came when this teenager said nothing mean or hurtful to anyone. So, feeling very pleased with himself, he told his father that he had achieved the goal at last of learning how to control what he said. His father, of course, was very happy and satisfied. He suggested that every day his son controlled his words, he should pull a nail out of the fence. The days passed and the young man finally told his father that he had removed all the nails from fence. Then the father hugged his son, and together they headed for the fence. When they got there, the fathers said: “Look, son, you have worked hard to hammer in and remove the nails from this fence, but look at all the holes that were left behind! It will never be the same! What I want to tell you is that every time you speak out of turn or hurtfully, you will leave a scar, like these holes in the fence. You can ask for forgiveness from the offended person, but their wound or scar will always be there. Always remember, my son, the prudent know how to hold their tongues.”

God gave us the ability to communicate. We often need to use words to do it, although there are various forms of communication. The word is the linguistic unit that, properly grouped with due intonation and defined intention, allows us to express ourselves, make ourselves known, transmit

and receive information, etc.

Throughout Scripture, we find good advice about the ‘how’ and ‘for what’ we should use words, remembering that God highly rates good use of words. With words, we can bless (saying good things to others) or we can curse (by saying bad things to others). These two aspects are always present. The words we say have the power to do good as well as to destroy. The Apostle James expressed it in the following way: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. . .” (James 3:9-10a); and he clearly added: “. . . My brothers and sisters, this should not be” (James 3:10b). We’re exhorted to use our tongues to bring blessing, which can be achieved with self-control and the help of Holy Spirit.

Let’s discuss some practical tips that we find in the book of Proverbs which help us make good use of how we speak and what we say.

I. “The prudent hold their tongues” (Proverbs 10:19-20, 18:21, 21:23)

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “prudence” as: “The ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prudence>). Diplomacy is another aspect of prudence. Diplomats have to say the right thing to maintain peaceful coexistence among the nations. They have to study and practice prudence a lot. What is said is as important as what isn’t said, and often the latter is even more important than the former. Scriptures talk about moderation in our speech. There is an expression, “Loose lips sink ships”. This popular saying encourages us not to be distracted, rushed or impetuous in our speech.

Proverbs 10:19 states: "Sin isn't ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues." The first part of this verse warns us that when we talk a lot, it's very easy to fall into sin, even without consciously wanting to, by using aggressive, non-edifying expressions, etc. In the second part, we discover that the prudent restrain themselves knowing when to hold their tongues. Each of us can take a look back in our life and recognize how many problems or useless discussions we would have avoided if in some circumstances we would have kept quiet. Proverbs 21:23 tells us: "Those who guard their mouths and their tongues keep themselves from calamity."

The majority of us have spoken out of turn, hurt someone with our words, and even not spoken when we should have. In public life, many politicians and prominent people have been confronted and shamed because of the inconsistencies between their past or present spoken words and their actions. James dedicates 12 verses in chapter 3 of his epistle to discussing the tongue and the need to control how we speak.

It's very encouraging to remember, and bear in mind "... Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check" (James 3:2b). It's very true, and even comical, what Matthew Henry says about this verse: "Ordinarily, those who speak say too many things they shouldn't say; among many words there can be no lack of idle words. There are people who like to hear themselves, and they don't realize the tedium they cause to those who hear them. It is, then, a sign of prudence to curb the tongue. God put a double door on it: one made of bone, the teeth; another of meat, the lips" (Henry, Matthew and Lacueva, F. Matthew Henry Biblical Commentary. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.674). Therefore, let's be cautious about how we speak!

In Proverbs 18:21, we can clearly see the power of our tongue (words). It's both the power of life and death! Truly, with our words we can 'kill' someone (denigrate him, mistreat him, slander him, etc.); or we can encourage, bless, empower, and powerfully encourage others.

The second part of this verse deserves to be specially highlighted as it states emphatically that those who are careful with their words will be the first beneficiaries. Proverbs 21:23 underlines this truth; if we take care of how we speak, it will save us from anguish!

Questions:

What teaching do we find in the following verses?

- Proverbs 10:19-20
- Proverbs 18:21
- Proverbs 21:23
- What does the book of James say about the power of the tongue?
- Without writing it down, recall some circumstance in your life when it would have been better to remain silent.

II. "The lips of the righteous nourish many" (Proverbs 10:21)

The development of the first point could make us think mistakenly that good Christians should be a totally silent people so as not to fall into sin or mistakes when speaking. Nothing is further from the truth! It's true that our words can destroy, but it's also very true that our words can edify, bless and be of benefit to many. Proverbs 10:21 says: "The lips of the righteous nourish many, but fools die for lack of sense." Good shepherds nourish their flocks. How wonderful it's when in a congregation, Sunday school class, cell group, etc., each member has decided to be, in deeds and words, an element of support and edification for the other members of the group!

1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing." This verse is saying that this was the normal practice of the Thessalonian church. There was a culture of pastoring each other, whereas in many instances now, we leave that privilege to the pastor or local church leadership.

This second point of the lesson helps us to continue controlling and holding back our tongue, but no longer from a selfish and self-centered vision of taking care only of ourselves. It opens our minds to all the potential that we can do if we correctly use our speech. We constantly need to be carers, pastoring each other without appointment, out of obedience to God, because we love our brothers and sisters! If we do this, we'll be blessed and it will be a blessing to others.

Let's reflect on this verse: "He sent out his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave" (Psalm 107:20). It's a great privilege and honor to act with God! Let's make our words full of encouragement, comfort and edification.

On the other hand, consider the second portion of Proverbs 10:21 which says: "... but fools die for lack of sense." If we want to, our words can be used to pastor and build people up. We must not overlook this last recommendation. We don't want to be known as foolish people who may die because they were acting senselessly.

Questions:

- How should we use our words in our relationships with others?
- Remember a brother or sister who, without being the pastor, encouraged you at some point in your Christian life. Promise to remind yourself and thank him/her.

III. The words of the righteous please God (Proverbs 10:31-32)

The wisdom writer offers us a variety of aspects that characterize the lives of the righteous, and one of them is the good use of their words, which goes beyond fine or eloquent language. It's not about language that includes some kind of personal benefit, but on the contrary, it's words that seek to build up the listener. The text of Proverbs 10:31-32 provides us with an description of how to identify a person by what they say.

The Lord Jesus, commenting on this very subject, said, "A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of" (Luke 6:45). Normally, we hear many people talking daily, which logically includes our church brothers and sisters. We must keep in mind that what is spoken denotes to some extent what each person is like. The proverbs in this section are telling us that what we say reveals our inner selves, the sort of heart we have, a righteous or evil heart. Let's examine the words of the righteous, which are those that please God, which always express the following:

A. Wise advice

The Bible says: "From the mouth of the righteous comes the fruit of wisdom ..." (Proverbs 10:31). When the righteous speak, what they say contains God's wisdom and this advice is productive for the life of the listener. Ask your students: "How can we discern that what we hear is good advice?" Good advice follows the teaching of God's Word and time proves that it was good. Good advice comes from the mouths of the godly, people

that love God and live only to please him. Many people, including believers, commit mistakes because they seek advice from the wrong person, because sometimes we look for what we want to hear, and not what God wants to say to us.

Let's listen to wise advice, the precise guidance given by holy righteous people who please God. This touches us directly or indirectly, although we may not want counsel. It means that we must live in such a way that our words will be like those godly counselors.

B. Helpful words

Proverbs 10:32 says: "From the mouth of the righteous comes the fruit of wisdom but the mouth of the wicked only what is perverse." One of the evils that most affects societies, including the church, are the lips that murmur and gossip (1 Timothy 5:13), use obscene words (Ephesians 4:29), lie, and flatter (Jude 16). These words destroy families, homes, churches, creating tense and unfavorable environments. People who speak like this are called here 'the wicked' who are perverse. What comes out of the mouths of the godly, on the other hand, is 'the fruit of wisdom', which benefits those who listen and fulfill divine purposes (1 Corinthians 2:13). These are words of exhortation, edification rebuke and teaching (2 Corinthians 12:19).

God wants our speech to serve in some measure all who listen to us. The righteous become the mouth of God for others. From a heart regenerated and a life of communion with the Spirit, only profitable, beautiful and pleasant words will be spoken. Let's evaluate every day the words we say and see if they really are pleasing God. As a teacher, you can write on the board God's plan about our use of words. Ask your students to share everyday examples of how words can bless and be profitable.

Questions:

- Write your plan to please God with regard to words.
- According to the biblical text, tell what kind of words come from the mouth of the righteous.

Conclusion

Thank you, God, for the possibility that you gave us to communicate with other people. May your Spirit guide us to use our words in different circumstances to edify those who listen to them.



The mathematics of generosity

Natalia Pesado (U.S.A.)

Study Passage: Proverbs 11:24-26,28

Memory Verse: “A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed” Proverbs 11:25.

Lesson aim: To understand that God calls us unequivocally to be generous.

Introduction

For many centuries now, society has often distinguished people by their social status, that is, by the value of their acquisitions. The possessions of a person or their family can be quite varied: real estate (for example: homes, holiday homes, buildings or businesses which they rent, farmland, etc.); means of transport (cars, planes or jets, boats or yachts, etc.); possessions (technological devices, furniture, food, clothing, jewelry, etc.); access to health services, cleaning services, travel services, entertainment services; among others. And generally, the more valuables a person has, the more respect and social admiration they receive.

This is one of the reasons why most people tend to accumulate possessions and money. Many work long hours each week to earn more income with which they can acquire more possessions, in quantity or of a higher quality. Psychologists have developed the term ‘workaholic’ to refer to this phenomenon when people are just living to work. All this work to get higher wages becomes the main focus for these people. When a person becomes a workaholic, they rarely invest time to relax, spend time with friends and/or family, or spend time resting and sleeping. Often, they see these activities as a ‘waste of time.’ However, in reality the opposite is true; spending time in leisure activities renews the mind and body.

In complete contrast to the selfish ambition of accumulating belongings and/or social status, we find the virtue of generosity. This can be described as a holy disposition of the soul to invest, without measuring or selfishness, in the welfare of others. Generosity actively demonstrates radical love, and it's a quality close to God's love.

In today's lesson, we'll carefully study God's call to His children to be generous. Our possessions, and especially hoarding them, shouldn't be the priority in our lives. Our possessions should be used for the glory of God. God calls us to use whatever material resource available to us to bless others around us. Once again, God calls us to love our neighbor just as He loves us.

I. The “contradiction” of generosity (Proverbs 11:24)

In Proverbs 11:24, we read: “One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.” In this verse, we're presented with a truth that may seem contradictory initially- we're asked to give to get more. Being generous implies sharing with others the goods we have at our disposal. Sharing and giving, in mathematics, involve an exercise in subtraction and division. Although math can be very difficult for many school students, most people understand that by giving, there is usually less left. For example, when we pay for something we're buying, we end up with less money. Little children of three or four years old find it difficult to share cookies or toys because they understand that if they share, there will be less left for themselves.

The apparent contradiction of this passage is in the idea that by being generous, that is, by giving of our goods to others, we'll have more for ourselves. However, this proverb contains a promise: “One person gives freely, yet gains even more ...” (v. 24a). This promise invites us to think in the spiritual terms, beyond simple concrete mathematics.

It reminds us that God is in control of everything, and that by generously loving others by sharing our material goods, God will promote this generosity and love in the heart of others too. The result is abundance even for the cheerful giver himself. In this verse with this promise, the mathematical calculation is as follows: when subtracting, the result will be a larger amount. God himself takes care to supernaturally bless those who are generous.

This maturity of thought comes when we're walking daily with Christ, experiencing his sacrificial love. God wishes that His sons and daughters wouldn't think like four-year-old kids who hoard their toys or snacks. He wants us to demonstrate God's love to the world through generosity. We must ask our heavenly Father to form in us a desire to be generous, following in the footsteps of the One who gave His all and continues to give us life and all spiritual blessings.

Questions:

- How can you explain the "contradiction" of generosity to a young person or young child?
- How can we live a life of practical generosity?

II. The depth of generosity (Proverbs 11:25)

Proverbs 11:25 says: "A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." This verse speaks of the generous person. The generosity that God desires in His children isn't simply an external behavior but an action that begins in our hearts. Our heart is the most internal and intimate part of each human being. When estranged from God, the human soul is very selfish, prioritizing what brings immediate personal satisfaction and thinking only of personal gain and advancement. However, this verse shows us that we can be generous by showing love by sharing with our neighbors. Verse 25 concludes by saying, "...whoever refreshes others will be refreshed." Refreshed implies satisfaction or fullness, that wonderful feeling after a good night's sleep, after a cool shower on a hot sticky day or after a pleasant meal.

In today's society, there seems to be very little true satisfaction. People seek satisfaction in taking intoxicating substances, sexual practices, entertainment, excessive possessions, etc. These

things don't bring profound and lasting peace. Full satisfaction never comes by these means. The only true soul satisfaction is being able to experience God's love that fills our hearts like the perfect piece of a jigsaw puzzle. The only one true satisfaction comes when we know we're doing God's will. God wants us to share His love with other people.

In the verse that we're studying, it's clear that "... whoever refreshes others will be refreshed" (v.25). Once again, we can see the mathematics of God. Giving ourselves is the secret of getting more of God's blessings, and as we give, we'll refresh and help others. This is because God created us to relate to others through love and generosity.

How wonderful to know that God can give us generous hearts! As God's beloved children that have experienced the satisfaction of His agape love, we must ask Him to mold our hearts to be generous, seeking to refresh others when they're in need. God is surely waiting for us to make this our heartfelt prayer so that He can work through our generosity.

Questions:

- Reflecting on yourself, would you say you have a generous soul? In what ways do you think it shows?
- How do you think a generous soul can be developed?

III. The scope of generosity (Proverbs 11:26)

Proverbs 11:26 warns: "People curse the one who hoards grain, but they pray God's blessing on the one who is willing to sell." The Message translation says: "Curses on those who drive a hard bargain! Blessings on all who play fair and square!" This helps us understand the scope of the influence of generosity. Our generosity, or lack of it, has an influence on the community around us. Selfishness in someone's heart can also appear in labor relations or when we're doing business with other people; for example, when negotiating a price with someone about something we want to sell or some service like with a car mechanic, an architect or builder, a doctor, a teacher, a psychologist, a cleaner, etc. In Proverbs 11:26, the teaching is clear: Everyone around us will realize if we're seeking to enrich ourselves at the expense of others.

We shouldn't sell something others need at a higher price than what's fair. We shouldn't take advantage of the need of others to enrich ourselves. In today's world, there are companies that take advantage of the most needy by putting high-interest business loans in communities where the poorest people live. These companies do this knowing that people with the greatest need usually borrow more (compared to those people who earn more money).

These companies then get rich off the high interest payments of the debts of the poor. These practices are called 'abusive loans' and they can impoverish the people.

God, who is just, calls His children not to participate in these practices. The wisdom of this proverb indicates that whoever makes abusive loans or unfair business contracts will be cursed by their community. But on the contrary, this verse also shows us that hoarding isn't sharing and God will bless the one who is willing to sell (Proverbs 11:26). This doesn't mean that we should give the grain away. We too need to work to support ourselves and our families. The implication is that when we make a deal, it should be with a fair price which will bring mutual benefit to us and our neighbors.

So, whatever our occupation in society where we live, God warns that blessing will only come by handling business exchanges fairly. With God's guidance, we'll be able to bless our community and receive the benefit of a worthy livelihood. Once again, we see that God's mathematics are wonderfully wise.

Let's not hesitate to pray to the Lord each day to guide us in every responsibility and decision we have to make at work. He wishes that his sons and daughters be light and salt in the world, being an example of Christian justice in labor exchanges.

Questions:

- What is your reaction to the injustices that occur in the workplace or business?

IV. The result of generosity (Proverbs 11:28)

Proverbs 11:28 says: "Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf." In this final verse, the advice is simplified and summarized with a blunt truth: the danger of riches is to trust in them. We understand that wealth (including business or possessions) aren't implicitly sinful; but the great risk is that we'll come to trust in them very easily. Therefore, the big problem is that riches aren't trustworthy. They don't save us, don't keep on renewing themselves and they don't last. The only true God who has power to save and restore is the Lord. We're called to trust Him because if we put our trust in anything else, we won't be okay.

In the second part of verse 28, we find another truth straight from God: "The righteous will thrive like a green leaf." The Message version puts it very clearly: "A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree." So, we can be sure that while being generous and honest may be difficult for our selfish human nature, we must not give up because with God's help, we can be truly righteous and generous, and thus enjoy the great blessing of generosity. We'll be like "flourishing trees." After a cold winter, suddenly in spring the trees produce countless leaves, and then flowers, and even later, fruit. Generosity produces life. The true triumph of God's love is that it produces life in us and in others.

Questions:

- What does the phrase "succeed in life" mean to you? What does such an expression mean in the secular setting?
- How can we see the above concept in light of Proverbs 11:28?

Conclusion

We must decide every day of our life to practice generosity, starting with trusting God's math, asking him to give us a generous soul, exercising fair generosity in our labor relations, and finally, enjoying true wellness as a result. God's plan is always worth it; Let's put it into practice!



Anger management

Jessica Nogales de Castro (Spain)

Study passages: Proverbs 15:1,18,28, 16:32

Memory Verse: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger”
Proverbs 15:1.

Lesson aim: To learn what the Bible has to tell us about controlling anger

Introduction

Emotions play an extremely important role in our lives. Throughout our existence, we experience joys, fears, frustrations, satisfactions, etc., and each of them leads us to certain actions. Every human expresses their emotions in different ways. Some are more expressive than others; but one way or another, emotions are present. There are people who quickly let you notice how they feel, while others keep their feelings in to the point when a time comes when they explode.

There are all kinds of emotions: positive, like joy, surprise, satisfaction, gratitude, and others that can be negative, such as anger, resentment, and rage. Each of them will have good or bad consequences, depending on our attitude, but what we need to understand is that they are all manageable. In order to do this, it's essential to have a good emotional education and a correct relationship with God.

God, through His Word, has provided us with the emotional education we need. It's all there in the Bible; we need to search for it and put into practice everything He commands us. Proverbs is well known for imparting advice and wisdom for the people of Israel of those times, and for us today. The book of Proverbs continues to be very important because it warns us to make good decisions in our daily life. The verses we're going to study today will give us a guide about our attitudes as we face situations that could make us angry.

I. Be slow to anger (Proverbs 15:18, 16:32)

One of the things that we cannot bear is that someone hurts our pride. When this happens, immediately the lion that we all carry inside comes out and seeks to annihilate, with words or actions, those who have belittled us. The

attitude we assume shows the degree of maturity we have and how much we have consecrated our lives to the Lord. The Bible tells us in Ephesians 4:26 the following: “In your anger don't sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry...” Notice that God doesn't tell us not to feel angry. He knows this is a positive emotion to a certain extent. “Many people react with anger when they feel threatened. It's a state of alert that generates adrenaline through activation of the sympathetic nervous system so that we can combat what is interpreted in a moment as a threat. In its most positive sense, anger aims to give us strength to protect ourselves and to be able to survive” (Recovered on 14 October 2019 from <https://elpais.com/elpais/2014/02/27/html>).

God made us this way and what He does is perfect. What Ephesians 4:26 wants us to understand is that we can have control over our anger. Remember that the Lord doesn't ask us to do anything that we aren't capable of doing. In 2 Timothy 1:7, He says that He has given us a spirit of power and self-control. This is wonderful; it means that all of us who are God's children are able to control our anger or rage.

Proverbs 15:18 tells us a little about the consequence of anger and the benefit of mastering it. Let's take a further look.

A. Consequences of anger (Proverbs 15:18a)

This verse says: “A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict...” (v.18a). Ask: What is an angry person like? The Wikipedia Encyclopedia defines anger as: “Anger, also known as wrath or rage, is an intense emotional state involving a strong uncomfortable and non-cooperative response to a perceived provocation, hurt or threat” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anger>).

That is, an angry person who may have lost control of themselves can easily get angered. Therefore, a consequence of anger is that it makes us live irritated, constantly in fights and discords.

Usually when people are angry, they do or say things regardless of the harm this can cause. Likewise, if we let anger grow in our hearts, this can lead us to suffer many misfortunes.

Currently, one of the most notable consequences of lack of control over anger are the fatal victims due to gender violence. A UN report indicates that 87,000 women were murdered in 2017 worldwide (Retrieved in October 17, 2019 from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>).

What a person can do when carried away by anger can be terrible. This condition affects all the people around them, often leaving lifelong trauma. That's why the lack of control of our anger can even take us away from our friends, co-workers, loved ones and from anyone we consider important to us. The consequences of uncontrolled anger are dire. It's not worth living that way.

B. Benefits of Prudence (Proverbs 15:18b)

Likewise, we read in the Word of God: "... but the one who is patient calms a quarrel" (v.18b). One of the benefits of people who control themselves is that they have peace, and live in peace with those around them, because they have the ability to cope with difficult situations wisely. In this way, they'll fulfill what Romans 12:18 says: "If it's possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Another benefit of self-control is that it strengthens faith and the character of the individual. These types of people aren't easily influenced by what others say or do. Rather, they take the reins of their own life and choose to live doing what is right in the eyes of God. Proverbs 12:16 says: "Fools show their annoyance at once, but the prudent overlook an insult." So, we can say that the person who controls their anger is a person of faith because they don't seek to fix things in their own way, but knows how to wait for God's way at the right time.

Questions:

- What does 1 Timothy 1:8 remind us of?
- List some consequences of not knowing how to control our anger.
- What are the benefits of knowing how to behave wisely in the face of anger?

II. Think before you answer (Proverbs 15:28)

Proverbs 15:28 tells us about the difference between what the righteous and the wicked say. The righteous, who have surrendered their mouths to the fear of God, meditate about how to edify with their words. Those who are wicked and impious because of the evil in their hearts can speak harmful words (Luke 6:45). Before speaking, the righteous should have a good habit of not falling into the temptation of the wicked. Let's look at three important aspects which should guide us when we speak.

A. Think about what to talk about

We must never give an answer without first having verified that what we're going to say will be a blessing or edification for those who listen to it. James taught us: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..." (James 1:19). In other words, we need to think about our words before saying them. First, we must listen, and while we do so, analyze what we should say or not; and finally, speak if required.

God's Word says: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4:29). Starting today, if we have the urge to say something, first we need to stop and ask ourselves: "Will what I'm going to say be a blessing which will build up my brother's/sister's life?" After reflecting on it and confirming that it will, then continue; otherwise, we could get into a tremendous mess. If unsure, it's advisable to keep quiet.

B. Think about who you are going to talk to

Another aspect that we must consider before saying something, is, do we really know to whom we're going to speak? In today's society, the value of respect is being lost. A young man can tell an adult what he wants without realizing that he is being disrespectful. It's also important to know who the recipient is because we need to be careful not to talk about things that aren't age appropriate, which could be confusing. This can happen when proud people want to show how much they know about something by talking to someone who has just converted to Christ.

Note the degree of maturity, the context in which we live, the degree of trust we have with the recipient, or if this person is a believer or not. All these factors will be decisive in helping us give a correct answer.

C. Think about how you will speak

After having considered both previous aspects, we need to add one more; that's how we speak. Now that we have already thought about what we're going to say and to whom we're going to say it, we must think about the way in which we'll express ourselves.

We cannot speak to everyone in the same way. There are some people who don't mind what they hear, but there are other people who are easily offended. People brag about being frank and saying the first thing that comes into their heads. They justify themselves by saying that they are sincere people. Watch out! Sincerity has nothing to do with the lack of judgment and self-control of a person. The way we say things greatly influences the people around us. Like Newton's third law, "also known as a Principle of action and reaction, tells us ... if a body A exerts an action on another body B, this one performs on A another equal and opposite action" (Recovered on 03 Dec 2019 from https://www.ecured.cu/Tercera_Ley_de_Newton).

Our Lord Jesus also taught that with the same measure that we measure others, we'll be measured (Matthew 7:2b). Let's keep in mind that each of our actions, whether it's something we do, what we say and even our body language, will always elicit a reaction. Therefore, we must try and speak to others with the same care we want others to share with us.

Questions:

- What are the three important points to consider before giving a heated answer?

III. "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1)

This Proverb talks about the 'gentle' answer removing anger. A kind word will always be like water that puts out the fire in the middle of an altercation in a conversation. In the Bible, we find many examples of this. Let's look at one of them:

This is the case of Abigail and Nabal (1 Samuel 25). Nabal was very rich and had many animals, but at the same time, the Bible describes him as a tough man of full of bad deeds (vv.2-3). Abigail, however, is introduced to us as a woman of good understanding and good appearance (v.3). David, who was in the desert fleeing from Saul, sent ten of his young men to ask Nabal to help with some supplies. He and his men had looked after Nabal's shepherds in the field (vv.5-7). But Nabal answered them very harshly, showing that selfishness

and pride were in his heart (vv.10-11). This harsh response ignited the fury in David's heart in such a way that he became extremely angry and decided to go with his men to kill Nabal and all his people (v.13).

So far, we can see that anger is like a ball of snow, which grows, becoming bigger and bigger as we make room for it in our hearts. As James 3:5 says: "... Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark." One insult leads to another; an offense leads to another offense; and this won't end until one of the two parties reacts and changes their attitude.

Returning to the story, when Abigail, Nabal's wife, learned through her servants about all that had happened, she acted quickly (1 Samuel 25:14-17). We see in verse 18 that Abigail packed a lot of provisions on her donkey's backs and sent it with her servants to David. Without telling her husband, who was furious with David, she went and when she saw David, she knelt down before him. She apologized for her husband's attitude. She spoke in such a way that David had a gracious reaction (vv. 23-34). Abigail got David to reconsider what he was planning to do and desist from his desire to destroy Nabal. Her words were soft and full of humility and wisdom. In this way, Abigail managed to save all of her family, and also save herself. This is a good example of the effect of a gentle answer that turns away wrath.

Questions:

- What did you learn today from the story of Abigail, her husband and David?
- What are the three counsels of James 1:19?

Conclusion

We have seen that anger usually does nothing to promote God's kingdom. Let's ask God to help us be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to get angry. Our lives should reflect Christ for those who as yet don't know Him. Let's testify for Him as we speak carefully and wisely to those around us.



Tips for parents and children

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Study passages: Proverbs 1:8, 13:24, 19:18,26-27, 20:20, 22:6,15, 23:13-14, 30:17

Memory Verse: “Stop listening to instruction, my child, and you will stray from the words of knowledge” Proverbs 19:27.

Lesson aim: To learn and apply the biblical advice for parents and children.

Introduction

We have a variety of opinions on how to raise children. No one goes to school to be parents; there is no single model of how to bring up a child. Although churches have created ministries that help families a lot, and there are different social institutions that give advice, what happens each day at home is the perfect school. It's not always easy to bring up children, especially when we consider that they're unique people with free wills. This means that no two children will be the same, and what works with one child will not necessarily work with another. Children of the same parents, with the same upbringing, behave differently. But we can be sure of one thing ... that God's advice recorded in Scripture for parents and children will guide us in all cases. Let's look at some good advice from the book of Proverbs.

I. Children need correction (Proverbs 13:24, 19:18, 22:15, 23:13-14)

Correction is very important in children's lives and the Bible teaches that it should be done at an early age while there's still time.

A. “The one who loves their children is careful to discipline them” (Proverbs 13:24)

Correction is very important in children's lives, and the Bible teaches that it should be done at an early age while there is still time.

The Message translation of this verse says: “A refusal to correct is a refusal to love; love your children by disciplining them.” Here the Bible is encouraging us to discipline our children, which includes punishing them. For some parents, this is hard because it hurts them and the child, but if we don't, the character of our son or daughter won't be formed correctly. And then later it will be too late, and when we want to do something about it, there may be bad consequences. As parents, we shouldn't let children off when they do something wrong. Of course, the correction must be done in the most loving manner. They'll be grateful for the discipline later on in life.

B. Discipline prevents disaster (Proverbs 19:18)

Proverbs 19:18: “Discipline your children, for in that there is hope; don't be a willing party to their death.” There is an urgency in correcting at an early age. Sometimes children repeat obscene words they have heard, and parents laugh and think it's funny instead of correcting and teaching them. Sometimes too, children don't obey the first time when you ask nicely, and then you have to raise your voice to get them to pay attention. This happens a lot in our homes. Children must be taught to obey at once, without the need to repeat or shout the command. They need to do this from early childhood. Children need to learn to respect their parents and all authorities.

C. “Punish them with the rod and save them from death” (Proverbs 23:13-14)

The Message translation puts it this way: “Don't be afraid to correct your young ones; a spanking won't kill them. A good spanking, in fact, might save them from something worse than death.” The wisdom writer is promoting physical correction. This is a hot topic in today's society, even within the church. Should we spank or hit children? Here the Bible affirms that some physical punishment is needed. However, this doesn't mean beating the life out of a child or striking them in anger. The use of physical discipline should always be accompanied by verbal dialogue, and must be applied after a warning. The child must always know why physical correction is happening. Some spanking may come in handy at an opportune moment. The main objective is to correct a behavior so that the child learns self-control and grows to maturity recognizing the difference between what is right and what isn't.

Questions:

- Let's review the aspects about the correction of children that we've talked about.
- Explain one of these aspects in your own words.

II. Children have duties towards their parents (Proverbs 19:26, 20:20, 30:17)

We never stop being parents even when our children have grown up. But as time goes on, children also have some responsibilities toward their parents.

A. Respect and care for parents (Proverbs 19:26)

Proverbs 19:26 in the Message translation says: “Kids who lash out against their parents are an embarrassment and disgrace.” The NIV says: “Whoever robs their father and drives out their mother is a child who brings shame and disgrace.” Stealing is a well-defined sin in God’s law, but in this text, it’s underscored because the hurt is against the father. Children have the duty to take care of their parents, to give them protection and to respect them. This biblical case of children robbing their fathers, and others who throw their mothers out on the street, still happens today. God obviously doesn’t approve.

When children come of age, to some extent, they need to provide for their parents, seeing that they have enough food and other essential necessities. Parental care includes many issues both spiritual and material, ranging from a visit to chat with them, to being at their bedside in a hospital. It’s definitely not about throwing them out on the street! It’s about taking care of them and giving them all the attention that they are able to. Sometimes children justify themselves because their parents didn’t fulfill their roles or expectations. But no matter how our parents were, our duty as children is always to be supportive. Jesus reminded the Jews of his day: “For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’” (Mark 7:10). The duty to honor parents isn’t based on how the parents were with their children, but simply, it’s the duty of each child. No matter what we experienced growing up, God wants us to do our duty towards our parents, and that will bring us blessings.

B. Children shouldn’t curse their parents (Prov. 20:20)

The Message puts this proverb this way: “Anyone who curses father and mother extinguishes light and exists benighted.” Vine, in the Theological Dictionary, states: “The term ‘curse’ lends itself to various interpretations; but the one used in this text, as contained in the Septuagint version (LXX), is the Greek verb kakologeo. The meaning of this verb is to: “speak badly (kakos, bad; lego, speak). This verb is translated as ‘curse’ in Mt 15:4 and Mk 7:10; where the Lord refers to speaking evil of father and mother” (Vine, W. E. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1999, p. 1132). According to Old Testament laws, ‘cursing parents’ could even be punished with death (Leviticus 20:9). So, one of the duties of sons and daughters is never to speak ill, or say negative and hurtful words, of their parents.

We can practice the opposite of cursing by blessing them and saying things that build them up. This doesn’t mean that we don’t recognize errors or wrongdoing. But we need to do it constructively to help them. There are those who justify themselves saying: “But what I am saying about them is the truth.” Maybe it is, but the truth must be told loaded with love, and never resentment, bitterness or hatred.

C. Appreciation and obedience (Proverbs 30:17)

The Message puts this verse in very dramatic terms: “An eye that disdains a father and despises a mother—that eye will be plucked out by wild vultures and consumed by young eagles.” Some of the key actions in the duty of children towards their parents is obedience. Parents generally want the best for their children, and the Bible commands us to obey them, knowing that this obedience is a result of a righteous conduct which God wants of us. There are blows that children receive in life for not obeying parental advice. They don’t listen, and that’s where problems come that could have been avoided. Jesus is our greatest example of obedience to His heavenly Father while He was here on earth. He left us the model of obedience.

In the Jewish culture, disobedience to parents was considered to be very serious. This text suggests death for the person who incurred this fault. The recommendation is to obey, which means doing what our parents ask us to, recognizing their authority, even when we don’t agree with them. Of course, we shouldn’t obey where there is a violation of biblical principles or anything that endangers life.

This verse also speaks of contempt for parents, which is sometimes exacerbated when they are seniors. We must appreciate them, including our gestures, words and actions of love towards them. We can’t abandon them, but keeping the relationship close. Some people who didn’t have a very good childhood may very well say: “Why should I appreciate and obey someone who never took good care of me?” This is hard, of course, but when our lives have been changed by Christ, then His love will help us because we know that it’s what the Lord wants of us.

Questions:

- Mention the duties children have towards their parents.
- Explain one of these aspects in your own words.

III. Children need instruction and teaching (Proverbs 1:8, 19:27, 22:6)

It's essential to continually instruct our children. This is the daily work that parents have to carry out. For the Jews, teaching their children to love God with all of their being was an indispensable part of daily life. In Deuteronomy we see that they carried out this instruction several times a day and in different places (6:4-9). Receiving spiritual teaching and instruction is fundamental in our children's lives, as well as training about how to coexist fully in society.

A. In order to act wisely (Proverbs 19:27)

Verse 27 says: "Stop listening to instruction, my child, and you will stray from the words of knowledge." Instruction brings knowledge and wisdom. It's vitally important to listen and take heed of useful instructions. This teaching can prepare children to apply knowledge in the context of their lives. Sometimes children think they know everything, which may lead them to neglect and ignore their parent's advice and instruction. Then maybe, what Mom and Dad predicted happens.

Children's wisdom and knowledge depends largely on their parent's instruction and teaching. This cannot be left to the teachers at school who do assume some responsibility. There are a variety of teachings and instructions that parents should teach to their children, such as the following:

- Cultivating love for God (prayer, reading the Bible, family altar, spiritual disciplines, etc.).
- Exercising their gifts and fulfilling God's purpose.
- Relational education (giving thanks, apologizing and/or forgiving, requesting permission, rules of good behavior, etc.)
- Sex education (knowing their body, its limits, the use of their sexuality correctly, etc.).
- Relationships in different areas (family, school, etc.)
- Behavior at work (with superiors, with subordinates, honesty, commitment, etc.).

Children are the greatest legacy of parents; for this reason, teaching and instruction consists of sharing and helping children apply wisdom in the different areas of life. In every part of their lives, children need their parent's instruction to act with wisdom. Even when they don't want to listen and obey, teaching and instructing must continue. The advice and counsel that we give will always make a spiritual impact.

B. Children must listen to their father and mother (Proverbs 1:8)

The Bible also admonishes: "Listen, my child, to your father's instruction and don't forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8). Teaching must come from both parents; this is crucial in the biblical text. Unfortunately,

we live in a society where a high percentage of children grow up without one of the two parents. Generally, the father is the absent and many mothers say: "I have had to be a mother and father at the same time." This expression denotes the great sacrifice made by that mother in raising her children without having the father beside her. But this is completely removed from the divine pattern. God created both father and mother with a shared responsibility for their children. Each one brings something different to parenting, completing the harmony of the home. Children need both parents growing up.

As parents, we have a duty to teach our children the Word of God, and as children, we have a duty to listen to both parents, unless that teaching acts against God's model in His Word. Family design was established by our Creator because He knew what would be best. In this section of the lesson, ask your students for examples and testimonies about the support and benefits of listening to parental teachings.

C. Education is fundamental in childhood (Prov. 22:6)

Verse 6 clearly says: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." We have heard many testimonies from Christian children and adults who remember the teaching of their parents, and they keep pleasing God. We parents can have a powerful impact on our children's lives through what we say and how we live.

Education in childhood is of the utmost importance. All societies and cultures down through the ages go through this stage of learning and teaching, although practice has shown us that it's possible for children to depart from what has been taught, and that makes us think that the verse doesn't actually work. What the Bible is conveying to us is the principle that teaching children will always remain in their hearts, even when perhaps they stop complying at some stage in their lives. Nevertheless, the duty as parents was fulfilled. If you have the high privilege of being a Christian and having young children, sow the Word of God in their lives, and have family times where you can teach them to be true disciples of Christ. In addition, it's important that our children see how their parents love God, and serve Him. This will always remain in their hearts.

Questions:

- What teachings and instructions should parents teach their children?
- Whose responsibility is it to teach children, and at what stage of their life is this essential?

Conclusion

God's Word commands us to discipline our children and we must not fail to fulfill that responsibility. And as children, we must listen and honor our parents always.



Four things that God hates

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

Study passages: Proverbs 20:10,19,22-23,25, 24:29, 25:21-22, 26:20,22

Memory Verses: “Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” Matthew 22:37-39.

Lesson aim: To discover the practical wisdom offered by the book of Proverbs regarding deception, gossip, revenge and vows.

Introduction

The book of Proverbs offers deep insights and exceptional wisdom on how to live a happy and peaceful life, full of honor and respect for God. There are a couple of guiding principles that we find at the beginning of Proverbs. Firstly, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (3:5) and “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge...” (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10). In this lesson, we’ll look at four things that God hates and that we must avoid: deceiving people, gossiping, taking revenge, and making vows lightly.

I. Deception (Proverbs 20:10, 23)

Does a kilo of potatoes always weigh 1,000 grams, or has someone upset the balance? When the tank of your car is filled at the petrol station, is it a real liter of gas or petrol plus some extra water? And what about misleading advertising? Can Coca-Cola sell ‘happiness’? McDonald’s says that their food is ‘healthy’. Everywhere, they try to sell us ‘wellness’. We realize that the government or politicians, companies and businessmen, or the media, lie to us repeatedly. It seems that society considers deception as a virtue.

The writer of Proverbs warn us: “Differing weights and differing measures—the Lord detests them both” (v.10). To detest something implies strong feelings, repulsion, disgust or hatred. God cares about fair business practices. The Bible commands honest weights and measures. This implies honesty and integrity in financial and professional dealings. Truth and righteousness demand that we treat every transaction with precision and care. Yes, we want God’s blessings, and not His judgment. So we have to consider the warning of this proverb.

Fraudulent trading and imprecise weights and measures are one way of breaking two of the Ten Commandments. Christians should never use false measures because this involves lying about what is being sold, and it’s also equivalent to theft by getting from the buyer more than the correct amount. Fiddling with weights and unfair measures are prohibited throughout the Scripture (see Leviticus 19:35-36; Hosea 12:7; Amos 8:5-6; Micah 6:10-11).

Questions:

- Why is it important to be fair in all of our businesses?
- What two commandments are broken when we counterfeit the weights?
- Are we always honest in our money transactions? If someone gives us more change than was due, do we return it?
- Do we all pay all our taxes honestly?
- Are we happy when we sell something for a cost greater than its value?
- How do we know when people are cheating us? What should we do in these cases?”

II. Gossiping (Proverbs 20:19, 26:20,22)

A gossip is one who has privileged information about people and likes to reveal that information to those who don’t know it. Everyone likes a good story, right? Well, not necessarily. What about the people in the story? Would they like to hear what we’re saying about them? Spreading rumors only hurts others and destroys our credibility. Who will trust us when they’re thinking that we’ll tell others? Gossiping is a way of judging people. Words are powerful; they can encourage or destroy. Proverbs 26:22 says: “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to the inmost parts.”

In these times, forest fires of huge dimensions are sometimes caused by a smoking cigarette butt or a small campfire in a field. James says: "Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark" (3:5). Proverbs 26:20 says: "Without wood a fire goes out; without a gossip a quarrel dies down."

Ask: What are the results or effects of gossip? Gossip spoils relationships, destroys trust, and the pain associated with gossip is felt long after the words are spoken. The Bible warns about the danger of our tongue when we use it incorrectly, and describes it by saying it's "full of deadly poison" (James 3:7-8).

Gossiping is pointless. Often, we join a discussion simply to feel included without considering that there is no benefit in mistreating another person or spreading rumors.

God didn't create humans to be judges pointing out the imperfections of everyone else. In fact, the Bible repeatedly commands that we love each other (John 13:34-35), that we treat others as we would like to be treated (Matthew 7:12), and that we love our neighbor as ourselves (Mateo 22:39). Although we're blessed with free speech, God's plan for us doesn't include a haughty tongue (Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:29). Proverbs 20:19 says: "A gossip betrays a confidence; so, avoid anyone who talks too much."

Ask: What should you do when someone comes to tell you: "Did you hear about ..."? If we want to avoid gossip, we should focus on creating helpful and encouraging statements. We have to stop the conversations that lead to gossiping. If we do this, the others will know that we don't listen to such matters. We must remember the golden rule: if we don't want people to talk about us, then don't participate in gossip.

Questions:

- What are the effects of gossip on society?
- Is it possible to gossip on Facebook or WhatsApp?
- How can we avoid listening to gossip?
- Are we tempted to pass news, which could be false, to our friends?
- How can we discern fake news?"

III. Vengeance (Prov. 20:22, 24:29, 25:21-22)

What do we do when someone does something bad to us? How would we feel if our neighbor poisoned our dog? Or even worse, when a boy from the neighborhood raped our daughter? Or if our spouse is dating another person? We humans have a normal reaction to such events. We wonder "Why? What can

I do now? I hate him/her, I want them dead..." These are human reactions, but as citizens of the Kingdom of God, we need to reflect on how we should react and act.

The principle of retaliation, "lex talionis" (the law of retaliation), was common in both Jewish and other ancient codes of laws of the Near East. The judicial sentence "an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth" (Exodus 21:24) was established as a means to end disputes, that is, provide a just punishment. But we must not take the law into our own hands. Proverbs 24:29 warns us, "Do not say, 'I'll do to them as they have done to me; I'll pay them back for what they did.'" The Bible has a lot to say about revenge.

Both in Hebrew as in Greek, the words that are translated as 'revenge' or 'vengeance' mean to return evil for evil. However, God reserves for himself the right to bring about justice. Paul says in Romans 12:19; "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it's written: 'It's mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. 'Do not take revenge yourselves, my beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God; because it's written: Vengeance is mine, I will pay, it says the Lord'" (see also Deuteronomy 32:35 and Hebrews 10:30). As Christians, we have to follow the command of the Lord Jesus: "... Love your enemies, bless those who curse you..." (Matthew 5:44), leaving 'vengeance' to God.

There are two cases or examples in the Old Testament that illustrate how terrible revenge can be. In Genesis 34, we read the story of Dina, a daughter of the patriarch Jacob, who was raped by a Canaanite prince called Shechem. In love with Dina, Shechem asked Jacob for her hand in marriage (v.8), but Dina's brothers were filled with a desire for revenge. Simeon and his brother Levi deceived the men of the city saying they had to be circumcised first before marriage (vv. 13-15). The Canaanites obeyed in good faith, but when they were weak and in pain, Jacob's sons violently avenged Dina by attacking and killing them (v.25). They did an injustice without measure to the whole community and ended up as enemies.

In Judges 14 and 15, Samson cruelly avenged himself on the Philistines because they made fun of him. In both cases, they made enemies ... not only personal ones but also national one. Proverbs 20:22 says: "Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong! Wait for the Lord, and He'll avenge you.'"

Genesis tells us another story (Genesis 37-47). Out of envy, Jacob's son Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave to the Ishmaelites, who in turn sold him in the slave market in Egypt. The Bible tells how Joseph suffered in Egypt, and how later he became the vice-regent in charge of distributing grain in times of famine. There is a beautiful scene in the last chapter of Genesis, verses 15 to 21, where Jacob was an old man and Joseph's brothers were afraid that Joseph would take revenge on them. But instead of taking revenge, he forgave them.

Proverbs 25:21-22 says: "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you." On the cross, Jesus prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34a). The wise counsel of the Bible is that we should pray for our enemies, forgive them, and put things into God's hands.

Questions:

- Why does God forbid us to take revenge against our enemies?
- What is the biblical teaching about dealing with our enemies? (Deuteronomy 32:35; Matthew 5:44; Romans 12:19 and Hebrews 10:30).

IV. Making vows lightly (Proverbs 20:25)

Proverbs 20:25 says: "It's a trap to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider one's vows." Ecclesiastes 5:4 says: "When you make a vow to God, don't delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow." How many of us have gone down the aisle moved by a message? And we have said: "Lord, if you help me, I promise..."? Or perhaps a family decides to give their tithes and offerings to the Lord, but with the passing of time, they no longer do. Also, in our marriage ceremony we made vows of fidelity and mutual care, but later, when things get difficult Some people decide to dedicate their lives to God and His service, but attracted by business, they forget their promise.

We read many promises in the Bible that God makes in our favor, and which always have conditions, and God keeps what He promises. The Bible mentions cases of fulfilled vows. Ana promised that if she had a son she would dedicate him to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:11). When the baby was born, Ana kept her promise: "I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life He'll be given over to the Lord." And she worshiped the Lord there" (1 Samuel 1:27-28). King David promised that he would not rest until he found a home for the Lord and build the temple (Psalm 132:2-5).

This proverb warns us not to promise something that we should not, or will not, keep. Jephthah made a hasty vow to God that he would sacrifice the first thing that came out of his home to God if God gave him victory in the battle. When he returned home victorious, his only daughter was the first to run out and greet him (Judges 11:29-40). Jephthah's vow was hasty and against God's will since human sacrifice was a sin (Deut. 12:30-31).

In the New Testament, we see Peter at the last supper promising to follow Jesus no matter what. But Jesus warned him that that same night, Peter would deny Him (Matthew 26:33-35). Ananias and Sapphira promised to give an amount of their money, but they hid part of it, with fatal consequences (Acts 5:1-11).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advised people to simply not take vows: "But I tell you, don't swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it's God's throne; or by the earth, for it's His footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it's the city of the Great King. And don't swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matt. 5:34-37; see also James 5:12). Both Jesus and James said it's better to make no vow than to make a vow and not keep it.

We shouldn't deceive our children by promising them things and then forget about our promise. It's important in a world that's filled with noise and idle words to be aware of what we're promising to the Lord, to our spouse, to our family and even the world. We must be wise in how we use our words.

Questions:

- At what times do we make vows or promises?
- What do Jesus and James say about making promises?
- Can a Christian swear as a witness with his hand on the Bible? "
- Have you ever made a promise to the Lord? Did you fulfill it? Take a few moments to reflect on your actions.
- Is it a sin to break a vow or promise?

Conclusion

Holiness implies walking in love, being filled with the Spirit of God showing His fruit in our lives. As people who walk close to the Lord, we must refrain from participating in gossip, we won't take revenge on people who attack or badly treat us, and we'll be scrupulously honest in all our transactions, and we won't promise what we won't be able to deliver.



A life without alcohol

Noemi Santiago Anzueto & Nemias Morales (Mexico)

Study Passage: Proverbs 23:29-35

Memory Verses: “Do not gaze at wine when it’s red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper” Proverbs 23:31-32.

Lesson aim: To understand the consequences of alcohol consumption for spiritual, physical, psychological, emotional, family and social life, and to make the decision not to ingest alcoholic beverages, and conduct ourselves as holy people in God’s presence.

Introduction

Alcohol has become a real social problem because it’s one of the drugs which is easy to get hold of, and it receives such a lot of powerful propaganda. When we talk about alcohol among Christians, there will always be some debate. Some are in favor of its use with measure, and others believe in total abstinence. Although the Bible doesn’t explicitly prohibit alcohol consumption, there are several biblical passages that recommend keeping away from it.

The Bible definitely condemns drunkenness and its effects. On November 14, 2019, The World Health Organization (WHO) provided statistical data on the global situation of the consumption of alcohol (https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications%20/global_alcohol_report).

Here is a summary of the information: -

- 1 in 20 deaths in the world is associated with alcohol.
- Of all deaths attributable to alcohol, 28% were due to injuries caused by traffic accidents, by self-harm such as suicide, or by interpersonal violence.
- 21% of alcohol-related deaths were due to digestive disorders; and 19% due to cardiovascular diseases

In Latin America and the Caribbean, 22% of all death injuries are attributable to alcohol consumption. There are many incidents of drinking among teenagers. The statistics show that more than a quarter of 15 to 19 year-olds all over the world (which equates to 27% of the world population) drink alcohol.

Given this reality, we have to ask ourselves why more and more young people are starting to consume alcohol at increasingly younger ages?

I. Profile of the alcoholic (Prov. 23:29-30)

A person currently suffering from alcoholism is

considered a to be a sick person. The characteristics of an alcoholic have been described perfectly for us by the writer of the book of Proverbs. “Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes?” (Proverbs 23:29). In other words, a person who drinks too much tends to become complaining, suffering, distressed, sad, in addition getting bashed around and bruised. At first, the alcoholic begins with one beer or a drink, then they have two, and so on, until as a drug it takes effect on their body and they reach a state where the substance consumed takes away their self-control. In that state, the individual can become violent, disrespectful, behaving differently than normal.

The next day, some people feel guilt for what they have done. Psychologists have also determined the defining characteristics of an alcoholic.

The scientific journal “Consejo Estatal Contra las Adicciones of the State of Querétaro, Mexico”, published some personality traits of someone who uses alcohol. These characteristics are the following:

- Emotional immaturity
- Emotional dependence
- Need to attract attention
- Inability to give and receive love. Nevertheless, they can speak very lyrically about love, as in the case of alcoholic poets, writers and composers.
- Sexual problems such as latent homosexuality, promiscuity or sexual insecurity
- Existential loneliness. They feel lonely, skeptical, indifferent, and oblivious to everything. They compensate for this situation by surrounding themselves with people who are by their side, and admire them.
- Impulsiveness. They work by short impulses. They aren’t consistent; they hardly persevere in anything.

- They live in a fantasy world, full of dreams.
- The alcoholic has a vague fear of everything and nothing: an existential anguish. As a consequence, and a compensation for their fears, they can develop aggressive behavior.
- Inability to integrate. As alcoholics are internally disintegrated, they don't accept themselves and evade company. They don't join group activities unless it's to drink.
- They are very emotionally sensitive, moved by everything. Some people sometimes consider alcoholics to be strong, but in reality, they're fragile. What happens is that alcohol consumption leads to emotional anesthesia.
- Inability to tolerate frustration. They're introverted, shy and insecure. Faced with failure, they generate resentment towards other people and self-pity. They feel both guilt and as a victim and in short, unhappy.
- Inability to tolerate suffering. They cannot face up to things and run away.

Proverbs reminds us of many of the ill effects of alcohol: pain and sadness, strife and complaints, wounds and red eyes (v.29). The intake of intoxicating beverages will bring these sorrows and countless life tragedies.

Questions:

- What are the characteristics that identify an alcoholic person?
- Why should we not get drunk? (v.30).

II. The temptation of the alcoholic (Prov. 23:31-32)

Currently, the sector most vulnerable to consumption of alcohol are teenagers who, as they develop into adults, experience constant changes in all areas of life. Consumption of alcoholic beverages in social gatherings is common in many places of the world.

We all know that sin keeps us from God, so sadly, the person who lives under the power of evil lives without the ability to overcome temptation. But in Christ, we can receive the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome temptation (1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Timothy 1:7). The temptation to drinking alcoholic beverages is so subtle. Maybe in a family gathering or a meeting of friends we could be invited to drink a glass of wine. Also, there is a lot of social pressure to drink at the work place.

Alcohol is intoxicating; working like a drug, it generates a reaction in the nervous system that will make the person want to ingest more, until there comes a point where a little bit is no longer enough. Proverbs 23:31 tells us: "Do not gaze at wine when it's red, when it sparkles in the cup when it goes down smoothly!" Wine

can be pleasant on many levels: how it looks, smells, tastes and feels. Nevertheless, these 'nice' aspects never justify their use (Proverbs 23:31-35). This passage in Proverbs describes those who drink alcoholic beverages and have got drunk and are always seeking for more: "Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine" (v.30).

Consuming any amount of alcohol, whether in form of wine or any other drink, with the intention of feeling relaxed, is a temptation which goes against our integrity. We're told that a little wine is healthy for the body, but when we hear the testimonies of those who have come out of alcoholism, we should remember that to love our neighbor, we must not do anything that would lead them to difficulties such as alcoholism. In the context of Latin America and the Caribbean where so much damage has been done by alcoholic abuse, the community of faith should be restorative and help those who struggle to get out of this practice since so many constantly battle against the temptation of alcoholic beverages.

As the writer of these proverbs truly warns: "In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper" (v.32). To beat the temptation, we must make the decision to be faithful to God, flee from it, and seek the help of the Holy Spirit and the family of Christ as support in the midst of weakness so that we don't sin against God.

Questions:

- What are the consequences of drinking wine? (v.31)
- How can we overcome the temptation to drink alcoholic beverages?

III. Some consequences of alcoholism (Proverbs 23:33-35)

Proverbs 23:33 says: "Your eyes will see strange sights, and your mind will imagine confusing things." Alcoholism alters people's physical, emotional and spiritual state. The tongue grows rebellious, the heart pronounces things contrary to reason, religion and common courtesy. Proverbs 23:34-35 warns: "You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. "They hit me," you will say, "but I'm not hurt! They beat me, but I don't feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?"

The person who ingests alcohol will drown in their sin and misery if they don't give Christ the opportunity to transform them. The only thought of the one who consumes alcoholic beverages revolves around looking for another drink (v.35). This verse paints a picture of the temperament and condition of alcoholics. They desire more and more alcohol.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicates that the consequences that can result for the alcoholic:

- Physical: cancer, liver disease, headaches, diabetes, gastritis, cardiovascular problems, insomnia, pancreatitis, stroke (i.e. a heart attack or brain hemorrhage), nutritional deficiencies, brain degeneration, erectile dysfunction, among others.
- Psychological: depression, anxiety, anger, jealousy (inability to control jealousy), epilepsy, psychosis and alcoholic dementia.
- Social: family breakdown, work problems, financial problems, accidents, mistreatment, etc. As we can see, the consequences of consumption of intoxicating drinks produce destruction in the life of the person and of the people around them.

Alcohol not only damages physical health; it also destroys families. Alcoholic parents give a bad example to their children. Their marriages often end in divorce, and it also generates other evils, such as domestic and family violence.

Dr. Jaime Ponce Alcocer wrote a publication entitled "The ravages of alcoholism in the family" where he says that the alcoholic tends to become aggressive and destructive not only with himself, but with his whole family and his social environment. When there's an alcoholic inside of the family, 'everyone gets sick', some members of the family consume alcohol and others try to avoid it. He wrote also that the consequences of alcoholism for the family are fear, tension, stress, arguments, non-compliance, guilt, reproaches, solitary confinement and secrets. This can affect the development of children, and although alcoholism isn't hereditary, children of an alcoholic tend to suffer from the same disorder.

Drinking alcohol offers only temporary comfort. We only find the real solution when we understand the evil that it does to us and we seek the help of God.

Questions:

- As a church, how can we help people who come to our communities of faith with this vice of alcoholism?
- In whom do we find true healing and deliverance from all addiction to alcoholic beverages?

IV. Making a wise decision (Proverbs 20:1)

Proverbs 20:1 says: "Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them isn't wise." When a person has fallen into alcoholism, it's very difficult to get out of it. Many psychologists tell us that this disease isn't curable. Alcoholics will always be alcoholics, but they can learn to live every day deciding not to fall again. They will have to work at restoring their way of life, changing their

interpersonal relationships, and constantly struggling not to relapse.

Proverbs invites us to act wisely. It's foolish to continue in a drunken state. Conversely, getting out of this addiction is an act of bravery and wisdom. As we have seen, alcoholics don't just damage their own lives, but also those of their families. Stopping drinking alcoholic beverages isn't only an act of the human will, it leads to total restoration where God's grace can transform the reality of the addict and his family. The power of the Holy Spirit provides the strength to get out of this condition; a spiritual restoration by the grace of Jesus Christ working for their salvation. A process is needed to restore their damaged emotions, giving them the security that they are part of God's family. They need to see with the help of the Holy Spirit they don't have to fight alone.

Our Lord Jesus wants to restore the family; the marriage destroyed by consumption of alcohol, the parent-child relationship, and the future of the children who suffer so much. Likewise, our God wants to restore the economy of the affected household by providing wisdom for good stewardship of finances. The family need to learn to spend time wisely, investing in productive things. The recovering alcoholic needs to find a job. This process of restoration in all areas of life will take time, counselling, and support from society and the faith community.

God can transform the reality of alcoholics, whether they are young people, adults, old folk, men or women. They can be freed from the slavery of drink. The church should be a community of support, forgiveness, and restoration. The church must help people who come struggling with these addictions, accompanying and understanding them with patience. The church can surround the family with love.

Questions:

- If it's true that 'once an alcoholic always an alcoholic,' what should we say and/or do as children of God to help these people? Is victory possible?

Conclusion

Alcoholism is a very serious social problem. It has hurt the lives of the people who fall into it, affecting their physical, social, family, emotional and psychological development. The church, as a community of faith, must open its arms of love to those who are fighting this problem of addiction, helping them in their processes of learning how to have a true relationship with the Lord and the restoration of their family. In the power of the Spirit of God, it's possible to be victorious.



Beware of deceitful people

Eudo Prado (Venezuela)

Study Passage: Proverbs 26:24-26

Memory Verse: “Their malice may be concealed by deception, but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly” Proverbs 26:24.

Lesson aim: To learn not to idealize people based on what they say, considering their true intentions.

Introduction

“The writing of the proverbs found in chapters 25-29 is the work of the wise in the time of Hezekiah, some 250 years after the reign of Solomon” (Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary, volume 9: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Songs. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1995, p.26). Perhaps these wise men were supporting King Hezekiah’s interest in religious revival and could have been used in the public teaching of the Levites (2 Chronicles 30) God brought great prosperity to this king who decided to obey God, and God will do this for us too, if we follow Hezekiah’s example.

The main purpose of this passage is to teach us to be prudent in our dealings with other people. We cannot always trust what people say; we have to discern their intentions.

I. The deception of pretty words (Proverbs 26:24a)

Words are false when they have no congruence with the actions of the one who says them. This is the idea reiterated in the first part of the three verses of study.

A. Words disguised as kindness

The first mention of verse 24 is about people who simulate kindness or friendship, when in reality they hide bad intentions. Some examples from the Old testament can be found in Genesis 34; Judges 4:17-21. This kind of attitude continues to be very common in society. Today, where relationships between people are increasingly trivial and lacking in commitment, the message contained in these proverbs has great relevance. Friendly conversations are often the way people disguise their hatred or bad intentions.

Verse 24 says: “Enemies disguise themselves with their lips, but in their hearts, they harbor deceit.” Genesis 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel. After hearing God’s verdict about his sacrifice, Cain was furious because his offering had been rejected. “Now Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let’s go out to the field.’ While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him” (v.8).

Jesus too warned about this same evil, instructing his disciples not to put excessive trust in people who don’t fear God. They needed to exercise prudence. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus says: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.” In the first chapter of Romans, Paul warned his readers about society: “They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil...” (vv. 29-30).

Even today, some people are very skilled at using their tongues to harm others for their own benefit. We need to keep our moral principles in mind. Reflect on the following: How many times have we seen how a false lover, through beautiful words, has tricked a naive young girl, dragging her to inappropriate actions that she later regretted bitterly! Some skillful salesmen, with lots of promises, try to sell us anything, even if it’s unnecessary or of poor quality. They easily manipulate people with their fancy and clever adverts.

Many congregations have been disrupted by someone who, through misleading words, arrives to cause divisions. We could mention an infinity of examples from everyday life. Because of this we must listen to the wise counsel of the Word of God contained in these beautiful proverbs.

Since what people say isn't always sincere, and may carry evil hidden intentions, biblical wisdom advises us not to trust what seems at first to be good. We must take some reasonable time to check out if there is true sincerity.

B. Sound advice for young people

The tips we find in these proverbs are especially necessary for the new generations who lack experience and have to make important decisions. We all need to be wary and take our time when we form a new friendship, courtship or marriage. The same goes for making business decisions without knowing the other person well enough. Bad choices can bring real suffering.

God's Word is full of wisdom, advising us about how to live our lives, but sometimes, we ignore the warnings. "The teaching given in proverbs hopes to save the young from many moments of tragedy and pain that are products of the deception of the wicked. Throughout the book of Proverbs, you can feel this spirit of urgency. The Master of wisdom knows that it's about salvation and loss of a life" (Carro, Poe and Zorzoli (editors). *Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary, volume 9: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Songs.* USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1995, p. 46).

Ask: What should we do to avoid deception in the fake world we face each day? An important measure that we can take is to sufficiently weigh the quality of the morals of the people with whom we interact, based not on the words that are so easy to say, but on their actions. Surely, in this way we'll avoid a lot of pain and suffering, both for us as well as for others. We need to remember that almost always, the things that happen to us affect many people, especially our family.

Questions:

- What does the person who has hatred in his heart use to cover it up?
- What special warning does this Proverbs offer to young people?

II. The false heart hides ugly things (Proverbs 26:24b, 25b)

The previous point has shown us that behind the friendly expressions of certain people, there may be hidden a world of evil intentions. Man's heart is very skilled at hiding deception. In this part of the lesson, we'll study the second part of verses 24 and 25: "...

in their hearts they harbor deceit" and "for seven abominations fill their hearts."

A. Only God knows the deceitful heart

As for the deception present in the heart of mankind, the Bible refers to this on several occasions. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve." Only God can really know what is hidden in a person's heart. So, we need guidance from His Word and His Spirit to enable us to face the deceitful heart.

Sometimes we find ourselves in a relationship with someone that we have doubts about, or we feel that we've been cheated by someone. In cases like these, prayer is a powerful means that can bring us victory. Through prayer, we can ask God for wisdom and spiritual discernment. We need to put on all the armor of God to face Satan's machinations (Ephesians 6:13). After all, he is the father of lies (John 8:44). God will give us the discernment necessary to recognize someone who is misleading us, and the wisdom required to see through Satan's cunning. We just need to entrust our doubts to God. Proverbs 3:5 says: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."

B. Deception is born of a corrupt heart

The final part of Proverbs 26:25 is of great importance for understanding this passage. It says: "... for seven abominations fill their hearts." The number 'seven' is extremely significant in the Bible. Basically, it's the number that indicates fullness or completeness. "It's a sacred number among the peoples of the Middle East... There are countless occasions when this number is used as a symbolic and sacred number" (Lockward, Alfonso. *New Dictionary of the Bible.* USA: Editorial Unilit, 1992, p.758).

The other key word is 'abominations.' The Bible speaks of certain things that God abhors. For example, it says that He abhors "the lying tongue" and "heart that devises wicked schemes" (Proverbs 6:16-19).

The word 'abomination' indicates that which "produces dislike or revulsion, especially from the point of moral and religious point of view" (Lockward, Alfonso. *New Dictionary of the Bible.* USA, 1992, p.11).

We can observe here the idea of a fullness of moral corruption, although in appearance the person seems very nice. God hates pretense or deception; they are 'abominations' to Him.

God has promised to sanctify the heart of everyone who puts their trust in Christ, no matter how corrupt their heart has been. Sanctification is the purification of the heart of all that moral corruption, which was deeply ingrained in us when we were separated from the Lord, that is abhorrent to our holy God, (Romans 6:22; I Corinthians 1:30).

Questions:

- What can we ask for through prayer to avoid deception?
- What does the word "abomination" mean?

III. True intentions will be exposed (Proverbs 26:26)

Verse 26 points out the impact of hatred in interpersonal relationships. "Their malice may be concealed by deception, but their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly."

A. The false tongue is full of poison

Attitudes, such as deception or hypocrisy, usually involve and almost always impact others. Generally, the bad intentions that some people harbored in their hearts cause problems for their group of friends, families, churches and entire communities. Sometimes they trigger serious conflicts in relationships which are very difficult to address.

Hebrews 12:15 talks about a "bitter root" which can develop, affecting not just the person who feels bitter, but it can poison interpersonal relationships. This root of bitterness can cause the person to use their tongue to channel their hatred; then words become a lethal weapon, the tongue becomes "full of deadly poison" (James 3:8).

The statement "their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly" (Proverbs 26:26b) indicates that situations arise which originate from hidden hatred. Many times they cause divisions as the congregation takes sides, or the problems are aired at the public level. How much pain could be avoided if we were more careful when giving credibility to people!

B. Deception exposed

Disguised hatred cannot stand the scrutiny of the truth. At the least expected moment, a contradiction appears between the words and the actions of the deceiver. Jesus said: "A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit" (Matthew 7:18). In the same way, deception cannot be maintained all the time. Although it's unfortunate, many times when it's discovered it has already caused many problems.

The hypocritical person is inevitably destined to public moral condemnation, which is almost always very embarrassing. Regarding Proverbs 26:26, the commentator Matthew Henry said, "Someone has said that love is the best armor, but the worst cloak, and those who deceive, will get the same benefit as Ahab when he disguised himself, but couldn't avoid death" (Henry, Matthew. *Biblical Commentary on Matthew Henry*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.699). "Finally, v. 26 shows that the truth wins, affirming the popular saying: 'Truth like oil also comes to the surface'" (Carro, Poe and Zorzoli (editors). *Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary*, volume 9: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Songs. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1995, p.248).

This also highlights the importance of getting advice from those who are older. Old age, generally, represents experience; because "Is not wisdom found among the aged? Doesn't long-life bring understanding?" (Job 12:12). So, the advice of the elders can help us avoid deception. Many times, we reject guidance or the advice of experienced people, pretending to be independent, and we can fall into an attitude of self-sufficiency that will not always benefit us. The Word of God exhorts us: "Hold on to instruction, don't let it go; guard it well, for it's your life" (Proverbs 4:13).

Questions:

- What does the following expression indicate: "their wickedness will be exposed in the assembly" (v.26b)?
- Why is it important to heed the advice of older people?

Conclusion

Whoever hides their bad intentions behind a façade of apparent goodness, deceiving their fellows with hypocritical words, will not go unpunished. The Bible says that God "does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:7).



Lessons from three small wise creatures

Jefferson Estévez (Ecuador)

Study Passage: Proverbs 30:25-27

Memory Verse: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!” Proverbs 6:6

Lesson Aim: To learn that even though they may be weak, we can learn from the industrious ant, the thoughtful hyrax and the ingenuity of the locust.

Introduction

The book of Proverbs contains good advice through wise statements about how to live a life aligned with biblical purposes. The wisdom in this book was supposedly written mostly by king Solomon covering almost every aspect of life, although this chapter was written by Agur, about whom we know nothing (Proverbs 30:1).

One of the key themes that Proverbs focuses on is the basic conduct of a righteous person who has a good relationship with God. Within this book, we can find beautiful and deep passages whose messages continue to refresh today's world. When analyzing Proverbs, we'll learn words of wisdom that will allow us to draw closer to the Lord. Through the study of Proverbs 30:25-27, we'll consider three different animals who can give us some practical advice for us Christians today.

I. Wise ants prepare in advance for winter (Proverbs 30:25)

The Message version says: “ants—frail as they are, get plenty of food in for the winter” (v. 25). This verse teaches us that there are aspects that we can apply from the way ants live. Although they're very small insects, they're very strong and hardworking, thinking ahead. During the summer, they collect and store their food which is going to serve them and their little ones during hard days in winter when food is scarce. On some occasions, we have seen an ant carrying food that's much larger than itself, going steadily along a difficult path, with a clear fixed goal of reaching its anthill and contributing to food for the new generations.

Proverbs 6:6 makes this recommendation: “Go to the ant, you sluggard, consider its ways, and be wise”. We can learn from this insect to prepare in advance for difficult times ahead with determination and hard work. This is a very valuable tip for us, since being a Christian can sometimes be trying. We can claim the same promise that God gave to Joshua: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; don't be discouraged, for the

Lord your God will be with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:90).

The ants teach us to prepare and work hard. In order to grow in the Christian life, we must put in effort. God said to Joshua, “Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; don't turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go” (Joshua 1:7).

We need to continue along the Lord's way, getting our spiritual nourishment from God's Word, which is our food. Those who don't mediate and obey the Scriptures will not progress in their spiritual life and can be dragged down by sin or live a Christian life without serious commitment. Lack of time, tiredness, and lack of understanding are common excuses people make for not reading their Bibles. Lack of good spiritual nutrition brings immaturity, inconsistency and weakness, and leads to difficult moments, even to the point that believers leave God's sheepfold.

A. Ants work very hard to get food

In this way, they are prepared for the bad days. They know that seasons will come when the food will be scarce; therefore, they must be prepared. If not, they will die! In the same way, Christians should strive and prepare through spiritual food in God's Word. John 6:27 says, “Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.” There is a never-ending supply of this food that John is talking about; it will never run out and will lead us to everlasting life. Many Christians today eat less and less spiritual food. As a result, in times of temptation or trial, they fail.

We must not neglect our spiritual life. We must create in ourselves the habit of studying, reading, and searching the Word of God. We must make this a priority. The following are guidelines to help us form the good habit of feeding on God's Word constantly.

1. Set aside time each day to read the Bible.
2. Stay away from any distractions that interrupt your Bible reading.
3. Choose a study and/or reading plan as a guide.
4. Use books as tools to help with biblical interpretation (Biblical commentaries, maps, Bible dictionaries, among others).

B. Concern for the afterlife

We must be responsible in building an economic or material future for the times to come. Make sure that we have enough for our old age, have health insurance, and provide for the education of our children, among others. However, although these actions are very valuable, there is something much more important than our material future, and that is our eternal future. We must continually grow spiritually, having a good testimony, worshipping and obeying Him. We must draw closer to Christ through constant communion with Him, putting our lives at the service of the kingdom of heaven. Christ has prepared an eternal future for his children. John 14:2 notes: "My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?" There is an unimaginable reward for God's children who remain faithful to the end. So, let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and not faint until we get the reward of eternal life (Revelation 2:10). It's important to note that as Christians, we must not neglect this very valuable area of our lives. If we're not constantly preparing and feeding ourselves properly, our Christian life will fail.

We have to be aware that bad days are getting closer. These will be times when false doctrine and manipulated interpretations will be more common, and the Christian who doesn't feed on God's wonderful Word will be lost. Let's be very careful not to fall and separate ourselves from God.

Questions:

- What are two ways you see yourself preparing for your eternal future.
- What spiritual disciplines do you practice to feed yourself spiritually?

II. "Hyaxes are creatures of little power..." (Proverbs 30:26)

First, we need to find out something about these animals which were common among the rocks of Israel. Hyaxes are sometimes called coneys or rock rabbits. The San Diego Zoo web page tells us: "The Hyrax might look a bit like a large guinea pig or rabbit with very short ears, but the hyrax is neither. As their name implies, they hang out in areas where there are boulders, rock formations, or even little

nooks on sheer cliffs that provide shelter and protection. They may live in colonies of up to 50 individuals, sharing sleeping areas and looking for food together" (<https://animals.sandiegozoo.org/animals/rock-hyrax>).

Our proverb tells us that "hyaxes are creatures of little power, yet they make their home in the crags" (v. 26). Just like the ants, they aren't great powerful animals. They appear defenseless, but although they are weak and their environment is difficult, they know how to live among the rocks. Probably, the steely eyes of eagles and hawks would be on the look out for these little creatures.

In Old Testament times, they were considered impure animals. Leviticus 11:5 says, "The hyrax, though it chews the cud, doesn't have a divided hoof; it's unclean for you." This is a small but wise little animal which seeks refuge in the rocks, a place where they feel safe from all danger that stalks them..

A. Learning from the Hyrax

These animals, because they aren't strong, seek refuge and safety, and they get it between the rocks. From them, we must learn that because we're not strong, we need to take shelter in the best refuge, God, our eternal rock.

B. Psalm 61:1-2

The Bible says: "Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that's higher than I." In a desperate cry, the psalmist raised a prayer and found a safe place! God is our rock.

As human beings, we're easy prey for the enemy. Our sinful tendency makes us vulnerable to the lures of evil. We must recognize that we need the Rock because alone, we're incapable of protecting ourselves in the midst of the dangers of life. If we try to fight by our own means, seeking salvation on our own, we won't achieve it because we'll be looking incorrectly towards material things, religions, ideologies, or relying on our own human efforts.

C. Christ is the rock

The Psalmist said that God was his rock. We also see in Scripture that Christ is also described as a rock. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:4: "and they drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

Paul says here that Christ is the source of all blessings. He is our refuge; in Him we're safe, outside of Him we're in imminent danger as we take refuge in our achievements or material things.

Despite our indifference to God, and although we don't even deserve that He should notice us, He's ready to welcome us into His arms, just as the father welcomed his young prodigal son who had left the parental home and ended up wasting the inheritance the father had given him (Lucas 15:11-32). This loving father was attentive when his son came back.

According to Matthew 7:24-28, wise people build their houses/lives upon the firm foundations of rock. Their construction won't perish and will even go through storms and disasters. Christ is the eternal rock; He defeated death and lives for eternity. Let's run to take safe refuge in Jesus, just like the hyrax takes refuge among the rocks. Let's go confidently to protect ourselves in the arms of the Lord.

Questions:

- What lesson does God teach us by considering the actions of Hyraxes?
- Explain in your own words why Christ is our foundation.

III. "Locusts have no king, yet they advance together in ranks" (Proverbs 30:27)

National Geographic tells us that: "Locusts have been feared and revered throughout history. Related to grasshoppers, these insects form enormous swarms that spread across regions, devouring crops and leaving serious agricultural damage in their wake. Plagues of locusts have devastated societies like ancient Egypt and they still wreak havoc today" (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/invertebrates/facts/locusts>).

In the time of Moses, God promised the Egyptian Pharaoh a plague of locusts: "If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow" (Exodus 10:40). If we turn to Revelations, the last book of the Bible, we find them again: "And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth" (Revelations 9:3). The surprising thing is that although locusts don't have a visual guide or leader, they are incredibly well organized when they attack.

The text of Proverbs 30:27 teaches us that locusts, without having a leader, stick together. How much more the church must act in unity since we have the most extraordinary of all leaders: Christ! The example of locusts highlights the need to act together with coordination.

So, one locust is no great thing, but thousands of swarming hungry locusts can destroy many harvests. They achieve this because they have a single-minded goal. We too need to apply the same principle of unity to everything that God has commanded us. If we do this, we'll carry out His will and purpose.

A. Christ our guide

Ephesians 1:22 says, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church..." The head guides the body: "...He is the head of the body, the church..." (Colossians 1:18). Christ is also the Good Shepherd who leads His sheep to the fold and keeps them safe. Although we don't see Him physically, we can see him in faith. We know that He is leading us and we're following in His footsteps. We must be submissive to His words and commands and allow Him to be in charge of our lives. What's more, He is our Master and we're His disciples. He is the head of the church and we're part of the body.

Everything we do is by His order and coordination. Colossians 1:18 states: "...he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

B. Union in the Holy Spirit

Without the work of the Holy Spirit, unity would be impossible in the body of Christ. The early church is the ultimate expression of the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, the disciples were united and shared the same joy. God's work in the first century could not have been achieved without the work of the Spirit Holy. The church walked as a true body because each one carried out their functions with joy and dedication without being afraid even to die.

The early church had one purpose despite differences in social classes and cultural changes. Acts 2:44 says: "All the believers were together and had everything in common."

Today, the Church must continue to live united through the Holy Spirit, fulfilling the purpose for which it has been established (Acts 1:8). A church led by the Spirit can be used by God to proclaim the message of the Kingdom and the truth of the King who brings freedom to the world, radiating a light that pushes back the darkness.

Questions:

- What lesson does God teach us by considering the actions of locusts?
- How can a Christian contribute to the unity of the body of Christ?

Conclusion

As children of God, we must listen and practice biblical advice, nourish ourselves spiritually, stay on the foundation that is Christ, and fulfill our mission as the body of Christ, to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. We need to strive to remain united, and allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit.



A woman who fears the Lord

Francisco Borrallés (Mexico)

Study Passage: Proverbs 31:13-22,25-26,30

Memory Verse: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised" Proverbs 31:30.

Lesson aim: To discover the traits of a really wise woman

Introduction

This poem that we find at the end of Proverbs paints a picture of what it means to be wise in action. It's an acrostic poem which means that each verse starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which may have helped people to memorize it. The target audience is men. What sort of wife and mother should they seek: "An excellent wife, who can find? For her worth is far above jewels. The heart of her husband trusts in her, and He'll have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil All the days of her life (vv.10-12). So, this is an ode to women rather than a manual on how to be a good wife and mother, although of course there is much that can be learned. The memory verse gives the key to her success, she is a "woman who fears the Lord."

This ode to the virtuous woman contrasts with many other comments in the book of Proverbs about women: "...an adulterous woman is a deep pit" (23:27); "...Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion" (11:22); "...A quarrelsome wife is like the constant dripping of a leaky roof" (19:13); "... Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife" (21:19), among others.

The Theology of Work Project states: "The book of Proverbs is summarized, then, in a poem praising a woman who is the wise manager of diverse enterprises ranging from weaving to wine making to trade in the market. Every detail of what a wife and mother should do in those times is described for us" (theologyofwork.org/old-testament/proverbs/what-do-the-proverbs-have-to-do-with-work/the-valiant-woman-proverbs-3110-31).

In this lesson, we'll take a look at this godly wife and mother, referring specifically to her interactions with her husband, family and with society.

I. The secret of her success (vv. 25, 26 and 30).

Our memory verse points to the key of her success: "Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised" (v.30). What does it mean to fear the Lord? This is a concept that's often repeated in the Bible (Psalm 111:10, Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10).

Here we're not talking about being afraid of God as we might be of earthquakes or hurricanes or mad dogs. People who fear God revere and stay close to Him, trusting in His promises. They seek to obey the guidelines that the Bible lays down for each area of our lives. They will always ask God's forgiveness and try to live blameless lives.

The result of her reverence for God is seen in her quiet confidence in the future and in all that she endeavors to do day by day for her home: "She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come" (v.25). Because of her trust in God, she isn't anxious about the future. Proverbs 14:26 says: "Whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for their children it will be a refuge."

She "speaks with wisdom: and faithful instruction is on her tongue" (v.26). James in his letter, after sharing about the damage that the tongue can do, went on to explain what true wisdom is: "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness” (3:16-18). So, she fears and trusts God every day and for the future and her words bring blessing and positive teaching.

Questions:

- What does it mean to fear the Lord?
- What is true wisdom?

II. She is industrious

Here we can observe that she has ability, physical strength, as well as the skill to develop various types of work according to her situation in society. This lady doesn't sit in front of the television watching for hours on end; neither does she spend all her time on her mobile phone, WhatsApp or Facebook. “She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks” (v.17). She doesn't stay in bed but “gets up while it's still night” (v.15). This lady knew how to work hard as she organized things for her family. God promises us strength for the tasks we have to carry out: “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak” (Isaiah 40:29). Let's look at some of the things that she does:

A. She's a good wife (vv. 10-12)

“Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life” (vv.10-12). These are the opening comments of the poem and reveal that she was truly his help meet. He relied on her and could trust her implicitly.

B. She makes clothes for her family (vv. 13, 19, 21, 22)

First, she has to choose the best materials to make garments out of wool and linen. Verse 13 tells us: “She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.” When she has the materials she needs, she sets about to spin the yarn and weave the cloth: “In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers” (v.19). The reason why she spends so much time on these garments is her love and care for her family whom she wants to protect from the cold winters: “When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet” (v. 21).

She also knows that the wife's bedroom must be made special for her husband and as his wife, she must dress well to please him: “She makes coverings

for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple” (v.22). We can appreciate, without the need for much analysis, how necessary it is to wear the right clothing according to the occasion. She knows how to dress for success.

C. She provides food for the household (vv. 14, 15)

She shops around the neighborhood for the best food supply, searching to find the best food in the market: “She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar” (14). Not only does she find the ingredients she need, she gets up early in the morning to prepare the food for the family, including those who were her helpers, the female servants. “She gets up while it's still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants” (v. 15).

D. She invests funds for her family (vv. 16, 18).

The virtuous wife is forward thinking, combining her creativity with hard work. She is a successful businesswoman, buying a field and planting a vineyard. “She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard” (v.16). She knows how to sell goods for profit: “She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.” (v. 18). Her work compares favorably to merchant sailors (v.14), and one suspects that the reason her husband is well known (verse 23) is because of her, not vice versa!

E. She shows compassion for the needy (v.20).

Apart from what we have already seen in her care of her staff, we find that: “She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy” (v.20). It appears that although this lady appears to be well off, she doesn't allow her station to hinder her association with the lowly. Her strength appears to be as much moral as it is physical.

F. She is a good teacher (v.26)

Verse 26 tells us: “She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.” Who were the people that learned from her faithful instructions? All the female staff who worked with her; and of course her children and maybe even her husband, although he was mostly down with the elders: “Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land” (v.23).

Questions:

- Ask the men in the class to mention all the activities that they think a woman does at home. Contrast their answers with the opinions of the women present in the class.
- What did she do to be called a “virtuous woman”?

III. Susanna Wesley (1669-1742): An exemplary woman

It might seem that throughout this lesson an idealized model of a woman is presented, and that she, therefore, is impossible in reality. However, let's look briefly at a real historical virtuous woman who was highly respected in Christian circles precisely for the characteristics of being a virtuous woman that could be seen in her life.

Susanna Wesley was born in England in 1669. Her father was a clergyman. Susanna was Dr. Annesley's twenty-fourth child. Her father allowed her to stay with him in his study where famous men met to discuss theological and philosophical issues. Very young, she learned Greek, Latin and French.

At age 19, she married Samuel Wesley, dedicating her life to raising and caring for her family. She was the mother of a large family of nineteen children, although only 10 lived on to adulthood. Two of her sons, John and Charles, became leaders in the Evangelical Awakening of the 19th century in Great Britain. John changed the way of preaching and formed discipleship groups through the land. Charles, for his part, became one of the greatest hymn writers of all time.

In her article for Holiness Today, (Sept/Oct 2018) Rebecca Laird tells us: “Susanna Wesley understood her home as a small community of believers called to live together in covenant grace. Consequently, she considered it her primary vocation to instill a clear pattern of Christian devotion in her children. As God allowed, she would also extend her ministry in more public ways to the people of Epworth parish through works of mercy and public speaking. When her husband was away and the substitute priest proved ineffective, Susanna exhorted from her open kitchen windows, and dozens gathered to hear her teach the Scriptures.

She gave birth to 19 children, and 10 survived... She worked tirelessly and without much assistance

from her husband, who was often absent. She was given a remarkable mind, the ability to write and reason, bright children, teaching gifts, a pious upbringing, a challenging marriage, and ultimately a fulfilling death.

Susanna Wesley was also a spiritual guide and theological mentor to her children. She instructed them in the basics of the faith, taught them to read and reason, and to live out a “practical divinity.” Susanna Wesley lived and died believing that forming the family as a local faith community and extending care beyond it to the surrounding community could lead to reformation of the nation. The Wesleyan movement and its methodical way of living can be traced directly back to her firm hand, sound mind, and persistent faith.” (<https://www.holinesstoday.org/susanna-wesleys-method-of-motherhood>)

Susanna became the “Mother of Methodism.” John and Charles brought her ideas into Methodism, using the teaching methods they had first experienced around the rectory kitchen table.

Questions:

- What can we learn from the life of Mrs. Wesley?

Conclusion

In the same way that God manifested himself mightily through the lives of so many women who honored him, He still can and wants to do it today in the life of each of His daughters.

Responsible stewardship

Second quarter

Introduction to Christian stewardship
Stewards of creation
Stewardship in Jesus' parables
God's stewards in the work place
Responsible parenting
Administrating the Church for Jesus
Biblical principles for the stewardship of our resources
Ethics in financial administration
Managing our time
Fulfilling the Great Commission
The administration of spiritual gifts
Taking care of our bodies
John Wesley's counsel about managing our resources

Lesson
14

Introduction to Christian stewardship

Mary Prado (Venezuela)

Study passages: I Chronicles 29:11-18; Luke 12:42-46; Romans 14:7-8; I Corinthians 6:18-20

Memory Verse: “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand” I Chronicles 29:14.

Lesson aim: To understand the general aspects of Christian stewardship described in the Bible.

Introduction

In one of his famous sermons, *The Good Steward*, John Wesley considered that no description given to human beings in the Bible “agrees better with our present state than that of steward” (González, Justo L. *Wesley Works*, Volume III-Sermons III. USA: Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc. p.219). That means that our responsibility to God constitutes the main basis of stewardship.

This is a topic that’s talked about a lot in the Bible, but often isn’t taught so clearly in churches. So, we need to study it carefully. In this lesson, we’ll learn that there is a central idea that crosses all biblical teachings on this subject: God is the great reason or the principle motive for Christian stewardship.

I. The concept of stewardship (Romans 14:7-8; I Corinthians 6:18-20)

‘Stewardship’ is a word full of deep meaning. We should certainly teach more about stewardship due to its great importance in the Christian life. However, as one author has said, stewardship “Has sometimes been an absent term in religious and theological thought” (Turnbull, Rodolfo G., ed. *Dictionary of Practical Theology-Stewardship*. USA: Christian Reformed Church, 1976, p.5). Maybe this is due to ignorance, omission, or simply out of disinterest.

In this first part of the lesson, we’ll seek to appreciate in a broad way the concept of Christian stewardship through some fundamental ideas that will explain its meaning.

A. Stewardship is submission to the lordship of Christ

Our first study passage is Romans 14:7-8. Here we’re taught that stewardship isn’t just about money. It has to do with our submission to the lordship of Christ in all areas of our lives. This means that God expects us to be good stewards of His creation, of our own bodies,

spirituality (gifts, talents, abilities, etc.), money and other material things, our family, our use of time, and our relationships with others, etc. There is no aspect of our lives that escapes from our responsibility to God.

When speaking of the Lordship of Christ, Paul taught: “For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (Rom. 14:7-8). Here Paul emphasizes the lordship of Christ as the standard of the Christian life.

The word ‘Lord’ is translated from the Greek term *kýrios*, which means “lord, sovereign, powerful one... Of the 718 times *kýrios* is used in the NT, most appear in the Luke’s writings (210) and in the Pauline letters (275) ... God raised Jesus from the dead and elevated him to the dignity of universal *kyrios*. He gave him the name that surpasses all names (Phil 2, 9 ff. ; cf. Is 45, 23 ff.), That is, his own name of lord and consequently the position corresponding to such a name” (Coenen Lothar, Beyreuther Erich and Bietenhard, Hans. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IV. Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, 1994, pp.203,205-206).

So, practicing careful stewardship shows our submission to the lordship of Jesus in all that we are and do.

B. Stewardship has to do with sanctification

As a consequence of what has just been said, we can understand that stewardship expresses Christian sanctification. But what does this mean? Let’s examine the following: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies” (I Cor. 6:18-20).

Maintaining a righteous lifestyle is a fundamental part of Christian stewardship.

God created us with a lofty purpose, so we must exercise good stewardship of His divine gifts. Sexual impurity, for example, is contradictory to Christian stewardship. Robertson says: "Fornication constitutes a violation of the rights of Christ in our bodies (v.13-17) and also ruins the body itself ... even gluttony and drunkenness, as well as drug addiction, are sins done on the body ..." (Robertson, A. T. Commentary on the Greek Text of the New Testament. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2003, p.436). Therefore, stewardship is more than just giving our tithes and offerings. It means leading a life separated from evil and fully consecrated to God.

Questions:

- Define in your own words what Christian stewardship is.
- What are some areas of life that are included in stewardship?

II. Principles that underpin stewardship (I Chronicles 29:11-18)

Why should we practice stewardship? We can discover some of these principles in the Bible passage of this section.

A. God is the owner of everything

The first principle, without a doubt, is the most important aspect of Christian stewardship. King David recognized it as we read in I Chronicles 29:11-12. As we keep in perspective the divine prerogative of God as 'Owner of everything,' we can correctly appreciate our responsibility to Him. The difficulty of some Christians to 'consecrate their pocket books' through good stewardship only indicates ignorance of the fact that in fact what we have is not ours but His.

The supreme truth that God is the owner of everything is the foundation of Christian trust and responsibility. "Nothing else in the Bible, including the doctrine of stewardship, will make sense or reach some real importance if we miss the fact that God is the creator and has all the property rights" ("What is biblical stewardship?" Retrieved from <https://gotquestions.org>, February 18 2017).

Understanding this truth that God owns everything has a practical purpose in the Christian life. Stewardship is exercised through practical holiness and worship. "So, as we remember that God is the owner, He has ordered us to give Him our praise and worship, and our gifts" (Purkiser, W. T., Exploring Our Christian Faith. USA: CNP, 1994, p.553).

B. We are who we are by virtue of who God is

Human beings were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). What we are reflects His greatness and goodness towards us. We don't have anything good inherent in ourselves. Our intelligence, talents, abilities, any virtue and quality, everything, absolutely everything, comes from His power and wisdom.

That's why David said in this passage: "But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this?" (I Chronicles 29:14a). Paul also taught the Corinthians: "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you didn't receive?" (I Corinthians 4:7).

C. All that we possess and give to the Lord came from His provisions

Sometimes we think we're doing a favor to God by giving for His work, but in this we're completely wrong. In this passage from I Chronicles 29, we have a great teaching about this. David prepared for the construction of the Temple that later would be built by his son Solomon, and for this, he gave innumerable amounts of gold and silver as did the people of Israel. But, here King David recognized that all this came from the same hand of God: "... everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (v.14b).

One of the so-called divine names in the Old Testament is "Yahweh Jireh" (Jehovah appears or will provide, Gen. 22:14). Through the centuries, believers in God interpret this title as a promise that He 'will supply all that we lack according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 4:19)" (Hoff, Paul. Evangelical Theology, volume 1 / volume 2. USA: Editorial Vida, 2005, p.200). God is the source of our provisions, and He "gives us all things in abundance for us to enjoy" (I Timothy 6:17b).

D. Stewardship brings ample blessing

The last principle we'll study is one of the blessings that stewardship brings: abundance. But, although biblically, prosperity comes as a blessing from God for faithfulness and because of His grace, this doesn't mean that material prosperity is synonymous with blessing, or that poverty is due to sin.

All the circumstances that believers live in our life follows God's purpose. David expressed: "Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a temple for your Holy Name comes from your hand, and all of it belongs to you" (I Chronicles 29:16). David recognized that prosperity comes from God.

We see another example in the case of Joseph in Egypt. Many people were blessed because of the faithfulness of Joseph's stewardship: "From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field" (Genesis 39:5). By being faithful to God in our stewardship, He not only blesses our own life, but everything we do can prosper, becoming a blessing for others (Genesis 39:23).

Questions:

- What is the most important principle of stewardship?
- In what ways might our good stewardship bless the lives of others?

III. Characteristics of a good steward (Luke 12:42-46)

The next truth we'll study is that stewardship is directly related to Christian character. Therefore, Christians who correctly exercise their stewardship reflect correct values in their conduct that leads them to do good and fulfill the will of the Lord in all that He has entrusted to them. Let's examine some of the characteristics of a good steward in our last study passage located in Luke 12:42-46.

A. A good steward is faithful and wise

This first characteristic is closely linked to the integrity and honesty with which we manage everything that the Lord has given us, both before Him and people. Good stewardship is about moral integrity. "Integrity in our world of today implies moral incorruptibility" (What does the Bible about integrity? Retrieved from <https://gotquestions.org>). On the other hand, good stewards are cautious and well prepared in a forward-looking way. They don't waste their time on vain issues, but being prepared, they keep everything in order.

All that we are and possess, including our bodies, must be managed wisely to avoid damaging ourselves and also others. Also, prudence means surrendering our own wills to the Lord's purpose and exercising self-control over attitudes and actions that may lead us to neglect our task.

The Lord expects that as good stewards, we'll manage everything He has put into our hands with love and wisdom to bring blessing, and also to benefit those around us (v.42).

B. A good steward is hardworking

A good steward places importance on industriousness. Idleness and laziness are inconsistent with the concept of Christian stewardship.

In Jesus' parable, the faithful steward "acted during the absence of his master in exactly the same way that he would he have done if he had been present" (Turnbull, Rodolfo G., ed. Dictionary of Theology Practice-Stewardship. USA: Christian Reformed Church, 1976, p.68). "It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. Truly I tell you, He'll put him in charge of all his possessions" (vv.43-44). This speaks to us of the importance to God of the diligent fulfillment of our assignments and responsibilities in our families, professions, in church life, etc. Paul said in this regard: "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11).

C. A good steward is responsible

Good stewards have a clear awareness of their responsibilities. Each of us has responsibilities that have been assigned to us and for which we'll have to give an account one day, just like the steward in the parable (Romans 14:12). Someday, we'll be examined by how we have fulfilled our stewardship responsibilities.

Let's remember what the Lord said in Luke 12:45-46; we all have responsibilities to God for our family, the church, for others, for work, etc. How are we fulfilling our responsibilities? For example, we have a responsibility to work honestly to earn our sustenance (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12); also, to provide for our families. To be irresponsible is to deny the faith and to be worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). And what about our job responsibilities? The Christian must be the best possible worker (Ephesians 6:5-6). In the accomplishment of all our responsibilities, both in the work of God and in our personal life, as all these biblical texts have indicated, we should be seeking to fulfill God's will and please Him (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Questions:

- What are three characteristics of a good steward?
- What does it mean to be a responsible steward?

Conclusion

Christian stewardship is a profound concept that indicates, among other things, a submission to the lordship of Christ, daily living fully consecrated to Him. Stewardship also implies having a clear awareness of our responsibility before God and the fact that one day we'll have to come before Him to give an account of all that He entrusted to us.



Stewards of Creation

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

Study passages: Genesis 1, 2, 3; Psalm 24:1, 104

Memory Verse: “The earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”
Psalm 24:1.

Lesson aim: To understand that as Christians, we have a responsibility to use and care for creation well.

Introduction

Henry Fountain (19 April, 2020) wrote in the New York Times, “The science is clear: The world is warming dangerously, humans are the cause of it, and a failure to act today will deeply affect the future of the Earth” (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/19/climate/climate-crash>). For a couple of centuries, we humans have polluted the atmosphere with gases like CO₂ and Methane to the point that our planet is overheating due to greenhouse gases, jeopardizing our future existence on planet Earth. We have relied on oil for transport and many articles made of plastic and its derivatives. We have cut down most of the worlds natural forests and those that remain, like the Amazon forest, are under threat from exploitation. In 2020, there were many natural disasters which point to a serious imbalance in nature: storms and severe hurricanes causing flooding, forest fires which have consumed more of our precious forests, the ice caps are melting in the poles causing the sea level to rise, etc.

What does God, our Creator, think about what is happening? This class aims to help us understand and answer some of these questions.

I. God the Creator (Gen. 1, 2; Psalm 24:1)

A. In the beginning

God’s Word is clear in communicating that what exists is the work of a creator God. Genesis 1 is undoubtedly the description of the creation of the heavens and the earth, with special emphasis on planet Earth. Genesis tells us how, at the voice of God, everything was created: the plants (v.11-12); the

planets and stars in space including the sun and the moon (vv.14-17); then the land animals (vv.24-25); sea animals and fish (vv. 20-21); as well as the birds (v.20). God was watching everything and “God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:12,18,21,25).

The 2017-2021 Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, in Paragraph 923, states: “The Church of the Nazarene believes in the biblical account of creation (“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”—Genesis 1:1). We’re open to scientific explanations on the nature of creation while opposing any interpretation of the origin of the universe and of humankind that rejects God as the Creator (Hebrews 11:3). (Church of the Nazarene. Manual 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p. 322). So far, who could claim ownership of this creation but its Creator?”

B. Mankind ... a special creation

Mankind was the crown of Creation. Genesis 1:26, expresses it like this: “Then God said, ‘Let’s make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’” Here we see one of the main reasons for creating us was to be administrators of His wonderful creation.

C. The roles of mankind in creation

Adam and Eve were responsible for looking after the Garden and the animals. They even had to give all the animals names. “He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19b).

They needed to work the land. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (Genesis 2:15). So, in these first moments of time, God gave humans responsibilities. They needed to work, care for creation, have families, and populate the Earth. "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen. 1:28). Work is a blessing. The opportunity to cultivate the garden was a privilege that God gave to Adam and Eve to help develop all that He had created.

The Bible is very clear that we're not owners of creation but its caretakers or stewards. The 2017-2021 Manual of the Church of the Nazarene says in paragraph 32: "The Scriptures teach that God is the Owner of all persons and all things. We, therefore, are His stewards of both life and possessions..." (pp.48-49). Psalm 24:1 affirms this truth: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it."

So, our homes, which we have probably registered in our names, or other properties we consider to be ours, in reality all belongs to God, even the so-called 'intellectual property.'

Isaiah 45:18 states this clearly: "For this is what the Lord says, 'he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he didn't create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited...'" There are many verses in the Bible that emphasize that God is the Creator. Ephesians 3:9 and Revelation 10:6 are among many New Testament verses that attest to God as Creator.

Thus, God the Creator made the world to be inhabited, and He designed human beings to rule over His fabulous Creation (Genesis 1:28).

Questions:

- How would you explain the truth that God is the Creator of heaven and earth?
- How does Genesis 1:1 relate to Psalm 24:1?
- What do you think about the quote from the Church of the Nazarene Manual about creation?

II. Responsibility in the use of resources (Genesis 3)

A. The consequence of sin

Genesis 3 recounts the misfortune which came as a result of human disobedience. When the serpent tempted Eve about God's very clear instructions, that they could eat of every tree, except from the tree of good and evil (Genesis 3:16-17), she fell, as did her husband, who also ignored God's instructions. Genesis 3:7 tells us that they lost their innocence: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked". God cursed the serpent (v. 14) and the ground (v.17). God told Eve that women would have pain in childbirth and that Adam would have to work with difficulty the land that had been cursed. The worst part was that "the Lord God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken" (v.23). This is how sin entered the world, and the rest of the Bible narrates God's plan to save the world and His special creation.

B. Human responsibility for Creation

God has remained faithful to His promises. He is a God that he doesn't abandon His creation. Therefore, although creation had to face the consequences of human disobedience, they would still have the opportunity to produce food and develop. However, even though people can live in abundance, they would always experience the consequences of natural disasters, disease and even physical death. Job was right when he said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart..." (Job 1:21).

Psalm 115:16 states: "The highest heavens belong to the Lord, but the earth he has given to mankind." God's plan was always that the human being would work the land and reign supreme over creation. According to Genesis 2:15, God took the man and woman and put them in the garden so that they would work. God has given us this wonderful world to enjoy for our benefit, but we don't own it. Stewardship implies rational use of the natural resources around us, looking after them on behalf of God. A polluted river, a burned down forest, tons of CO2 in the atmosphere, seas full of plastic waste, the fast extinction of species, etc. are all signs that we're not taking seriously our responsibility to carefully look after the planet.

Flaws in stewardship, as well as human greed, have led to improper use and destruction of the resources that God our Creator gave us to enjoy.

Questions:

- What effect did sin have on humans (vv.23-24)?
- How does God show His mercy to man and woman despite their sin (Psalm 115:16)?

III. Responsibility in the care of creation (Psalm 104)

A. God cares for His creation

Psalm 104 is a beautiful poem about God the Creator and how He cares for the world. None of His creatures are out of His control. He provides sources of water for the animals and the birds (v. 11-13). "He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth" (v.14). Humans receive many benefits: "wine that gladdens human hearts, oil to make their faces shine, and bread that sustains their hearts" (v.15). There are trees for the birds to nest in and high mountains for the goats and hyraxes (vv. 17-18). "He made the moon to mark the seasons, and the sun knows when to go down" (v. 19) The psalmist ends on a note of worshipful praise, "How many are your works, Lord! In wisdom you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures" (v. 24).

If God cares for His creation, and He has delegated to us the responsibility of looking after it, we must follow His example.

B. The role of the church

Regarding the care of creation, the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2017-2021 states in Paragraph 924: "With deep appreciation of God's creation, we believe we are to strive to exhibit the stewardship qualities that help preserve His work. Recognizing we have been given a stake in sustaining the integrity of our surroundings, we accept the individual and collective responsibilities of doing so." Appreciation for creation translates into the right attitudes and practices as individuals, churches, communities and nations.

We have seen from scripture that we have a responsibility for our planet. As Christians, we cannot ignore this. What does it mean? What can we do

to care for our planet? Ask your students to share their ideas. On an individual level, we can recycle carefully and reduce the rubbish we throw-out to the minimum. If we can, we can make a compost for vegetable waste which will turn into good earth with time. We can use as little plastic as possible.

C. Examples of two churches

1. In the city of San Miguel, El Salvador, the Emanuel church carried out a reforestation program in streets and parks. After a few years, they planted trees that offered pleasant shade. It was so famous that the local authorities contacted the parishioners and asked to join the project. This contributed to reforestation, but most importantly, it bore witness to lives transformed by the gospel.
2. The website of the Church of the Nazarene (<https://nazarene.org/es/article/church-in-costa-rica-is-compromised-caring-for-the-environment>) shares the commitment of the Church of the Nazarene of Los Angeles, in Costa Rica, to environmental protection by joining a government program. Their involvement consists in promoting the use of reusable alternatives, replacing plates, glasses and other disposables items. In addition, they encouraged recycling in the congregation. This led to similar results as the previous example.

Questions:

- What does this psalm say about God's care of nature?
- What can we do as individuals and families to look after God's creation?
- Is there something our church can do in our neighborhood?

Conclusion

God is the owner of everything that exists, and we're stewards of His creation. This conviction must be practiced and communicated in the life of the church. We need to be informed about ways we can contribute to the preservation of Creation as part of the church's commitment to wholistic mission projects, sharing the gospel and teaching with our lives our appreciation for God's creation.



Stewardship in Jesus' parables

Mary Prado (Venezuela)

Study passages: Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 12:42-48, 16:1-15

Memory Verse: "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" Luke 16:10.

Lesson aim: To understand that faithfulness is an essential quality of Christian stewardship.

Introduction

The figure of the steward was very emblematic in Jesus' time, and that's why he used it in several of his parables. According to these stories of everyday life, God regards us as the stewards of His possessions and expects us to be good stewards. According to the Bible, the day will come when each one of us will have to present ourselves before God to account for our responsibilities, and we should be prepared for that crucial moment by being faithful and diligent (Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

The parables of Jesus that we'll study in this lesson will teach us the qualities necessary to be faithful and responsible stewards.

I. Who is a faithful and prudent steward? (Luke 12:42-48)

Every Christian must be prepared for the moment when they must give an account to God for their stewardship. Christian stewardship simply means the correct administration of everything over which He has put us in charge.

The first of the parables that we'll study is the story of the 'unfaithful servant' that appears in Luke 12:42-48. This parable emphasizes the need to be prepared for the moment of our accountability to God. The awareness that at any moment we'll have to present ourselves before our Lord in order to account for our stewardship should lead us to seek two main qualities: faithfulness and prudence.

A. Faithfulness in stewardship (vv. 42-45a)

Faithfulness has to do with honesty, reliability and consistency. It's the complete opposite of falsehood

or unworthiness of trust. It's important to know what a steward in biblical times was like: "In the east, the steward had almost limitless powers. He was a slave like the others, but he was in charge of the others. A trusted steward ruled the house of his master and administered his estate" (Barclay, William).

The other virtue that God expects in a good steward is prudence. This indicates a measured disposition which is balanced in all matters of life. But according to the parable, the unfaithful servant didn't act in this way; rather, he acted carelessly. He took the mistaken attitude of believing that he was the owner of the goods, and he started to dispose of them at will. Thus, "he then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk" (v.45b). However, from one moment to the next, when he least expected it, his lord returned, surprising him in that wrong attitude.

Barclay points out a few highlights in his comment: "Nobody knows the day or the hour when eternity will invade time and we'll have to give an account. How do we want God to find us?"

i) We would like Him to find us with our task finished. For many of us life is full of loose ends: we have unfinished things, and things half done, things postponed and things that we haven't even tried yet...

ii) We would like God to find us at peace with everyone.

iii) We would like God to find us at peace with Him" (Barclay, William. Commentary of the New Testament. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.330).

The parable of the unfaithful servant reaches its climax when he is caught red-handed, and he receives severe judgment from his lord (v.46). But it's important

to note from verse 48 the following: "The severity of the judgment will be in proportion to the amount of knowledge of God's will that could have been achieved, but was disobeyed. A lot of light implies a lot of responsibility" (Earle and others. Exploring the New Testament. USA: CNP, 1985, p.210).

Thinking seriously about this makes us feel overwhelmed about our responsibility. All the knowledge and preparation that we have implies a greater responsibility in our stewardship. We must be fearful of God, and faithfully fulfill what He has entrusted to us.

Questions:

- Define in your own words what Christian stewardship is.
- What is a wrong attitude of an unfaithful steward?

II. An unfaithful and crafty steward (Luke 16:1-15)

The second parable that we'll study is found in Luke 16:1-15, and may be called the parable of the 'crafty steward.' This passage is primarily intended to teach the importance of correct Christian attitudes toward the riches and material goods that the Lord has placed in our hands to administer until He comes back.

A. The faithful in little is faithful in much (vv.1-12)

As in the previous parable, the story is about an unfaithful steward who dissipated his master's assets. Without being called to account, he shrewdly won the friendship of his master's debtors by lowering their debts in order to have their support in the future when he was fired from his employment.

Faced with the sad prospect of losing his job, this bad steward found himself in deep crisis: "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg'" (v.3).

Several reasons, perhaps, prevented this man from being able to be employed in another occupation. Maybe old age or possibly pride would be the main ones. But all of a sudden, a spark of light came to his mind; he would reduce the accounts of his master's debtors in order to win their friendship. This was a shrewd decision, though unfair and dishonest to his lord. When he came back: "The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind

than are the people of the light..." (vv.8-9). Fidelity and honesty in small things aren't insignificant. If a person is dishonest in the little things, they are dishonest, and cannot be entrusted with greater responsibilities. "The true riches, those that come from God, such as the blessings of spiritual wealth, will not be entrusted to a person who is unfaithful in their stewardship of material wealth..." (vv.10-12) (Earle, Ralph and others. Exploring the New Testament. USA: CNP, 1985, p.217).

We see that fidelity is an essential quality of Christian stewardship. Managing material goods is a test of our ability to manage spiritual goods.

B. You cannot serve God and money (vv.13-15)

The Christian must be completely honest in money management. Christian stewardship involves being free from mischief, double intention, dishonesty and greed in relation to money, which manifests itself in the world.

The love of money is one of the main causes of spiritual decline in many Christians today. An attitude of faithfulness in our stewardship requires including God in all life decisions about money. "In the individual aspect, the believer must seek knowledge and God's will for every decision about financial resources, real estate, other articles of value, time, influence or opportunity..." (Calcada, S. Leticia, ed. Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: B&H, 2014, p.1024).

That is, stewardship encompasses everything. "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus" (v.14). The Pharisees felt confronted by the teaching of Jesus, and in rejection, they assumed a mocking attitude. Jesus warned them that even when they pretended to appear righteous before men, God knew their hearts and abominable dispositions (v.15).

Greed is a bad disposition expressly condemned in the Bible, and should be rejected by those who exercise Christian service (1 Thessalonians 2:5; 1 Timothy 3:3). In general, it's an attitude that goes against Christian holiness. "A full mental concentration dedicated to obtaining money is not compatible with a wholehearted consecration to God" (Calcada, S. Leticia, ed. Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: B&H, 2014, p.996).

Questions:

- Why is fidelity of small things so important in stewardship?
- How would verse 13 apply in a practical way to your life?

III. Wise stewards increase what is given to them (Matthew 25:14-30)

All Christians, as stewards of the Lord, must strive for the advancement of the Kingdom of God with all that He has placed in our hands. The parable that we'll study in this last part of the lesson is known as 'The Parable of the Bags of Gold' found in Matthew 25:14-30. This story teaches us that we must use and multiply what God has given us.

A. Build up the Lord's work (vv. 14-21)

To begin the study of this passage, let's understand well what a talent was. "A talent wasn't a currency, but a weight measurement of approximately 34 kilograms, and was generally associated with gold and silver (Calcada, S. Leticia, ed. Illustrated Biblical Dictionary Holman. USA: B&H, 2014, pp. 1076, 1230).

"The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more'" (v.20). The servant who was given bags of gold invested them, making them multiply to five more bags of gold. He made his master's profits grow.

The money in this parable symbolizes our abilities, gifts, ministry, etc., and the profit obtained is everything which represents the growth of the Kingdom of God. The Lord, represented by the master here, rewards those who do so: "His master replied, ... You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (v.21).

Note that the reward referred to here has nothing to do with material wealth, but rather with a preeminent status next to his master. The master was really pleased with him. In other words, God's faithful stewards "share their master's happiness." In the Christian life, joy is defined as a "state of delight and well-being that results from knowing and serving God... Joy in the Lord enables people to enjoy all that God has given them" (Calcada, S. Leticia, ed. Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: B&H, 2014, pp. 677, 678).

B. Make good use of what the Lord has given you (vv. 15-30)

The master in the parable gave each servant an amount of money ("talents" in some translations) according to their individual capacity (v.15). As we have seen, these bags of gold represent the resources or abilities that God has given us. But although "God gives

people different gifts... it is not the person's talent that matters; what matters it's how we use it. God never demands skills which they don't have from anyone; but he demands that each person use the skills they possess. Everyone doesn't have the same talents, but they can all make the same effort. The parable tells us that whatever talent we have, small or large, we must use for God's service" (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p. 178).

However, there are Christians who don't use their gifts and talents, and are inactive in the church, doing nothing to help God's work grow and advance. They are like the man who received a talent and "... dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money" (v.18). This man, called the 'useless servant,' received no reward from his master, but rather a harsh rebuke and judgment (vv.26-28).

This parable teaches us the following: we must wisely invest everything we receive for the mission of the Kingdom. Those who do so will be praised and receive greater responsibility. Not investing what we have will result in God's condemnation. "The man who had just one bag of gold refused to invest the money, for fear that it would turn out wrong and he would be punished ... Men often stop fully consecrating themselves to God from a fear that emanates from a wrong idea of what God is like" (Earle et al. Exploring the new Testament. USA: CNP, 1985, p. 138).

Perhaps the fear of fruitlessly using what the Lord has given us is one of the main failures in Christian stewardship. Let's remember that we have the grace of God that makes us capable administrators (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Questions:

- With which character in the 'Parable of bags of gold' do you think exemplify Christians who don't use their gifts and talents? Explain.
- What do the talents represent?
- What talents or abilities has God given you?

Conclusion

Christian stewardship is all about being faithful to God, even in the simplest things in life. How we manage material goods indicates our reliability or not to take care of spiritual things. The extent of our responsibility before God is measured by how we manage the gifts He has entrusted to us.



God's stewards in the work place

Patricia Picavea (Argentina)

Study passages: Genesis 1:28, 2:15, 3:17-19; Exodus 36:1; Psalm 75:6-7; Proverbs 20:4, 12:27; Ephesians 4:28; Colossians 3:17, 23-24

Memory Verse: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" Colossians 3:17.

Lesson aim: To understand that work is a blessing from God, and as stewards of what He gives us, we must see work as a means to obtain the resources for our livelihood, bless others, and bear witness to our Lord.

Introduction

Nothing we have belongs to us, not our properties, time, not even our children, or our lives. Everything belongs to God, He owns everything. The Bible tells us that everything in heaven and on earth belongs to God: "The earth is the Lord's and all that lives in it" (Psalm 24:1); "Yours, LORD, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor; for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, LORD, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all" (1 Chron. 29:11).

Therefore, that makes us simply managers of everything that exists and all that we possess. As stewards of everything, what should be our perspective of work? What does the Bible tell us? What's our part? What's God's part? Who created work - God or the devil? Is work a blessing or a curse that we received through sin?

Over a period of 25 years, an ordinary person spends more than 70,000 hours of their life working. Most of an adult's life is devoted to their job. But many times, with work comes disagreement, tiredness, boredom and some other degree of discontent. To all this, sometimes we must add the fear of losing employment, inadequate wages, excess work and countless pressures that contribute to this high degree of discontent. No matter what our profession or trade, even if we are in a Christian ministry, at some point we have all felt a degree of frustration. Let's see what the Word of God tells us regarding this issue.

I. The biblical perspective of work (Genesis 1:28, 2:15, 3:17-19; Ephesians 4:28)

Work was instituted by God before the fall because work was a divine mandate before Adam and Eve committed sin. When God created man and woman, He gave both of them the responsibility of working and managing His creation: "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male

and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Genesis 1:27-28).

Despite what people think about work today, it was created by God for our profit, distraction and occupation, in a sinless environment. For this reason, we shouldn't say that work is a consequence of the curse on humanity for having sinned. The curse after the fall, was upon the land. The Bible says: "Cursed is the ground because of you;" (Genesis 3:17b); and as a consequence of that curse, it would be harder for the man to work it: "through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17c).

After Adam and Eve sinned, work became more difficult. Genesis 3:17-19 shows us that work is important, to the point that when God gave the Ten Commandments, he said: "Six days you will work ..." (Exodus 34:21). Work is not an option; it's a God-given commandment.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul gave an interesting order in 2 Thess. 3:10 where we read: "... The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." Not working leads us to be lazy and idle. It's interesting that Paul didn't say: "Whoever doesn't want to work should rest up." It's a mandate. We cannot live at the expense of other people because that isn't fair.

Unless someone is disabled, everyone must work for the maintenance and support of their family. When we work hard, rest is good and restful. Enjoying a good vacation after hard work is refreshing, pleasant, and it does good to our mind and body. The holidays, even if we spend them in housework or different activities, are good and necessary. They take us out of the routine and make our mind and body take a break from everyday work.

Paul taught us that having a job will also give us means to share with others. Even those who used to work for dishonest reasons, but now are in the ways of the Lord, must work for their support, and also learn to share with others: "Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28).

Work helps us to:

1. Discipline ourselves (get up every morning, organize ourselves in the different activities outside working hours).
2. Subject ourselves to others (teaches us to put ourselves under the orders of a boss, and do what is asked of us).
3. Develop skills (whatever work we do makes us learn how to do it and become specialists).
4. Create habits that will always accompany us (working with schedules, take vacations, fulfill rest days, among others).
5. Create habits that also help us in our Christian life where we need to discipline ourselves to attend church, pray, read the Word, serve our neighbor, and submit to God and the leaders that He placed over us.

All honest jobs are worthy. In the Bible, there is no difference: David was a shepherd and later a king; Some prophets were peasants; Luke was a doctor; several disciples were fishermen; Lydia sold fabrics; and Paul made tents and was a Pharisee. All honest jobs are worthy before God.

Questions:

- What does Genesis 1:28 tell us regarding the origin of work?
- Who was given the responsibility of managing everything?
- What consequences did sin bring, according to Genesis 3:17-19?

II. God and work (Exodus 36:1; Psalm 75:6-7)

Exodus 36:1 says, "So Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the Lord has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the Lord has commanded." This passage shows us that God gives each one of us unique abilities. People have many different skills, manual skills and intellectual skills. In this, there is no category of importance, each person working in the different jobs that exist in our society.

When we put our work in God's hands, we see His blessing: "The LORD was with Joseph, so he became a successful man. And he was in the house of his master, the Egyptian. Now his master saw that the LORD was with him and how the LORD caused all that he did to prosper in his hand" (Genesis 39:2-3). This and other passages of this story show us that God can help us to prosper when we put it in His hands. But he doesn't make us prosper to enrich ourselves, but to bless others. So that as His children, we can be faithful witnesses of what God is doing in our lives.

The Lord is the one who controls the promotions: "No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves. It's God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another" (Psalm 75:6-7). Although it may be surprising, promotion or demotion doesn't completely depend on us human beings. It's important to understand that our lives are in God's hands and everything that happens depends on Him. We must understand that what we achieve or don't isn't just the fruit of our own strength, wisdom and intelligence, but because God allows or causes it.

Although the world doesn't understand this, we know that God is in control of all things. We must do our job the best way we can and let our testimony speak for itself and leave the rest to God.

Questions:

- What does Psalm 75:6-7 tell you about God and our jobs?
- What would you say to someone who constantly complains about their work?

III. Christians in the workplace (Proverbs 20:4, 12:27; Colossians 3:17, 23-24)

A. Work, representing the Lord

In Colossians 3:17, the apostle Paul writes, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." In this passage, we're taught that whatever we do or say will represent the Lord. It doesn't matter if we're the boss or one of the employees. We're called to serve and represent the Lord whatever our position.

Taking an example from a daily experience, if we go to an office and say, "Esther couldn't come, but I came instead of her," what does this mean? It means that I will be representing her, I will speak in her place and do what needs to be done instead of her. It means that If I speak badly and am disrespectful, it won't be me who looks bad but Esther, because I acted on her behalf.

But if I comply correctly with what was asked of me, Esther will continue to have a good reputation. What I do will make Esther look good or bad.

In the same way, if we call ourselves Christians, we're representing Christ in our work. All that we do or say will witness about Him, and we'll represent Him well or badly according to our actions as we identify ourselves as Christians and represent the Lord. Our testimony will be seen both among our co-workers as well as the leaders and bosses. For that reason, our behavior must be correct at all times and in every place where we find ourselves working.

B. Work as for the Lord

Colossians 3:23-24 says: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward." In this passage, Paul talks about what our attitude towards work should be. It shouldn't be one of reluctance or laziness, because on the one hand, work is the source of our sustenance, and on the other hand, we're doing it for Christ. In verse 24, the apostle refers to the fact that although on earth we may not expect a reward, in the end, we'll have a greater inheritance with Christ who is who we really serve.

The Lord is our King, and ultimately, everything we do must be done for Him. No matter what our boss is like, we must do the work as if the one who asked us is Jesus. We must do it as if the beneficiary of that work is the Lord, recognizing that work and skills are gifts from God and we are His representatives, whatever we do. This makes us His stewards.

The function of a butler, a steward or a manager is to be in charge of something that's assigned (house, field, company, family, etc.). When a person is appointed as steward today, we can say that they are the owner's representative and manager. The owner has great confidence in them because they represent him and take care of his interests.

Could it be that we feel this way about the work that God has given us? Do we bear a good testimony of the Lord in our work?

C. Work hard, but don't overdo it

God's Word is always against laziness. In the Old Testament, although God fought for His people, he also expected them to work. So in Judges 18:9 we read: "they answered, 'Come on, let's attack them! We have seen the land, and it's very good. Aren't you going to do something? Don't hesitate to go there and take it over!'"

In the book of Proverbs, there are several passages referring to laziness. People are even compared with ants, who are an example of how to achieve wisdom: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!" (Proverb 6:6). Showing the importance of working to have a livelihood, he also says: "Sluggards do not plow in season; so, at harvest time they look but find nothing" (Proverb 20:4).

In Ecclesiastes 9:10, we find the following: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." This teaches us not to question our responsibilities. We need to do the right thing well rather than doing a mediocre job. Proverbs 12:27 tells us: "The lazy do not roast any game, but the diligent feed on the riches of the hunt."

While hard work is important, we must avoid the excesses that prevent us from having our times with the Lord, taking due care of our families or resting when necessary. The Lord's command was clear: "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest" (Ex. 34:21).

If we do excessive work to get things that society imposes, even though they aren't of the utmost importance, this ends up damaging valuable family relationships, including our spouse and children, parents, as well as the wider family. Also, many times, overwork makes us feel self-sufficient and takes away from us the need for faith in waiting for God's provision or His help to be good stewards of what we already have. Let's remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:33 where we read: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Here, Jesus calls us to put our priorities in order, putting His Kingdom and its values first so as to be able to serve God, our families and society in the fullest possible way.

Questions:

- What is my part as a worker?
- What are the three recommendations given at this point for God's children at work?
- How is my Christian witness among my bosses and colleagues?

Conclusion

Work is a blessing from God and as His stewards of what we must see work as a resource for our livelihood, to bless others and to bear good witness to our Lord.



Responsible parenting

Elizabeth Soto Venegas (Chile)

Study passages: Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Proverbs 22:6, 23:13-14; Ephesians 6:4; 2 Timothy 1:5

Memory Verse: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” Ephesians 6:4.

Lesson aim: To learn the biblical principles of parenting which guides children to have healthy relationships with God, with their family and with society.

Introduction

Christian stewardship encompasses several interesting areas that include, without a doubt, responsible parenting of our children. Through this lesson, we'll see how God mapped out the path for us to hold ourselves consciously accountable of this task. In the Old and New Testaments, God gives us guidelines, knowing that we all need to strengthen family ties and build on a solid faith based on firm convictions.

Currently, there is a lot of talk about guidelines, practices and beliefs regarding bringing up children. First, we need to define 'parenting.' According to Eraso, Bravo and Delgado, “parenting implies the training and formation of children by their parents or their surrogates; as well as knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. Parents need to be concerned about the importance of protective factors, the importance of physical and social environments, and learning opportunities of their children at home ” (Eraso, J., Bravo, Y., & Delgado, M. Article: “Beliefs, Attitudes and Practices about Parenting in Head of Family Mothers in Popayán: “A Qualitative study”. In Journal of Pediatrics, vol. 41 (3), 2006, pp. 23-40. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/308725881>).

According to the research article “Cultural Models of Parenting in Chile: A look at the boys and girls of Chile”, they identified six parenting models in Chilean society which can probably be found in other countries as well. Let's take a look at each of these models (Information Retrieved from <https://www.worldvision.cl/blog/estossion-the-6-parenting-models-present-in-the-Chilean-family>, on May 19, 2020).

1. Absent: negligent parenting model in which there are no expressions of tenderness or abuse.
2. Authoritarian or violent: a parenting model based on the use of physical punishment, which doesn't include expression of tenderness.
3. Ambivalent without recognition: parenting model that shows abuse and expressions of tenderness, but it has no recognition of children's rights.
4. Ambivalent with recognition: parenting model that evidences use of abuse and expressions of tenderness. However, at the same time, it establishes relationships with recognizing children's qualities.
5. Tenderness without recognition: parenting model that excludes any type of violence, includes expressions of tenderness, but doesn't establish relationships based in the recognition of the children's qualities.
6. Tenderness with recognition: parenting model that excludes any type of violence, includes expressions of tenderness, and establishes relationships based on recognition of the children's qualities and rights.

There are mothers, fathers, and adults who use different strategies and practices in the process of raising and disciplining their children. These strategies move between affection, punishment, challenge and prohibitions, and ambivalence that should be replaced by a parenting style based on tenderness and recognition showing the biblical model. This should guide Christian parents in their God given assignment, and allows interpersonal relationships to develop in a healthy way on a day-to-day basis through parental responsibility. In this lesson, we'll study three inescapable responsibilities of Christian parents.

I. Responsibility to lead them to God (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; 2 Timothy 1:5)

Deuteronomy 6:6-9 teaches that God has assigned to both parents the responsibility of leading their children to God. The UN website (Organization of the United Nations), in its section on “World Issues,” has the following article: The family is one of the pillars of society, (Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/es/>, on May 19 2020).

U.S. Census Bureau (2005) defines the family as: “A family consists of two or more people, one of whom is the householder, related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing in the same housing unit. A household consists of all people who occupy a housing unit regardless of relationship. A household may consist of a person living alone or multiple unrelated individuals or families living together” retrieved from (<https://wfrn.org/glossary/family-definitions-of/>).

Currently, the family can be made up of various members, of which not all are related by blood. In the following section, several types of family can be identified:

1. Nuclear family: formed by the mother, the father and the children. This is the typical classic family.
2. Extended family: made up of relatives whose relationships aren't solely between parents and children. An extended family may include grandparents, uncles, cousins, and other related people.
3. One-parent family: formed by only one of the parents (most of the time the mother) and her children. May have various origins: separated parents or divorced, where the children remain living with one of the parents; Because of an early pregnancy, where the single mother family is established; and finally, due to the death of one of the spouses.
4. Assembled (blended) family: it's made up of aggregates of two or more families (example: single mother with children who joins a widowed father with children). In this type, those families also include siblings or friends, where the meaning of the word “family” has nothing to do with blood relationship; but above all, with feelings, coexistence and solidarity between those who live together in the same space.
5. Family where the couple are living in civil union: this type of family takes place when the couple live together without any legal bond.

If our Lord has given us the privilege of having children, it's very important that we lead them to Him. Our primary disciples will always be our children. This is our first task as parents, and it's a task for life (Matthew 28:19-20). Another inescapable truth is that we have to show in our lives sincere devotion and dependence on God. “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” Deuteronomy 11:18-21, a divine promise of long life.

In 2 Timothy 1:5, Paul gives us some of Timothy's family background: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.” So, these two ladies had been responsible for the task of guiding and passing on their faith to Timothy. The best inheritance that parents can leave their children is not the material goods that perish, but true faith in the living God.

Questions:

- According to Deuteronomy 11:18-21, name the biblical counsel, divine promise, and an example of current application.

II. Parents are responsible for the education of their children (Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4)

Wikipedia defines education as “the process of facilitating learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, morals, beliefs, and habits” (retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education>). Proverbs 22:6 perfectly sums up the need to educate children and the outcomes. “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” This proverb is referring not only to the aptitudes, abilities or inclinations of the infant, but primarily to their moral education. This education is important because we understand that what characterizes people is not so much what they know as how they live. God's Word is clear about the moral standards required of us which we must pass on to our children. The family worldwide assumes this role of passing on traditions and values and we must teach what God wants of each of us.

The second part of Proverb 22:6 is very comforting for faithful and godly parents. The Beacon Biblical Commentary says that this shouldn't “be interpreted as an absolute guarantee.

A good Christian environment alone will not save our children. To make their salvation possible, they need to make a free choice in order to receive the grace of God which is always available” (Chapman et al. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 3. Argentina: CNP, 2008, p.537). This proverb’s advice is more relevant now than ever.

Well, we can see today how as parents we must be very vigilant in the education of our children. Many ideologies are transmitted every day. Knowledge is a click away from any device on the Internet, so it becomes important to talk about all issues with children, appropriate for their age, always passing them through the filter of the Word of God.

Teaching shouldn’t just be theoretical. Children need to see the practice of the Christian life in their parents’ lives. Obviously, that task is challenging. It’s easy to talk of God, faith, the church, obedience, the commandments, studying the Bible, prayer, meditation, etc. However, talking alone isn’t convincing. It must be accompanied by the example of a model.

This type of teaching (theoretical and practical) requires that parents spend time with their children. The best Christian teaching is not achieved in the formality of a church setting, but needs to occur in the informality of conversations in different scenarios of daily life.

Paul warns us that education shouldn’t be an imposition but rather wise advice. Colossians 3:21 says, “fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged,” and Ephesians 6:4 states: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” These two verses show that parents can get it wrong. We don’t want ‘embittered’ or ‘exasperated’ children. As parents, we need to learn how to “Bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” as stated in the second part of the verse from Ephesians.

Perhaps we should learn from Jesus’ method of training His disciples, He’s the best model to follow. He glorified the Father because he obeyed him, and he educated his disciples by leading them to the Father, as if they were his sons. This is the model that as fathers and mothers we must follow, always doing it with love.

Questions:

- Do you think that the advice the Apostle Paul left us in Ephesians 6:4 can be applied today? Explain.
- Mention some situations that parents can create that could lead to bitterness in their children.

III. Parents have the responsibility to correct (Proverb 23:13-14)

Proverb 23:13-14 says: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod and save them from death.” These little people that God puts into our families need to be corrected when they’re doing something wrong. Obviously, it will depend on the age of the child on how this is done. It needs to be done with love, always respecting the free agency of our children, and the divine grace of our Lord in their lives.

The importance of discipline is emphasized in the Bible so that they can learn good values and morals and know how to control themselves. This will enable them to be productive people. It’s a lot easier to learn these things while they’re still little. Children who lack proper discipline may grow up with defiant attitudes; often it’s difficult for them to maintain respect for authority. They may present disruptive behaviors in different contexts. Disobedient attitudes sometimes lead to violence. Medical studies with regard to this type of aggressive behavior in children indicate that they are mainly due to inappropriate parental practices. If parents don’t correct their children, they run the risk that these children will find it difficult to be willing to obey and follow God. The Lord uses discipline to correct and guide us on the right path, as well as to lead us to regret our sinful actions.

As responsible parents, we must correct our children gently, lovingly, never in violence or abusing them in any way. A child should never be disciplined physically to the point that it may cause physical harm or abuse. The Manual of the Church of the Nazarene in paragraph 916 declares that our denomination abhors mistreatment of the defenseless.

Questions:

From each Bible verse, extract the main idea. Then discuss them as a group.

- Proverbs 13:24
- Proverbs 22:15
- Proverbs 23:13-14
- Proverbs 29:17
- Hebrews 12:11

Conclusion

The Scriptures show us biblical principles for responsible parenting and help us reflect how to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with our children, every day. Our task as parents is to guide them to God, educate and correct them with divine love, which inspires us to bring up children able to swim against the current in a world where everything is relative.



Administrating the Church for Jesus

Mariela López (Argentina)

Study passages: Acts 6:1-6; Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 1 Peter 5:1-3

Memory Verse: "Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them" Acts 6:3.

Lesson aim: To understand that Jesus is the head of the church, and so we need to manage it well.

Introduction

First of all, we must be clear about the meaning of the word "church." "This term translates from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which literally means 'meeting, assembly, congregation' ... refers to a local congregation or a regional body of disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:31; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:2) ... In no case *ekklesia* is used to refer to a building (temple) " (Padilla, R., et.al. R. Contemporary Biblical Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1382).

In the New Testament, we have record of Jesus speaking about the church on two occasions. One of them is recorded in Matthew 18:15-17. On that occasion, the Lord gave indications about how to deal with a brother or sister who sins against another. He also made it clear that the church "is the local body of believers who constitute the people of God and have the internal power to discipline" (Taylor, R., et.al. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1969, p.345).

The other occasion was when the Master asked the disciples: "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied... 'on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it'" (Matthew 16:15-18). When the Lord referred to 'This rock,' He was referring to the statement that Peter had just made about Jesus being the Messiah. That is to say "the existence itself of the church is linked to the Person and the deity of Christ ... his resurrection will be a sufficient guarantee of perpetuity and indestructibility..." (Taylor, R., et.al., Beacon Theological Dictionary, USA: CNP, 1969, p.345).

In the biblical passage referred to, Jesus used a metaphor used in construction. But he wasn't talking about a physical building, but rather that He himself would be the foundation stone of the church, and at the same

time, He constituted himself as the perfect architect for building His church.

Far from being a building, the church is the group of people that have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, those who are faithful to His Word, follow His footsteps and serve Him. In several letters in the New Testament, different metaphors are used to describe the church, such as "family of faith" (Galatians 6:10); "the body of Christ" (Colossians 1:18); "God's household" (1 Timothy 3:15); "God's special possession" (1 Peter 2:9); among others. In all the references found, we can see that the church has only one owner or head: Jesus Christ.

I. The church has only one owner or head (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18)

Jesus Christ so loved the church that he gave himself as a sacrifice for her, in order to sanctify her and present her without blemish. The church has been purchased through the price of His blood. Ephesians 5:23b says: "Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior." Just like Jesus did while he walked this earth fulfilling his ministry, "The church is witness to the purpose of God for human life by what she says and when she proclaims the gospel. This includes her character, lifestyle and doing good deeds. She is called to embody the values of the kingdom of God ... and thus prolong the mission of Jesus Christ throughout the world " (Padilla, R., et. al., Acosta, Contemporary Biblical Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos 2019, p.1382).

To prolong the mission of Jesus, the church needs the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke to His disciples about His departure, but at the same time, He told them that He would send another Comforter (John 14:16-26) since they would need power to continue the ministry that He was entrusting them to fulfill (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus instructed His disciples that they shouldn't leave Jerusalem until they were "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:48-49); and moments before He ascended, he told them again that they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5).

The disciples remained in prayer and in unity. As a result, on the day of Pentecost, hundreds of people repented and turned to Jesus by God's power, and this was the birth of the church. We can say that before starting any ministry or work, the requirement is that the church should be invested with power from on high.

Let's analyze what Acts 20:28 says: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." We find here the summary of what we have been affirming: Jesus is the sole owner of the church since He paid the price through His blood. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the ability to shepherd the Lord's flock. We who lead must always remember that we ourselves are still sheep. Total dependence and submission is expected from us as we take care of our personal life and the flock.

Questions:

- According to what was discussed, who is the owner of the church, and why?
- What qualities should we find in a church owned by Christ?

II. The church must be cared for and pastured (1 Peter 5:1-2)

It's interesting to note that the apostle Peter used the same words that he received from Jesus in his post resurrection conversation with Jesus: "... do you love me? ... Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17). After 30 years, Peter wrote a letter addressed to the church in which he expressed his plea to the elders: "Be shepherds of God's flock ..." (1 Peter 5:2).

First of all, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, Peter didn't use that title, but he said of himself that he was an elder, along with the rest of the elders of the congregation. "The elders were mature servants of the church who acted as supervisors, had defined administrative and pastoral duties" (Taylor et al. Beacon Biblical Commentary, volume 10. USA: CNP, 2008, p.308). One of the pastoral tasks was to 'pasture' (feed) the flock.

Second, looking at the image of a shepherd pasturing his sheep, we can discover what he wanted to express with that mandate.

A. Shepherds provide food

Just as the shepherd provides food for his flock, the Lord expects the church to be provided with spiritual nourishment that they need. In the Great Commission, Jesus said that we should teach His followers all the things that He has commanded us (Matthew 28:19-20). We need to continue to provide solid food for those who are already part of the congregation so that they continue to grow until they reach the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13-14).

B. Shepherds provide care

There are various situations in which a sheep finds itself vulnerable. For example, if they are injured, after giving birth, if they are sick, etc. In the church, too, there are people who need to be looked after for some time. Maybe they're going through family losses, or crises of various kinds (financial, marriage, work etc.), traumatic events, prolonged illnesses, birth or marriage of children, job changes or housing, etc. All of these are situations in which the family of faith can be supportive, comforting and caring for those who have had to go through difficult moments.

C. Shepherds provide security

The sheep, being a prey animal, has many predators who are on the lookout for their movements to devour them. The shepherd is one who provides safety within the fold, and if necessary, he comes out to meet the predator to scare it away, and thus defend his sheep. It's impossible for an isolated sheep to survive. Christians, by the mere fact of being children of God, have an enemy who is always on the prowl waiting to 'devour us' (1 Peter 5:8).

In the church, we find shelter, support, and teaching about how to wear the armor of God and stand firm when attacked (Ephesians 6:11-18). It's impossible for a Christian to survive in isolation without being part of the church as the body of Christ, a community offering care and support.

In Psalm 23, there is a beautiful metaphor about the shepherd providing security to his sheep: "...you anoint my head with oil..." (v.5). The shepherd would put oil around the sheep's head to keep pesky insects away from its eyes, ears, and mouth. That sheep could not defend itself from such insects, especially flies. Those flies weren't just pesky, they also laid eggs which turned into worms, causing a lot of pain and serious infections.

(<https://bellezaverdaderablog.wordpress.com/2017/01/19/the-shepherd-and-the-sheep-part-1/>, May 15, 2020).

Similarly, we can say that the Lord by His Spirit anoints our heads with His oil to keep the enemy away from our minds as the devil tries to lie to us, manipulate us, confuse us, or discourage us with bad thoughts, etc. We are in the bosom of the family of faith where “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5b).

D. Shepherds provide space for service

Each sheep is a fundamental piece to perpetuate and grow the flock. Some offer their young; others, their wool, others, their heat for the winter season; etc. Thus, each Christian is a fundamental piece in the church of Christ. Everyone must find their place or ‘purpose’ as part of the kingdom of God, and be useful in hands of the Lord.

The Apostle Peter made a series of recommendations on how the flock should be pastured (1 Peter 5:2):

1. Voluntarily and not by force. No one can meet God’s law by obligation or by force. Pastors help people get to know and love God, voluntarily deciding to obey and serve Him.
2. With prompt encouragement, and not for dishonest gain. The leaders’ service in leading the church should be because they love God and their neighbor. Any other motivation would be wrong, whether it’s seeking personal recognition, to be famous, or to earn money. Although the worker is worthy of his wages (1 Timothy 5:18), this cannot be the motivation for Christian service.
3. Being an example to the flock. There is a popular phrase that we say, “Do what I say, but not what I do.” A leader should be an example in everything so that the followers ‘want to imitate them’. Their actions must support their words.

So, as we can see, it’s a huge responsibility to take care of the ‘Lord’s people.’ The pastor and each leader of local churches become stewards or administrators, that is, people who look after the others. Jesus asked Peter personally, and Peter repeated it in his letter to the church. Today, the Lord continues to say to each one of us also: “Feed the flock of God.”

Questions:

- Considering the current century, what does the request of the Lord, “Feed my sheep,” that we find in Scripture mean to you?

- Do you believe that the requirements mentioned by the Apostle Peter apply to the choosing of current leadership? Explain and give examples.

III. The church must be well managed (Acts 6:1-7)

The church is a living organism, made up of people who need dynamic organization, stable principles to sustain it, leadership with clear goals, and priorities capable of seeking the common good without losing sight of the mandate that the church has received from the Lord: to Make Christlike Disciples in the Nations (Matthew 28:19).

If we allow ourselves to continue with the metaphor of shepherds, they need organization and to develop certain routines for handling sheep in order to make sure all the sheep are fed, watered, sheared (remove the wool), and that they all meet apt partners to reproduce. In short, shepherds make sure none remain outside the fold. When the young are born, there must be cleanliness and enough space for the new lambs that will come to join the flock. Increasing the number requires more space (enlarging the pen or finding another to take those that don’t fit in any more). They may need more trained people to perform care tasks, etc.

In our Acts 6:1-7 study passage, we note the need for good administration. This doesn’t mean that the apostles weren’t organized, but because of the outstanding growth, restructuring was needed. For this reason, the apostles were obliged to make changes to solve the problems which had been presented (v.1). When there is growth, reorganization is needed. Otherwise, growth will present a new set of challenges. It may even lead to disagreement, stagnation, complaints, gossip and criticism, as happened in the early church of that time.

It’s of utmost importance that the church doesn’t lose sight of God’s call to mission (Matt. 28:19-20). In the case of the church of the time of Acts, the apostles felt that they shouldn’t neglect the preaching of the Word and prayer to attend to other matters (Acts 6:2). However, they were responsible for finding solutions for the problem that arose at the time. So, they looked for suitable people to delegate responsibility of the distribution of daily rations to (v.3). The same strategy or organization for fifty people cannot be used for two hundred, and the one that works with two hundred won’t work with a thousand people. As the church grows, there will be a continual need to train and empower leaders for service at all times.

The goal of every church should be to work intentionally with each member of the congregation, enabling them to become a people of good testimony (in their relationships with their neighbors). They must be filled with the Holy Spirit (with a deep relationship with God), full of wisdom (knowledge of the Word of God). In this way, when the time comes, different tasks of service can be delegated to them. Preparing in advance, intentionally training people, and delegating activities will activate growth. There is no doubt that this is the will of God (v.7).

Let's learn from the farmer. He decides on the area where he plans to sow, works every day pulling weeds, softening the earth, fertilizing it, preparing with effort every furrow in the whole field. He plants the seed and waits for the rain. He's a good steward of his land. He doesn't wait for the rain to come to start work because if he did, it would be impossible for him to reap his crop! He works because he knows that at some point, the rain will fall and there will be a harvest.

We must not wait until the church starts to grow. We need to 'prepare' the church now because 'the rains will come', and with them the blessings that multitudes accept Christ, are filled with the Holy Spirit, become mature disciples, and also become trained to reach others. If this is not our priority, we're not managing the Lord's people and His church well.

Questions:

- Keeping in mind the passage of Acts 6 and what was exposed in the lesson, what do you think was the cause of the problem?
- What did the apostles face?
- What steps would you take in your local church to solve a growth problem?

Conclusion

The church of Jesus Christ has only one goal: to glorify God and extend the kingdom of heaven on earth. God, as owner, left administrators to carry out this task, of which you and I are part. He keeps saying: "... go, and make disciples ...", and "Feed my sheep ...". Let's boldly fulfill the desire of His heart!



Biblical principles for the stewardship of our resources

Eudo Prado (Venezuela)

Study passages: Deuteronomy 8:11-18; Mark 12:41-44; Luke 15:11-17; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

Memory Verse: “Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver Each one give as he purposed in his heart: not with sadness” 2 Corinthians 9:7.

Lesson aim: To understand the basic biblical principles about the stewardship of our finances.

Introduction

The Methodist church defines Christian stewardship as: “a way of life in which we regard ourselves and all that we have as a trust from God to be used in his service for what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.” (https://www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/me_CTBI_workbook.pdf),

God asks that each of His children be good administrators of all that He gives us. Obviously, money can be one of our main stumbling blocks if we don't administer it according to God's purposes.

This lesson introduces us to a series of basic biblical principles about how to manage our finances for God. Here we'll study some key passages where God instructs us on the correct use of money. Stewardship begins with the recognition that all our wealth and goods belong to God. We express faithful stewardship by giving generously to Him.

I. Recognize that it's God who provides for us (Deuteronomy 8:11-18)

Material prosperity almost always brings with it a sense of self-reliance. This usually happens in the lives of non-believers, but also in the life of many Christians. Often when we are doing things well, our commitment to God decreases. Wrongly and of course sadly, we forget that the Lord is the true source of our blessings and we attribute success to our own initiatives.

Deuteronomy 8:11-18 teaches us precisely not to forget our gratitude to God, recognizing that He is the one who gives us all the blessings we enjoy throughout of our lives.

A. Give to God with a sense of gratitude

In the passage from Deuteronomy, we have a fundamental principle of stewardship of our finances.

The secret is to recognize that God is the owner of the wealth and goods that we possess, and therefore He is the true source of our provisions. In verses 15 and 16, we find four main blessings received by the people of Israel on their pilgrimage through the desert to the land of Canaan, which, no doubt, the Christian also enjoys today:

1. Redemption from slavery, or salvation
2. Safety because of God's protection and care through the dangers of life
3. Divine provision of daily sustenance
4. Correction and discipline in order to perfect our characters

Realizing that all these things come from God leads us to be grateful. The opposite is to maintain that the goods we acquire come through our human self-sufficiency due to our own forces (v.17). The stewardship of finances thus begins with an attitude of gratitude to God as the giver of all that we possess (v.18).

B. Give to God out of obedience

This passage, moreover, is found in the book of Deuteronomy, which has been called very appropriately 'The book of obedience.' This book, found at the end of the Pentateuch, represents the opportunity that Moses had to reiterate the alliance that God had with His people and all the stipulations that they had to obey. It was given just before Moses died as they were preparing to enter into the Promised land. The admonition not to forget God should be considered as one of the commandments of the divine moral law, still relevant today for Christians. Faithfully giving our tithes and offerings reflects strict obedience to the Word of God.

Today, some people claim that the tithe is not valid since it's a command from the Old Testament. Thinking this way is a big mistake because various passages of the New Testament corroborate its validity. Jesus indirectly confirmed the practice of tithing when he said: "... while doing that [giving the tithe]" (Matthew 23:23); and Paul, when teaching in Corinthians on the Christian duty to support with their goods the work of God, bases it in part on the law of Moses (1 Corinthians 9:1-14).

Just like the new generation of Israelites, many Christians today run the danger of forgetting that God is the one who grants us all things through His grace. Therefore, by obeying the Word of God and giving the Lord our tithes and offerings, we're recognizing that our source of provision, whether it be our profession, the company we work for, any job we have, etc, comes through His provisions for us.

Questions:

- What is the fundamental biblical principle of stewardship of finances?
- In what sense is giving our tithes and offerings an act of obedience to God? Explain.

II. Be faithful in giving tithes, offerings, and donations to God (Mark 12:41-44; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

It has been said that the value of an offering is measured in proportion to what we have left in our pocket after we give it. Generosity in giving God of our material goods is a sign of our fidelity and faith. Christian stewardship involves the fulfillment of our financial responsibilities to God's work.

The Second Basic Principle of financial stewardship is about giving generously to God. We'll study it through two very significant passages of the New Testament: Mark 12:41-44 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-15.

A. She gave God all that she had (Mark 12:41-44)

The first passage tells the story of the offering of a poor widow. It's important to note that: "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts" (v.41). Jesus wasn't looking out for how much they gave but 'how' they gave it. This incident underlines the importance of attitude or disposition of the heart to God when giving, either tithes, offerings or any other financial resource.

The widow gave "two very small copper coins worth only a few cents" (v.42). This poor widow gave a very small offering, but it was all she had. Jesus used the generosity

of the widow to teach the disciples: "Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on' (v.43-44). She gave her all as a beautiful act of worship, entrusting her needs to God.

By faithfully giving our tithes and offerings to the Father, even though we have many needs and financial commitments, we demonstrate our loyalty to Him. Sometimes, there are those who pretend to exempt themselves from the duty of giving to God by claiming their own needs or those of their family; but biblically, there is no basis for this.

Christian stewardship is based on being faithful in the fulfillment of our financial responsibilities to God. There are precious promises in the Bible for those who give generously to God. Proverb 3:9-10 tells us: "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine."

B. We must sow abundantly (2 Corinthians 9:6-15)

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 contains what it has been called 'the law of sowing and reaping' that appears in verse 6. In the realm of agriculture, the size of the harvest is in proportion to the amount of seed sown. This is also true with spiritual things. If we give generously, we'll be blessed by God and He promised to provide for our needs (v.8).

Paul was writing to the Corinthians, encouraging them as part of the church among the non-Jewish communities to give a special offering to the church in Jerusalem where there was a lot of poverty. Paul was raising this offering among the churches. This event is also mentioned in Romans 15:25-26, where it's said that it was an "offering for the poor."

So as the Gentile churches were collecting for this offering, Paul was exhorting the Corinthians to give generously. Barclay explains: "Paul insists that no one loses out by being generous. To give is how we sow. The one who is mean when it comes to sowing can expect nothing but a paltry harvest, while the one who is generous in sowing, in due time, will reap a bountiful harvest" (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, pp. 669-670). God is not anyone's debtor and always is aware of those who give: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done" (Proverbs 19:17).

Questions:

- Why do you think Jesus was pleased with the widow's offering?
- What is the "law of sowing and reaping" regarding stewardship?

III. We must administer our resources well following biblical principles (Luke 15:11-17)

The third basic biblical principle for the stewardship of our finances is good management. Luke 15:11-17 is part of the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son ended up ruined financially because he "squandered his wealth in wild living" (v.13b). How can we administer correctly the goods that God has given us? We need to apply the basic principles of administration that we find in the Bible. We learn from this passage how not to do it.

A. Planning ahead

One of the first steps in good administration is to plan. A good CEO of a company imagines the future of the company to anticipate probable situations. Lack of foresight was one of the prodigal son's mistakes. He simply didn't plan ahead for the lean time that suddenly came upon him: "After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need" (v.14).

Often when we go through a time of economic abundance, we begin to 'spend like crazy' without thinking about the future, but it always comes, and if we haven't prepared for the bad times, we may have to depend on others for our subsistence. In the case of this young man, he went hungry, but in our case, it could be disease, a catastrophic event, or any another need that suddenly comes upon us.

Foresight is the quality that helps us conscientiously manage the resources we have, and encourages us to save up for life projects and times of difficulties.

B. Make a budget

The prodigal son "squandered his wealth in wild living" (v.13). In other words, he led a life without control. He spent his money on superfluous and negative things. To avoid wasting our resources, it's important to make a budget. The Cambridge dictionary defines a budget as: "A plan to show how much money a person or organization will earn and how much they will need or be able to spend" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/budget>).

In a budget, we need to consider the resources we'll receive and how we plan to spend them. For any project that has to do with the use of money, a budget is necessary. It's useful both for personal and family finances, as well as for any other area of our life.

Budgeting helps us control how we spend our money for the purpose of using it to our advantage, in other words, using it more efficiently.

C. Be an industrious person

Another successful step in good administration is hard work. The Bible often teaches about the importance of work. Proverb 28:19 says: "Those who work their land will have abundant food, but those who chase fantasies will have their fill of poverty." The prodigal son wasted his inheritance on foolish things. Probably he was surrounded by idle people who were devoted to gambling and loitering. Little by little, he consumed his resources, but he had not produced anything, he had not invested, and after he had spent it all, he had nothing to live off. When he came to his senses, he had absolutely nothing, and had to take the job more abominable to a Jew ... feeding pigs. Aware of his miserable condition and deeply sorry, he decided to return to his father's house (Luke 15:14-19).

Good stewardship implies disciplined work. There are two main reasons why we must be laborious as Christians: first of all, we must provide for the needs of our families (1 Timothy 5:8); and secondly, it gives us the opportunity to support God's work (Acts 20:35). Paul admonished the Thessalonians for being lazy (1 Thessalonians 5:14). He taught that "... The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

The Bible is rich in advice and instructions to help us to be good stewards of the goods that God has placed in our hands. Let's not be forgetful listeners, but doers of what God's Word teaches us.

Questions:

- Why is a financial budget useful?
- Why should Christians work hard?

Conclusion

The stewardship of finances is fundamental in the life of every Christian. It ensures good use of money and provides for the well-being of ourselves and other people. The foundation of good stewardship is giving faithfully and generously to God, and administering our resources according to biblical principles.



Ethics in financial administration

Eudo Prado (Venezuela)

Study passages: Matthew 6:1-4; Romans 13:7-8; I Timothy 6:6-10

Memory Verse: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” I Timothy 6:10.

Lesson aim: To discover the Christian ethical foundations regard to how we treat and use money

Introduction

In the previous lesson, we studied some biblical principles about how we administer our finances. These include the recognition that all property belongs to God, and includes giving generously and good administration. These principles must be expressed in practical actions on a day to day basis. Based on what has been previously studied, this lesson provides the deepening of the ethical aspect of Christian stewardship.

As some authors have pointed out well, “Christian stewardship is the total response of the individual to the grace of God. Stewardship includes money. In fact, it’s usually defined in a reduced form only in terms of money, but stewardship is more than money. Christian stewardship is ... the way to manage what has been entrusted to us” (Trull, J. E., and Carter, J. E. Christian Ethics. USA: CBP, 1997, p.89).

How we manage money reflects who we really are. Our relationship with God determines how we use our resources. What we do with money relates to ourselves and to others. Because this is a fundamental topic within the study of Christian stewardship, we invite the teacher to prepare as diligently as possible for this lesson. Above all, try to relate the knowledge with the students’ previous experiences. We anticipate a time of great blessing in the class.

I. We should not live in debt (Romans 13:7-8)

These two verses are found in the section of the book where Paul deals with several practical issues which follow on from Chapters 1-11 where he outlines important issues of Christian theology. Within those duties that Paul mentions is the mandate to pay our debts.

A. We must pay off all our debts

It’s important to note that this is a mandate that transcends the personal sphere since it includes other social relationships. Paul always had in mind that the way Christians conduct themselves is a way of witnessing to the world. The world is watching how we manage our finances.

The instruction to owe no one anything ... (v.8) is exegetically linked to Paul’s teaching that we must all submit to higher authorities (Romans 13:1). Paul commands his readers: “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (v.7). As we can see, the mandate doesn’t refer exclusively to financial debts, but also includes the moral obligations that Paul considers debts within society.

In the world where Christianity was born, the Roman government wasn’t as fair as we might imagine, and because of this, it could perhaps be argued by some believers that they weren’t obliged to fulfill their obligations. However, the instruction here is clear. We are called as Christians to do what the laws of the land ask of us, even if the system is corrupt and unfair, and although we may believe that there are much better things which we could do with our money. Of course, this includes any other obligations we have with the government, other institutions of society, or individuals.

B. We have a debt of love to everyone

Verse 8 goes much deeper: “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.” According to the ethical values of God’s Kingdom we are instructed to pay all debts. Paul goes even deeper.

There is a debt which can never be repaid, that of loving others. Love is the permanent obligation that the Christian has to every person; and by loving our neighbors, we automatically fulfill the law. This includes fellow Christians as well as those with whom the believer interacts with, and particularly, of course, those who have special needs. No one is excluded from this all-encompassing love.

Here, then, love comes into play as the essential component for Christian stewardship. Love is considered as a debt that we have with everyone, due to the command to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:34-40). It's a permanent debt that never ends. Any Christian duty, including proper management of our resources, has as its essential motivation the love of Christ.

Questions:

- Briefly explain the importance of love in Christian stewardship.
- In your opinion, how can Christian stewardship contribute to the witness of the gospel in the world?

II. We should not love money (I Timothy 6:6-10)

How we administer our resources is perhaps one of the areas of greatest challenge in the Christian life. The reason is that we live in the middle of a completely materialistic world. Money practically rules relationships among people in the world today, with the countless ethical consequences that this entails.

Sadly, many Christians have yet to understand the decisive sentence of Jesus: "... You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13). In the New Testament times, the materialistic attachment to money was already a present evil in the lives of many believers, and even some of the leaders. I Timothy 6:10 states: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."

A. "Godliness with contentment is great gain" (v. 6)

Wanting to have more money is not the problem, but why we want it is. Selfish motives don't honor God and are a bad sign in the life of a believer: "There are many reasons why someone might want more money. Some may be bad, but others could be good. Some want more money to increase their status, luxuries or their ego, and

they would certainly fall under the admonition of this section of Scripture. But yes, if someone wants to earn more money to provide for those who depend on them, to give more to the causes that honor God or to invest in creating goods and services that allow the community to thrive, then it would not be a bad thing to want more money" (Theology Project on work. "Godliness with contentment is a great gain" [I Timothy 6:3-10, 17-19]" Recovered from <https://www.teologiadeltrabajo.org>, on December 25 2019).

The exhortation to 'contentment' expressed in verses 6 through 9 indicates the sense of satisfaction with what we have. It's not about conformity or lack of ambition for material progress, but of a sense of gratitude to God for what we have, be it little or a lot. Paul expressed this same idea to the Philippians when he wrote to them from prison: "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:11-13).

The greatest gain that the Christian should seek is in the spiritual realm. Many times, the possibility of earning more money or material progress can go against our spiritual life. In this case, we need to discover what God's will is for our life. He will always give us the necessary direction to make the important decisions that contribute to our Christian development.

B. The love of money as a cause of suffering

I Timothy 6:9 states: "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." Verse 10 warns us that it is loving money, or following a non-Christian approach of the value of money, which can make us wander from the faith and end up suffering hardships that cause us pain. At the end of this same passage, the apostle instructed Timothy to "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (I Timothy 6:17).

Jamieson, Fauset and Brown in their commentary state that: "to love money is not the only root of evil, but it is a main 'root of bitterness' (Hebrews 12:15), because it destroys faith, the root of all good things and gives rise to temptation, snare, lusts, destruction, perdition" (Jamieson, R., Fauset, A. R., and Brown, D. Exegetical and Explanatory Commentary on the Bible, Volume II: The new Testament. USA: CBP, 2002, p.578).

It's important to note the force of Paul's words here. He said that the love of money, in addition to misleading a person, can bring terrible consequences to our lives. This final phrase of verse 6 is very descriptive of the problems that come for those who love money; they will "pierce themselves with many griefs." The love of money brings dire consequences, both spiritually and materially. Therefore, we must ask God for wisdom to administer our resources according to the lofty purposes of the kingdom of God.

Questions:

- Briefly define what Christian contentment is.
- What are the outcomes of loving money (1 Timothy 6:10).

III. Giving with humility (Matthew 6:1-4)

A. Another ethical component in stewardship of finances is the attitude with which we give.

God wants us to give for the right reason. A sense of justice, love and generosity is what should drive Christian giving. Whoever gives for pride loses God's reward. These verses, which are part of the sermon on the Mount, are part of Jesus' teachings for His disciples on how they should give to the needy. Here He takes as a negative reference the hypocritical attitude of the Pharisees who boasted about giving alms. When the Pharisees wanted to deliver something to the poor, they used to stand on the corner of a busy street in Jerusalem and then they would sound a trumpet. Although the purpose was to gather those in need to receive the gifts, at the same time it meant that everyone was aware of the Pharisees' generosity.

Such an attitude is inconsistent with the humility that should characterize Christian work. It's completely unethical to divulge what we give. By doing so, we draw attention to ourselves and claim the glory that belongs to God. As this is something that displeases the Lord, we lose the possibility of receiving His blessing.

B. God blesses in public those who give in secret

Jesus commanded His disciples to give to those in need. Furthermore, He ordered them to sell their possessions and help others. By doing so, they would be guarding their 'treasure in heaven', and obtaining an eternal gain (Luke 12:33-34).

The book of Acts shows that Christians of the early church literally obeyed this command (Acts 2:45, 4:36-37). But, we also find the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who feigned generosity and they were punished with the loss of their lives (Acts 5:1-11). God hates hypocrisy so He wants our expressions of generosity to be genuine.

Matthew 6:3 states: "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." This is a hyperbolic expression, and it's also a Hebrew idiom for a secret. "Giving alms with the right hand is a typically Hebrew expression... it's the hand of honor, of power, of protection and resolution. That the left doesn't find out vividly expresses the secret of almsgiving, wherein is its best quality. Give it simply because it's a good work, not because it gives the donor a good name: (Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry Bible Commentary. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.1087).

Verse 4 tells us: "so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." When we show genuine generosity seeking to please God and not people, He's pleased and blesses us: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

Questions:

- What does the following expression mean: "... your left doesn't know what your right is doing" (v.3)?
- Explain how this can be put into practice today.

Conclusion

Christian stewardship has clear ethical foundations. It's supported by Christian duties expressly noted in the New Testament. But also, it proceeds from the character of a disciple full of the love of Christ.



Managing our time

Eduardo Meza (Uruguay)

Study passages: Psalm 63:1; Proverb 19:15; Ecclesiastes 3:1; Ezekiel 16:49; Matthew 6:33, 28:20b; Luke 19:11-27; John 14:27; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17, 4:2; Ephesians 5:1-33 6:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:4-5, 4:8, 5:16.

Memory Verse: "... making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" Eph. 5:16.

Lesson aim: To learn the great importance of organizing time into priorities following biblical advice.

Introduction

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul warns them about the dangers of wasting time and effort on things of little consequence. *"Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil; Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is"* (Ephesians 5:1-17).

There are several famous quotes about time:

- "Never leave till tomorrow that which you can do today" Benjamin Franklin
- "Time is a created thing. To say, 'I don't have time' is to say, 'I don't want to'" Lao Tzu;
- "For the 'present' is the point at which time touches eternity" C. S. Lewis
- "A man who dares to waste one hour of life has not discovered the value of life." Charles Darwin (<https://everhour.com/blog/time-management-quotes/>)

In this lesson we'll discover three important areas of time management.

I. Setting priorities

A. Make time for God (Psalm 63:1, John 14:27, Matthew 28:20b)

If there is a priority that isn't negotiable, it's our intimate connection with our God. Sadly, we're living in times where we see many priorities reversed. Often, we are impulsively putting together our daily agenda to solve the urgent, leaving aside the important things. This inverted equation will never bring good results. With the passage of time, neglecting to give God first place in our lives every day will bring frustrations and discouragement, and will be a constant emotional drain because we are fighting in our own strength and not in the confidence that comes with intimacy with our almighty Father.

King David expressed it in Psalm 63:1: *"You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water."* The Lord knows that we need to have joy and peace even in our troubled world. After the resurrection, He said to His disciples: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid"* (John 14:27) This peace comes when we trustingly put each day into His hands. He has promised to be with His disciples through the ages: *"...surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20b). John Wesley put it as follows: *"I have so much to do that I spend several hours in prayer before I am able to do it."* (<https://frasescristianas.org/tag/john-wesley>, February 11, 2020).

B. Spending time for the family (Ephesians 6:1-4, 1 Timothy 3:4-5)

If our priorities start with our close relationship with God, taking time to learn lessons from the Bible and conversing with Him in prayer, then the next item on our agendas must be our families. The apostle Paul clearly understood this crucial reality in the advice he gave to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 6:1-4) and to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:4-5). These important passages lead us to the great and important task that those of us have as spouses and parents; we need to invest in the family that God has given us.

We hear people say that they don't have time, but in fact we all have the exact same amount of time that our grandparents had. The issue is that we're filling our agendas with what we consider to be 'urgent', instead of giving time to 'what is important'. The modern family is under constant attack.

We see this in the current divorce statistics, the number of single mothers, orphans, adultery, children being abandoned, interfamilial violence, femicides, etc.

If we follow the model God has given us outlined in the Bible, this tragic situation could be transformed. We need to invest time in and with our families. Our spouses need our commitment and friendship and support. Our children need to have quality time with their parents. We need to teach them the Kingdom values which will prepare them to be good and useful citizens in the future. It must be our daily and intentional decision to allow time for our family in each of our roles.

C. Invest in our work time (I Timothy 5:16, Proverbs 19:15, Matthew 6:33)

We have seen that our times with God are sacred and that another priority is to spend time with our families. Also, we need to work to provide for household needs. When we read that God promises to supply our needs, it doesn't mean that we can just sit around and wait. Proverbs 19:15 says: "*Laziness brings on deep sleep, and the shiftless go hungry.*"

God expects us to be responsible workers. The apostle Paul himself taught industriousness with his example in his trade of tent making: "Sore arms, tired fingers and callused hands were a daily experience for this tent maker. He paid a high price for his integrity, but he felt it was well worth it to complete Christ's mission... Certainly, Paul considered laziness - which was endemic in the Greco-Roman society - as inappropriate for the Christian believer. Therefore, he deliberately established the example of hard work to sustain himself and called on the converts to imitate him" (<https://icmccarvajal.wordpress.com/2012/10/15/make-tents-and-the-apostolic-call/>, on February 11, 2020).

It's also clear that Paul instructed the church to be responsible for providing for needy families, such as the case of widows (Acts 6:1-3; I Timothy 5:16). For the main part, we are exhorted to use the skills and capabilities that He has given us to work and support our families and congregations, even in situations of economic difficulties. God is faithful to His Word. Matthew 6:33 says the following: "*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*" This promise has a condition; if we keep the first part, we'll be making a good investment.

D. Take care of ourselves (I Timothy 4:8, I Corinthians 3:16-17)

God wants His children to be healthy. As stewards of our Creator, we are responsible for looking after our bodies, which are the temples of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16-17). Just as it's important to take care of our spiritual health, so in the same way, it's vitally

important to give priority to habits that will help us enjoy good physical health. Exercise, healthy eating, sleeping well, grooming, vacations, and intentional retreats are some of the ways we can be good stewards of our body. The first part of I Timothy 4:8 tells us "... *physical training is of some value...*" It shouldn't be the 'be all and end all' of everything we do because "*godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come*" (I Timothy 4:8b).

Questions:

- What activities do you spend your personal time on?
- What things do you think you should prioritize now in your life as a child of God?

II. Organize our time with schedules (Ecclesiastes 3:1; I Corinthians 4:2)

It seems to some that to organize, plan or carry out an activity schedule is being rigid, limiting our freedom, as if we were in a 'straitjacket.' Ecclesiastes 3:1 tells us that: "*There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.*" Things don't just happen as coincidences but as the result of intentionally managing one of the most valuable resources that we have - time. How many times have we heard some people say, or maybe even we have also said: "I didn't make it today!" In other words, we didn't accomplish what we had planned to do. Such an expression is an alarm, a warning voice telling us that we have not organized our time well. You have to do what you have to do, at the time it has to be done. This makes a big difference in the way we use our time. Let's reflect on the following questions:

A. What can be done to buy us more time?

This will only happen when we become stewards of each day, of each month and of the year, organizing them in such a way that we give priority to what's important in our responsibilities and goals.

B. How can we organize time better?

One suggestion is simply learning how to use an agenda. That is, before starting daily activities, we can sit down with a pen and paper, or use an application in our cell phones or electronic equipment, to organize the important schedule of the day, week and so on. Using an agenda will not only help us organize our routine, but it will also help us waste less time and remember to keep commitments. It will be a valuable aid to our memory and will keep us focused on what's important to do for the day.

As children of God, we are stewards, responsible to take care of and attend to all the things that He has given us. In I Corinthians 4:2 we read: *“Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.”* Let’s start managing well what God gives us to do, remembering that we need to account to Him for what we do each day. We cannot forget that managing an agenda is not something that just happens from one day to the next. This is a discipline, a habit that we have to cultivate. Organizing time is not a waste of time; rather it’s a good investment to get things done. At the beginning of each day, we need to sit and organize our time in writing. The important thing about an agenda is that we write our daily plan in it, which helps us not to forget things. We can put to one side activities that we didn’t plan, or last-minute issues that spring up. Unless they’re urgent, they can wait. This is the way to have a much more organized day.

C. How important is this to our health?

It’s worth mentioning one of the famous phrases of John Wesley when he said, “I don’t have time to hurry” (Retrieved from <https://doing-disciples.blogspot.com/2013/10/asi-pensaba-juan-wesley.html>, the February 11, 2020). The hectic pace of society is stressful and stress is wreaking havoc on the health of many today. This could be avoided by applying these basic principles of being good stewards of our time. We’ll enjoy each day as a gift from God, with a little less stress, if we have a little more organization. A daily planner can become our great ally and a great blessing for our health!

Questions:

- Write in a brief and detailed way (with schedules) the organization of one of your days in the week.
- According to what has been studied, what are the priority activities that should be scheduled every day?

III. Do not waste time (Proverb 19:15; Ezekiel 16:49; Luke 19:11-27; Ephesians 5:16)

These four passages have in common the condemnation of negligence, laziness and idleness. Whoever assumes these attitudes will never produce good fruit, advancement or progress. What is certain is that it will bring unpleasant payoffs. We haven’t been given time to waste it. God has gifted us with a life which He expects we’ll use fully. We are only born once, we were five years old, or fifteen or twenty once... And so, the years go by.

We can thank God for His fidelity and care, but we’ll also collect what we have sown at every stage of our life. It’s sad when evaluating our lives now, we conclude that we’ve wasted time, confronting the harsh reality that we didn’t invest wisely every minute and hour we had.

Ask: “What things can be thieves of time?” First, it’s pertinent to mention that there may be external factors that arise at the last moment, which we’ll have to know how to handle so that they don’t alter our agenda too much. But also, there are factors or situations that we allow or we include in our daily activities that, not being planned, steal our time. Some of them are the following:

1. Email, social networks and others. The wise thing to do is to plan a couple of times a day to review emails and / or be on social networks.
2. Learn to say ‘no.’ This is part of understanding what we are primarily responsible for, not allowing ourselves to be sidetracked by the urgent.
3. Not knowing how to delegate or not delegating correctly. If we don’t delegate, we’ll end up doing everything, not allowing other people with gifts to develop their talents. That is a huge waste of time.
4. Poor organization of our time. Not being organized will lead to time being stolen and we’ll never get it back.

As long as God still grants us life in His great mercy, we are in time to make the best investment in *“making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil...”* (Ephesians 5:16).

Questions:

- Do you consider that certain activities that you currently carry out are a waste of time? Comment.
- Do you consider that you are currently doing activities that badly waste time in your agenda? Comment.

Conclusion

We as God’s children are called to live wisely, applying the Lord’s perfect counsel to our lives that guides us to know how to invest an important resource we have at our disposal: time.



Fulfilling the Great Commission

Juan Sosa Sernaque (Perú)

Study passages: Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 1 John 2:6

Memory Verse: “For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” 1 Corinthians 9:16.

Lesson aim: To understand the call to evangelization as a mandate for every disciple of Christ.

Introduction

Many times, we think that the admonishment to preach the gospel is only for pastors, evangelists or certain people, but this is not so. What happens is that we have become accustomed to being Christians who feel they have done their bit by going to church each week. We've forgotten our mission from our Lord Jesus to announce the gospel. One day, God will ask us to account for how we have fulfilled this mandate.

We live in a world full of dark places where sin, evil and corruption reign. There are young people who are lost in drugs, alcohol, and delinquency. The world desperately needs to hear our good news of salvation. There are homes that are splitting up and those who suffer the most are children, who equally need the good news of salvation. But we seem to have become indifferent, and the hurts and sorrows of those around us who are suffering no longer move us. We remain inactive, with our arms crossed doing nothing to offer the good news of Jesus to the people around us.

Today, many churches invest in everything except evangelization. They schedule their time for many tasks but often don't make the Great Commission their highest purpose. Churches set many goals but what is often missing is the mandate to reach the World for Christ. Sadly, we have set aside this mandate both personally and as communities of faith. That's why churches are empty, and when we give yearly reports, there are more members lost than new ones gained. It seems that we have all gotten used to this. We've changed the imperative from 'go' to 'come.' In other words, churches invite people to come to the church to be preached to and taught, and we don't go out in search of the lost ... those folk who really need Jesus.

Many believers have become 'church addicts,' filling the pews, singing songs, and getting teaching and enjoying just being with other Christians. But what about the people who live around the church and in our neighborhoods, ... do they know Jesus? What are their needs? Whenever leaders want to preach in the open air or reach out in the neighborhood, many members don't come. They seem to be ashamed to say that they are Christians. They're losing out on the great blessing of announcing the good news of salvation.

In this class, we're going to consider the following points to understand better what it means to preach the gospel.

I. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 1:17)

A. Preach the gospel

Preaching is defined as announcing or making known, and the gospel refers to the good news of salvation. Therefore, when we preach the gospel, we are giving good news to many people who are lost in different ways in this world. We have to be very responsible to comply with this mandate which doesn't come from man but from Jesus Christ himself.

We find this mandate in Matthew 28:16-20. The Lord showed us the way (Matthew 4:17), for He knew He was sent to preach the gospel (Isaiah 61:1). He gave instructions for His disciples to preach the Kingdom of God (Mark 16:15-18) and that is what they did (Mark 16:20). The book of Acts states that they did this every day (Acts 5:42).

Paul was clear about this command (1 Corinthians 1:17). This servant of God said, “For when I preach the

gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Brothers and sisters, woe be to us if we don't preach the gospel!

We must preach the gospel. If we all were very actively involved, how many people would be saved! Many people are waiting for someone to come up to them and share the Good News of salvation. We should share the good message with joy and passion, motivated to fulfill the mission that the Master entrusted to us. God will also ask us to account for how we use our time for evangelism. Sadly, there are numerous Christians who use their time for many fleeting affairs, but little to accomplish this divine order.

B. It's an order

The word 'go' is an imperative and commands must be carried out, and even more so when they come from God. The Lord Jesus left us this commission in His last instructions before his ascension to heaven. So, this isn't an option, but a divine mandate which must be fulfilled. Many might think that this order was only for Jesus' disciples back then, but it's not like that. The disciples were under Jesus' authority; therefore, this order is for everyone who are under God's authority, and for all who regard Jesus Christ as their Lord.

God's commandments are perpetual. They weren't only for yesterday, they are also for today and for us. Reflect on this: How are we fulfilling the divine mandate to "... Go... and preach the gospel..." (Mark 16:15)? We don't need to be great preachers or travel far away because when we leave our house and look around us, we'll notice that there are many people who need Jesus. There are people who are waiting for us in anguish and in need of God's love. If we were all obedient to the divine mandate, how many families would be united, youth restored by the power of God, how many people would be reached and changed by the power of God? And we would become His instruments! We just have to do it individually, in teams, and as churches. It would be ideal if each congregation had a ministry of evangelism, and whose members were trained in evangelism.

The church should support this ministry in all its aspects, and so every day we could reach out to new places, bearing in mind that every member of the church has the responsibility to share the gospel, not just this evangelism team.

Questions:

- According to the lesson, who should evangelize and how?
- What is preaching?

II. Teach what Jesus taught (Matthew 28:19)

A. What did the Lord Jesus teach?

The Bible says in Matthew 7:28-29: "*When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.*" He knew how to communicate divine truths wrapped up in stories we call parables. Jesus' teachings and example are recorded in the gospels. There were times when he took the disciples away and taught them like what is recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). The call of Matthew 28:19 is to "make disciples of all nations." Just as he spent three years training His disciples, He wants us not only to share the Good News of the gospel but also help new members to grow in the spiritual life.

Reflect on the following: How are we passing on the Master's teaching? How do people react when we talk about the gospel? Are we prepared? What is our motive for sharing the things of God with others? Are we prepared spiritually to disciple others? We have to remember that there is an enemy that doesn't want us to teach the Holy Scriptures. To make disciples we too have to be disciples which implies having a close walk with the Lord.

Many of us are content when someone is converted and we leave them there. We are happy about it but our work or task will only be finished when they become mature Christians in Christ Jesus. In other words, after someone accepts Jesus as their Savior, the church needs to invest time in discipling them until they become Christlike disciples.

To share the teachings of Jesus, we have to be prepared spiritually and biblically. We need to know the Bible well and be a Christian who prays. But sadly, there are many believers who don't even know their way around the Bible. How can we teach others if we don't know the Scriptures ourselves?

B. Are we fulfilling this mandate?

In Luke 10:2, we find one of the sad texts of the Bible. Jesus said: *“The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* Surely there must be more than enough workers. But if not, it seems that we aren’t complying with this order that the Lord has given us. The following story illustrates this point: “A gentleman came to the church with a person who had become a Christian recently, and he presented him to the pastor of the church and He said to him: “Pastor, this is brother Peter. He became a Christian on Saturday. I led him to Christ, so I hand him over to you. If he gets lost, it’s now your problem.”

This is what is happening with many Christians today who think that it’s enough just to lead people to the Lord, and they don’t care about discipling new converts. The result is that these new Christians often don’t grow strong in their faith and when the troubles come, they leave. New Christians need to be taught as Jesus commanded us.

How are we spending our time in fulfilling this mandate that God has left us? How will the Lord feel as the days go by and many believers do nothing to fulfill this mandate?

Questions:

- What did Jesus teach us?
- What should we teach?

III. Live like Jesus (1 John 2:6)

To be able to live like Jesus, we have to understand what our mission is on this earth. We need to be clear about what God is calling us to do and ask ourselves the following questions:

A. Is it possible to live like Jesus?

Maybe we should start by saying that Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth as a man. It’s clearly written in the letter to the Hebrews that He was like us, shared our humanity, but he didn’t sin (Hebrews 2:17-18, 4:15-16). In the Bible, we find leaders like Joseph, Daniel, and Paul who show us that you can live like our Lord Jesus, without sin. These men knew what they wanted to achieve and what their mission was. They were willing to do anything to please God.

God needs mature Christians, but we don’t become mature just because we attend church, sing beautifully or have been church members for ages. Christian

maturity implies maintaining our relationship with God daily. This is a spiritual discipline, it takes time and effort, but the outcome will be blessing.

B. Do you know what God has called us to do?

Many live without any purpose in life. They don’t have goals or objectives, yet they consider themselves to be Christians, children of God. 1 John 2:6 says, *“Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.”* The rich young man thought that by keeping the commandments he was doing everything, but Jesus reproved him because he lacked something. He was too interested in the material things of this world (Mark 10:17-22). Let us ask ourselves: what is lacking in our lives? What is holding us back from living like Jesus and being His witnesses wherever we go?

Let’s listen to the following illustration: A pastor prepared members of his congregation for six months. He taught them how to become mature Christians. He taught them that they had to live following Jesus’ teaching and that the folk around them were watching and observing their lives. He also took them out to the parks and through the streets to share the gospel with the people around them.

When we live like Jesus, our testimony will attract people to Christ. People will want to be like us when they see the change that God has done in our lives. We’ll just have to explain to them that it’s following Jesus that has changed us. He healed us, restored our marriage, and much more. We have to share this with our friends and family for the glory of God. Therefore, it’s important that if we are His children, we must “live as Jesus did.”

Questions:

- Do you consider that you can live like Jesus? Explain.
- What is our mission here on earth?

Conclusion

We have all been given the mandate to fulfill the Great Commission. This command is not only for some brothers or sisters, or for a certain group of people; it’s for all of Christ’s disciples. The Lord Jesus went to heaven but he will soon return, and He will ask us to account for what we have done.



The administration of spiritual gifts

Joel Castro (Spain)

Study Passage: I Peter 4:10-11

Memory Verse: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” I Peter 4:10.

Lesson aim: To understand all the details of good administration of the gifts that God has deposited and entrusted to us.

Introduction

A long time ago, I heard a story that illustrates the diligence of the servant of God. The story says: “In a quiet little farm, a father lived with his two sons; they were humble peasants, and didn’t have many resources. One day, the father told his sons that he planned to go to the city to work to give them a better quality of life and achieve his goal which was to buy a small plane and return and take them with him to the city. The plan went ahead. Knowing that the land was full of weeds and crops, before he left, the father instructed his two sons to prepare a small field as a landing strip. These two very excited young men promised to prepare that strip even though they didn’t know when their father was coming back.

They expected that very soon they would see their father again. After a while, the sons thought that their father would come back after a long time because buying a plane was a lengthy business. So, day by day, they postponed making the landing field, or once in a while, they did a little bit, and then they let themselves be overcome by fatigue. After a certain time, already disappointed not to see their father again, they heard a motorized noise in the air in the distance. Both of them looked at each other, distressed and confused, but above all powerless, for at that moment they knew that they had not prepared the landing ground. It was half done and the father could not touch down and sadly, he had to return to the city without his sons.”

In the same way, our God, as a good Father, wants the best for us, and through Jesus Christ, He gave us the promise of His imminent return (Revelation 22:12,20). Meanwhile, He has left us duties to fulfill

while we wait for His promise of returning for His church. If Christ returned now, would He be glad and joyful about how we have administered what He assigned to us? Or is it just half done? God has given us gifts, wow, have we been using them? Or as our memory verse says, we must be good administrators of the gift or gifts we have received. Are we?

In his first letter, the apostle Peter mentioned four statements which help us examine ourselves about how we conduct the Lord’s work (I Peter 4:10). Remembering that the Lord may come back at any moment (v.7a), let’s see what these statements are.

I. “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received...” (I Peter 4:10a)

Because we have accepted Jesus as our savior, we are part of the people of God (I Peter 2:9-10). Peter, in his epistle, tell us about the grace of God that has been deposited in us once we received Christ into our hearts (I Peter 4:1-11). We have been graciously given spiritual gifts which are special skills and abilities that God allows us to have for His service. Yes, brothers and sisters, you have one or more gifts. Have you discovered which one or ones you have? Today, consider the next three questions that will lead us to some wise advice about how to recognize your gifts:

A. Firstly, how committed to God are we?

This is one of the first steps in detecting the gift that God has deposited in us. Both Peter and Paul, called as apostles of the Lord to the churches of their time, left the works of the flesh and sought the presence of God.

If we have given our lives to Him, we'll find the passion not only to follow Jesus, but also to serve Him. There are Christians who aren't really using their gifts. Just being active in the church can easily make us discouraged. Pure activism is not necessarily the way we use our gifts. That's why these people, faced with a problem or crisis, tend to abandon serving with their gifts because they were never really consecrated to God.

B. Secondly, how well do we obey the call to serve?

Consecrating our lives to Christ is important, but there is another detail that we need to pay attention to. Some folks are shy and don't get involved in service for fear of failing. The best way is to find the skill in which one feels fulfilled in the service of God. We can test different opportunities. We could talk with our pastor and take advantage of the occasions when people have confidence in us in the service we do. In my ministerial experience, I've been able to guide many Christians to find their true gift by giving them different opportunities in many areas of service. This has been satisfying for them since they were able to discover that they found joy in serving where they have the most passion. The third question has to do with passion.

C. Thirdly, how passionate are we about serving?

Serving others is a Christian responsibility. We should be passionate about it no matter how long it takes to carry out. We all have responsibilities in the church, such as evangelizing, praying, giving, etc. With respect to evangelism, the mandate is to evangelize. However, only some will evangelize with wonderful creativity, using more of their potential than that of a Christian who doesn't possess that gift.

The whole church must share the gospel, witnessing about Christ. But others who have the gift of evangelism, in addition to being witnesses, will do it in specific ministries and they will use special tools with a deep passion. This is what we should do with the specific gift we have received of God. Ask: What are we all passionate about when we serve our Lord and Savior?

We all have at least one gift that God has entrusted to us and for which He will ask us to give account to Him. Our personal characteristics are

special and unique for the work and the gift that the Lord has deposited in us. Don't let time go by doing things out of obligation or because you simply know how to. We need to begin by recognizing the gift that the Lord has given us and serve Him with great passion and devotion.

Questions:

- What are the three questions that will help a child of God know what their spiritual gifts are?
- What are your answers to the above question?

II. "Use whatever gift you have received to serve others" (1 Peter 4:10b)

The gifts of the Holy Spirit aren't for our benefit. When Paul spoke of the reason (the why) of the gifts listed in his first letter to the church in Corinth, he said that these are for "*common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:7); that is, for the good of others. Likewise, Peter's exhortation expresses service to others (1 Peter 4:10b). The gift is not to make us conceited. We'll deal with this in the last point of the lesson. Just as in the human body all the parts serve each other, in the body of Christ, we must all help one another with each one's purpose in mind. Paul explained it in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

Ask: What will be the purpose of our spiritual gifts? Paul himself gave two reasons that we want to highlight from Ephesians 4:12-16.

A. Firstly, to equip Christians

Ephesians 4:12 says that the gifts are; "... *to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.*" This is interesting. Nobody is more important than anyone else, but we all help each other develop our respective gifts. As in the physical body, all members help each other for a single purpose; thus the same thing happens in the body of Christ with service and gifts. Ephesians 4:16 says, "*From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*" It's important to use our gift because we can be a part of the chain of growth and building up of the body of Christ.

B. "... So that the body of Christ may be built up"

The term 'build' (Ephesians 4:12b) gives us the idea of construction. To do this, we need an architect, who is God, who combines all our gifts to build up the body of Christ. Just as all buildings need to grow or go upward, so too there needs to be important growth in God's building. The aim is that each one should: "...reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ ...Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:13,15). Peter exhorts us: "you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Returning to the Pauline teaching, we must bear in mind that every newborn Christian needs to be built up. What if we don't use our gifts? New Christians may be swept away by the cunning of false teachers (Ephesians 4:14). Using our gifts will help those who have recently joined us to stay on the right track.

Questions:

- According to Ephesians 4:12, what are the two purposes of the ministry of spiritual gifts?
- Are these two purposes fulfilled in your life when you use your gifts? How?

III. "... as faithful stewards of God's grace" (1 Peter 4:10c)

For Peter, God not only needs simple administrators but also "faithful stewards" (1 Peter 4:10c). The quality of God's stewards is of utmost importance. In Matthew 25, we find three filters if we want to be found worthy of the kingdom of God. Thus, in verses 1 to 13, He demands holiness from us, which is reflected in the five wise virgins; in verses 31 through 46, He requires His children to reflect love of solidarity, like the group on the right; and lastly (which has to do with our topic), in verses 14 through 30, He wants us to be good workers.

In this Parable of the Talents, the one who received a talent made a poor administrative decision. He thought that taking care of his talent and not losing

its value was enough to give a good account to the owner (v.25). However, he was reprimanded because he didn't make the opportunities to invest in other alternatives (v.27). By the time his master came back, it was too late. So, if we don't want to end in a shameful experience in the great judgement day like this guy, we need to use our gifts and talents. Today God asks us to be good stewards of His manifold grace. Serving the Lord is serious business!

How can we use our gifts and talents more productively?

A. Firstly, by refusing to hide the fact that we have a gift from God

Enough of continuing to just be a simple worshiper after being a Christian for many years! It's time to understand that each of us has at least one gift. Most of all, it's time to get to work because God wants good stewards. We hold the Lord's work in His Kingdom back if we do nothing with our gift.

B. Secondly, by helping the church benefit with our gift

There is no greater blessing than knowing that others are being blessed by the gift that God has deposited in us. Our congregations will thank us when they feel blessed by our contribution in His service. On the other hand, it's very sad that there are congregations where it seems that the members aren't exercising their gifts. They go regularly to church but they aren't using their gifts in the service of others.

C. Thirdly by not being worldly

"No one can serve two masters ...", Jesus said (Matthew 6:24). If we give more importance to earthly things, we won't have a genuine desire to discover our gift. Even when we know what our gift is, we won't be able to serve earnestly. Faced with this temptation, Peter had no qualms about exhorting the Christian congregations of his time to give no place to the flesh (1 Peter 4:2). This warning is also relevant to the church today. What's more, Jesus affirmed forcefully: "... the flesh counts for nothing" (John 6:63). However, if we start to surrender our life to the Holy Spirit, we'll use our spiritual gifts to edify and bless others.

Questions:

- According to the three sections of verses in Matthew 25, what does the Lord require of you to be worthy of His Kingdom?
- How can you be a faithful steward?

IV. So that God will get all the glory (I Peter 4:11b)

Finally, we receive spiritual gifts to glorify God: *“Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around so all get in on it: if words, let it be God’s words; if help, let it be God’s hearty help. That way, God’s bright presence will be evident in everything through Jesus, and he’ll get all the credit as the One mighty in everything—encores to the end of time. Oh, yes!”* (v. 11 The Message version).

This verse is quite clear about the second purpose of our service. Earlier, we said that gifts are for edification of the body of Christ, but they also bring honor and glory to God. However, we don’t give Him the glory when:

A. We’re not serving with our spiritual gifts

Peter affirmed if we have received gifts, we must use them (v. 11). The renowned speaker John Maxwell, in his teachings on *The Art of Leading*, affirms: “you rob God of the glory He deserves. . . when you do not use his spiritual gifts” (Maxwell, John. *The art of leading*. Argentina: Publications SAM, 2012, p. 17)

B. We use our gifts for dishonest profit

It’s possible to obtain money for the use of the gifts we’ve received. Unfortunately, some false believers pretend to be preachers, singers, etc. They want to make personal financial benefits from their God-given gifts. This was the case of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-24). God’s gifts aren’t to be used to obtain earthly selfish luxuries.

C. When we believe we are the heroes of God’s work

This happens when the believer steals the praise that must be for God alone. No servant of the Lord should seek popularity among their followers. We must all hide behind the cross of Christ as we use the gifts God has given to us. There are those who take more care of their own prestige and fall into the temptation to seek personal applause. The Lord

Jesus fulfilled His mission by dying on the cross out of love. Similarly, we as children of God, filled with the love of God, must exercise our spiritual gifts.

Questions:

- In what cases is glory not given to God?
- Mention some gifts that you have, and with which you are glorifying God. If you have not yet discovered it, ask help from your teacher.

Conclusion

On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is nothing, and 5 is a lot), what is the true analysis of your service to God, based on these four statements by Peter? God gives us gifts, He expects us to use them in His service following all the advice we find in Scripture.



Taking care of our bodies

Ela González de Enriquez (Guatemala)

Study passages: 2 Kings 20:7; Psalm 136:25; Jeremiah 29:11, 33:6; Matthew 6:25-26, 8:2; 1 Timothy 5:23; James 5:14-16; 2 Peter 3:9; 3 John 2

Memory Verse: “Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” Psalm 100:3.

Lesson aim: To learn to care for our bodies as part of our Christian responsibilities

Introduction

How satisfying it is to be with a pleasant person! They look healthy, have a calm expression, a smiling face, their clothes are neat and clean. They are folks who radiate peace, joy, confidence, security and strength. However, not everyone enjoys such good health and pleasant circumstances. The business of each day runs our health down. Many have a poor diet, their water could be contaminated, they don't exercise sufficiently or go to the doctor for routine checkups. The environment where they live could have air pollution through traffic congestion. Some people are required to work really hard, putting their health at risk through increased stress levels, leaving them tired, moody and sick, and above all, without searching for God.

We must become aware of the way we're looking after our bodies. Paul wrote: *“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own”* (1 Corinthians 6:19).

I. Preventive health (Jeremiah 29:11; 3 John 2)

God's desire for His creation and His perfect plan cannot ever be evil: *“For I know the plans I have for you, - declares the Lord, - plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”* (Jeremiah 29:11). *“Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well”* (3 John 2).

God wants us to do well, to prosper and live in hope. God has given us our bodies, and like the apostle John's friend, He wants us to have good health. Medical science has shown that to enjoy physical well-being, there are steps we need to take to prevent illness and disease. We'll examine some of the things we can do:

A. Good nutrition

As human beings, we need food to survive. What we eat matters. Good quality food will add quality to our lives. The ideal diet is one that includes the nutrients the human body needs to maintain itself healthy. How we interact with food depends on our age, height and the type of activity that we have each day. Our diet must be complete, balanced, sufficient, varied and contain different foods from each of the groups that are generally classified in the food pyramid. Keep in mind that not everything that is edible is nutritious. There are some foods that don't have components necessary for our bodies; these should be excluded.

B. Eating junk food

This type of food fills us up but it isn't nutritious. It may contain excess components such as sugar, alcohol, tobacco, fats and other substances that can lead to disease and damage our bodies, which are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Eating healthy and balanced diets will make the body ready with defenses to deal with diseases when they arrive. Quality food, in the right amount at the right time, will bring health benefits. Excess food can lead to morbid obesity. While too little quality food could lead to anemia and malnutrition, and eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, if left untreated will lead to death.

C. Drinking water

Water has always been essential for us. When Moses led the people of Israel through the desert, God turned bitter water into sweet water for the people to drink (Exodus 15:22-25). God always knew they were worried and supplied the necessary water. Wells have always played an important role in supplying this vital liquid to people and animals.

Wells were of great value and importance to nomadic tribes. Even today, many people who don't have a good water supply have to walk a long way to get this precious commodity.

We need to include drinking water in our daily diet, and reduce the consumption of sodas and juices with preservatives, chemicals, and artificial colors. Drinking water will help us regain hydration lost during the day so that the organs in our body can function well.

D. Rest

The Bible says: *"By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so, on the seventh day he rested from all his work"* Genesis 2:2). Our Creator Himself gave us the example of resting after he had finished creation. This idea was later included as one of the commandments: *"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy"* (Exodus 20:8). In addition, He ordered the people of Israel that even the land should have rest: *"Do not reap what grows of itself or harvest the grapes of your untended vines. The land is to have a year of rest"* (Leviticus 25:5).

The human body needs to have time to rest. This includes daily hours of sleep, recreation, spending time with our families., etc. This especially includes a time of spiritual refreshment through Bible reading and prayer, going to church to learn from the teaching of the Word of God, communal prayer, and praise and adoration through songs and other experiences. Our Shepherd makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside quiet waters (Psalm 23:2).

E. Physical exercise

Many people lead a very sedentary lifestyle. They drive a car everywhere or take buses instead of walking. They are transported sitting down from place to place. We need to walk far more, use the stairs instead of the lift, leave the car at the furthest end of the parking lot to have the opportunity to walk at least a few meters more, walk at least half an hour each week and do about ten minutes of exercise a day playing sports, going to a gym, running around the block (urban space) wherever our home or work place is. We can take the opportunity to enjoy a moment of games with the family, especially with the children. Many diseases are caused through lack of exercise.

F. Hygiene

Personal hygiene also plays a very important role in preventing diseases. Having a daily shower, constant hand washing, brushing our teeth, keeping our nails

clean, using deodorants or other products such as creams, powders or perfumes to prevent bad odors and thus have a pleasant presence before others. We should change our clothes every day, especially our underwear. We need to wash our bed linen often to get rid of any fleas, bed bugs, mites, dust etc., which could inhabit the mattresses, blankets or pillows. If we don't give adequate attention to this, we might get diseases which could even be contagious.

Questions:

- Which of the aspects discussed today do you think is the most important? Why?
- Do you go for a general medical check-up at least once a year, including check-ups of your eyes and teeth? Explain your answer.
- Does the lesson motivate you to take more care of your health? Comment.

II. When sickness comes (2 Kings 20:7; 1 Timothy 5:23; James 5:14-16)

Nobody likes disease. This situation affects the whole family and brings as consequences physical wear and tear for those who have to attend to the sick, economic imbalance and emotional affection. Not all diseases are caused by lack of prevention; However, if the body is not given the necessary attention, if neglected in some of the areas described before, and others not mentioned in this lesson, some disease will present themselves. There are different types of diseases which are classified and grouped in various ways. It would be very extensive to share this in a short space, so only those that are temporary and terminal will be mentioned.

They don't have the same causes but suggestions shared in the first part of the lesson will help to avoid or minimize them. Terminal illnesses are those where there is no cure and whoever suffers in this will need palliative care which is provided to make the process less painful. But it's important to maintain medical care and correct application of suggested medications and studies.

A. Prayer: a bearer of divine healing

The Word of God says: *"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective"* (James 5:14-16).

When sickness first comes we should go to the Lord in prayer. God's Word teaches that we must intercede for each other.

B. Go to the doctors

Depending on where in the body the person is sick, he or she should be reviewed by an expert in a clinic, hospital or with a private doctor. The doctor will indicate the necessary studies through different procedures, laboratory tests, ultrasound, tomography, radiography, etc. in order to detect the disease and to suggest treatment.

C. Good use of studies and medications

Self-medication is not recommended. God the owner of science has given good brains to us to use. Each individual is different in constitution, physical condition and age, which means that all treatment will be individual.

D. Natural medicine

King Hezekiah received healing through natural medicine when he was suffering from an infection: *"Then Isaiah said, - Prepare a poultice of figs - They did so and applied it to the boil, and he recovered"* (2 Kings 20:7).

Questions:

- Have you had the experience of caring for a sick person with a terminal condition?
- Why is it not good to self-medicate?

III. God takes care of us all (Psalm 136:25; Jeremiah 33:6; Matthew 6:25-26, 8:2; 2 Peter 3:9)

God, as Creator, looks after and cares for His creation. His desire is that we all are healthy and happy. There are time when God heals sicknesses according to his will (Matthew 8:2-3). However, His great mission to humanity is that we all could get to know Him and receive His salvation: *"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9).

A. He sees that there is no lack of food or water

We need solid food and water in correct quality and quantity, not only to subsist, but to be healthy. God cares about it, and provides. The Word of God says: *"He gives food to every creature..."* (Psalm 136:25a), including human beings. We shouldn't be so concerned about what to eat or what to wear. Being anxious about these

material things doesn't solve the problem. The Lord Jesus said: *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"* (Matthew 6:25-26).

B. Should we seek medicines, natural cures, or divine healing?

God says: *"Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security"* (Jeremiah 33:6). Science comes from God, like the chemical elements and plants. He created them and faith is also given by God. Chemical medicine is the product of studies and tests with elements that, most of the time are plant or mineral based, as well as existing chemicals. Pharmacologists prepare those medications to heal or relieve the ills that afflict people. God has left plants for physical healing. Through science or experience, mankind has discovered in nature the medicine for different diseases. God created all these elements which scientists have discovered.

Faced with such urgent need as physical health, the church should be concerned with teaching how we need to take care of ourselves. There are different preventive programs such as vaccination programs, instructions for the proper handling of garbage, care of pets at home, hygiene in our homes, etc.

Questions:

- What does Matthew 6:25-26 tell you about the claim that God cares for us?
- Will God agree to the use of natural medicine for the treatment of diseases? Comment.

Conclusion

We are stewards of the body that our God has given us and we must take care of it responsibly. Prevention of disease and care of our body is something that we must consider in our daily life, applying it both for ourselves and for our family.



John Wesley's counsel about managing our resources

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Study passages: Genesis 41:48-49; Proverbs 6:6-11, 21:20; Mark 12:42-44; 2 Corinthians 9:7; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13

Memory Verse: "They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on" Mark 12:44

Lesson aim: To understand and apply the rules of stewardship of our resources that Wesley suggests for everyday life.

Introduction

Stewardship is one of the broader themes that we find throughout the entire Bible. Our understanding and application produce enormous results for our personal lives. Many believers have used and suggested countless principles on stewardship throughout the history of the church. John Wesley stands out among them as a great man of God who was relevant in the great revival of the eighteenth century in England. Wesley applied the Word of God to his life. We are led to the texts of the sermons he gave. These sermons are a valuable source from which we can extract principles, rules, and exhortations about stewardship of our resources, that with proper contextualization, can be very useful in the life of every believer.

Let's analyze three Wesleyan rules used specifically for the use of money.

I. "Earn all you can" (Proverb 6:6-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13)

What comes to our mind when we are told: "Earn all you can"? Can this rule lead us to violate biblical principles in order to achieve that end? These questions can allow an enriching dialogue to begin the class.

A. Work to earn all you can

In order to administer, we first have to have something to administer. This is the first step. This is what it means to earn, which includes the biblical duty to work. In the Thessalonian church, there were problems regarding their jobs because many didn't want to work. Paul faced them. He told them that they had to work and earn a living, in

other words, if you want to eat, you must work (2 Thessalonians 3:10). The apostle Paul questioned the idle life that some lived. They refused to work and also, they lived involved in affairs of strangers (2 Thessalonians 3:11-12).

Stewardship is the starting point to be able to earn what we can. In the wisdom we find in the book of Proverbs, the ants give us an excellent lesson: they work even when there is no one instructing them, and they prepare in advance for the winter (Proverb 6:6-8). In that same chapter, the slothful are also warned about poverty and shortfall that will come from sleeping rather than working (Proverb 6:9-11). Laziness, not wanting to work, goes against all biblical-Wesleyan principles of stewardship, and goes against responsible stewardship.

B. "Earn all you can" without breaking biblical principles

It's about earning everything we can, but without violating aspects that are crucial to our physical and spiritual life. On the one hand, we have loafers; on the other extreme are those who work tirelessly to the point that they stop attending church, praying, participating in activities with brothers and sisters in the faith, evangelizing, discipling etc. They are workaholics and the only thing that matters to them is to earn more money at all costs, even when their spiritual life is in a decline, and also that of their families. According to these people, time is just "for work."

This excessive eagerness to work, sometimes, also affects physical health. When this happens, John Wesley counselled the following: “Whatever it is, if the reason and the experience tells us that this job destroys health or even weaken the forces, we must not submit to it. Life is more than food, and the body is more than the clothing, and if we are already in one of those jobs, we must stop and look for another job where, even if we earn less, it will not harm our health “ (International Publications of the Church of the Nazarene. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.172).

Earning all we can doesn't include committing sin in what we do. This is a Wesleyan maxim and therefore, for all believers. We can't make money based on lies, deception in business or bringing damage to our neighbors. A good steward will always earn money honestly, without affecting any person or violating what the Word of God establishes and commands us “*Do to others whatever you want them to do to you*” (Matthew 7:12). A good steward treats other people with the same care and respect that they themselves want to be treated.

Questions:

- Explain why we must work?
- What do the biblical passages of Proverb 6:6-11 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13 teach us?
- What does the expression “Earn all you can” refer to without violating biblical principles?

II. “Save as much as you can” (Genesis 41:48-49; Proverbs 6:8, 21:20)

“Having earned as much as you can through your honesty, judgment and tireless diligence, follow the second rule: “Save as much as you can” (Publications Church of the Nazarene Internationals. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.173). This is how John Wesley began this very important rule for every responsible steward of their resources. Today there are different ways in which we can save. It's not about questioning or announcing what would be the best way because the biblical principle is not based on that. But the important thing is to save, regardless of how we do it.

A. Knowing how to manage our resources includes saving what you can

In the previous point, we analyzed the example of

ants in their early preparation for winter (Proverbs 6:8). The Word of God wants to show us the importance of saving up for when the need to use it arrives. Saving is not so much priority in the present, but it's important for the future. So for John Wesley, it was a priority that a good stewards save as much as they could. It's always difficult to save. For various reasons, sometimes our daily or monthly demand is above what we earn. Or we find that as each month passes we're spending what we earn, but in spite of all of this, the rule remains: “save everything you can.” The adjustments to achieve this are up to each believer.

The Bible also teaches us in Proverb 21:20 the following: “*The wise store up choice food and olive oil, but fools gulp theirs down.*” The teaching of this verse questions the attitude of the fool who wastes all, saving nothing, which is why he never manages to have stuff in store. On the contrary, the wise man, who as a steward, always has some goods saved. This is a clear indication to be wise stewards with what we earn. This point of stewardship in saving doesn't suggest being greedy or stingy, or not supplying basic needs, or not giving to others, etc. because they have an obsessive motive to save. The extremes are always negative; we need to understand this biblically.

Another biblical case is the life and experience of Joseph (Genesis 41). God's Word shows us how Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream in which he was shown that seven years of plenty and seven of famine would come. The Pharaoh appointed Joseph as steward in the nation of Egypt, and we can see the wise actions of this young man of God (Genesis 41:48-49).

That's what it's all about, consequently saving everything that we can and not spending unnecessarily. When the seven years of hunger arrived, what Joseph had stored up served to mitigate the problem and Egypt was able to give food to those in need because of the famine.

B. Saving is not just saving

For John Wesley, the important thing wasn't that he kept money saved up, although this was true. He made sure that he didn't waste money, only spending on things and matters without profit. It was more about spending with purpose, than saving. His principles at this point were very varied.

Let's analyze just one of them: "Do not spend anything to satisfy the pride of life, the admiration or praise of men ... Don't spend too much on your table, on your dress, or on furnishing your home, just to satisfy the appetite, the sight or the imagination, but also your vanity. As long as you treat people respectfully, men will speak well of you. As long as you dress in purple and fine linen, and feast every day, undoubtedly, they will applaud your elegance, good taste, generosity and hospitality. Don't buy expensive things to get applause, be content rather with the honor that comes from God" (Publications Church of the Nazarene Internationals. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.173).

Appreciating this principle can do much to help us. The clarity of the Wesleyan message: to save more money than we spend is to be admired. It's not necessary to run after the latest fashions in any area of life, or to be praised by society. We shouldn't help or give to others to be noticed, or have some personal, spiritual, or psychological need. What is really important is the true motive which should be profound love. Wesley stressed that believers should be content with doing things to honor God. Being admired by Him is what should satisfy us.

Questions:

- What passages do we find in the Bible that show us the importance of managing and saving?
- What does this expression mean: "saving is not just saving"?

III. Give all you can (Mark 12:42-44; 2 Corinthians 9:7)

Perhaps at first glance it seems that Wesleyan stewardship contradicts itself in relation with the second point studied. But it's not like that. It represents a harmonious complete relationship to such point that it complies with the previous rules. Wesley expressed it like this: "Let no one figure that by earning and saving everything we can, we have done it all. This is useless, it must go further and pursue another end. The truth is that accumulating money is not saving in the true sense of the word. It would be better to throw the money into the sea to bury it ... Add to the two previous rules this third: After earning and saving everything you can, "Give everything you can" (International Publications of

the Church of the Nazarene. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.174).

For a believer, giving is part of the spiritual nature received from our heavenly Father. It's something that must sprout spontaneously from the heart. Jesus, our teacher, lived it and taught it (Acts 20:35).

A. A faithful steward understands the greatness of giving

An understanding of who we are before God is crucial to apply this rule of giving: we are stewards of all the goods that come from him. John Wesley said: "When the Lord of heaven and earth created you, he put you in the world not as owners, but as stewards. As such, all your various goods, property and other assets are His and no one will ever be able to dispute this" (International Publications of the Church of the Nazarene. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.174).

It's interesting to note that Wesley didn't make a division between giving for God as something sacred and giving to others or our family as something secular or apart, which has been a mentality ingrained in the minds of some believers. Let's read what Wesley said: "You give" to God what is God's, not just by giving to the poor, but by providing what is necessary for you and for your family" (International Publications of the Church of the Nazarene. Sermons by John Wesley. USA: CNP, 1983, p.174). Spending for our needs so that our bodies will remain well and healthy, for the family, for the poor, for the brothers and sisters of our faith, as well as for those in need is also giving to God, there is no difference.

B. A faithful steward gives all he can gladly

We have clear examples in the New Testament of how Jesus rated generous giving as "giving everything you can." In a society full religiosity, the two small coins that a poor widow gave as an offering went unnoticed, but it didn't escape Jesus' eyes. He said: "...a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, - Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43b-44).

The Lord's words were clear in saying that that lady gave everything she had. This offering had a great meaning for Jesus because she was a poor widow. These conditions denoted the way that a woman was looked at within Jewish society in that situation. However, her offering pleased the Lord because of her attitude *"of giving everything she had."*

That is what giving is all about; it's an internal attitude. Whoever gives with all their heart and gives all that they can will never go unnoticed by God. The offering we give to God is not a fixed amount, it's 'everything' that He puts on our heart, enabling us to give cheerfully. The apostle Paul, referring to this subject, said: *"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver"* (2 Corinthians 9:7). This was a recommendation given for the first time to the church of Corinth, motivated by the collection for an offering for the church of Jerusalem, and encloses the same principles discussed above regarding the attitude of the giver: It must be a decision of the heart, and also with joy and gladness, because that's how God likes it, and He loves the one who does it this way.

Believers don't give to receive a blessing because we have already been blessed by God (Ephesians 1:3). In giving, the Lord continues to give to us, even when we give. Giving is a great spiritual mystery that only those who apply it enjoy the blessing. While we give, we are distributing God's blessing and, in turn, we are being blessed by Him.

God loves givers, and one day that blessing is activated from heaven. In all the Word, we find the Lord's good pleasure when we give to others. It doesn't matter the amount given, only that it's given with joy, even if it's only two small coins. Give "all that you can" because there is blessing in doing so.

Questions:

- What did giving mean for John Wesley?
- What lesson can we draw from the passages of Mark 12:42-44 and 2 Corinthians 9:7?

Conclusion

Let's learn to be faithful stewards of our resources before God, making good use of the money we have, earning, saving and giving everything we can.

Teachings and poetry (Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs)

Third quarter

The Meaning of Life
A time for everything
God is the *raison d'être* of mankind
Life's Vain behaviors
Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness
Love of money
Reflections of the Preacher
Where there is life in God, there is hope
How to enjoy true happiness?
Helpful tips for life
Introduction to the Song of Songs
A poem to human love
Loving with the five senses



The meaning of life

Eduardo Velázquez (Argentina)

Study passages: Ecclesiastes 1:1-18, 2:1-26

Memory Verse: "To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness" Ecclesiastes 2:26a.

Lesson aim: To understand that doing God's will is the only thing that gives true meaning to our lives.

Introduction

People go through life trying to find meaning, an ultimate goal that brings value to our lives. Some people think that we all have 'a natural sense' that drives us to be what we are, to do what we do, and to pursue objectives that bring meaning to our lives. In this constant search for meaning, people program their lives considering a myriad of purposes and projects aimed at satisfying their existence.

In the first verses of the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon, (the preacher), introduces us to the reality that worrying so much for the things of this world doesn't give true meaning to life.

I. Although people worry, nothing changes (Ecclesiastes 1:1-11)

Solomon was a person, who the Bible says had it all: wisdom, power, riches, honor, reputation and most importantly, God's favor (1 Kings 3:7-15). He was also the one who spoke about the final void that comes through seeking everything this world has to offer. He tried to destroy the trust that people had in their own efforts, abilities and righteousness, and direct it towards commitment to God as the only reason to live.

At that time, there was a common belief that only the good prospered and bad suffered. But such a conviction proved false in the biblical writer's own life. Faced with this reality, this king analyzed everything he had done, and almost everything, seemed to be nonsense, mere meaningless folly (v.2). King Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes after He tried everything and accomplished a lot, only to find that nothing but God had made him happy (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Jesus said in Matthew:22-34 that we should devote our special attention to things that aren't going to be destroyed, that no one can steal and that don't age. We shouldn't work so hard for the things of this world to the degree that we are its slaves. We live in a materialistic society where many strive for material goods. Such people spend their lives

gaining treasure, only to die and have to give it all up. Their longing to accumulate and what they can acquire with their gains, become more important than their surrender to God and other spiritual matters.

What we seek after in material things absorbs time and energy just thinking about it. We need to avoid falling into the trap of materialism because the love of money is the root of all evils (1 Timothy 6:10). Ask: In all sincerity, is God our Master, or are we slaves to materialism? What mostly occupies our thoughts, time and efforts?

Planning for tomorrow is time well spent, but toil for tomorrow is wasted time. Sometimes it's difficult to see the difference between the two. Planning is thinking ahead of time about goals, steps to take, dates etc., and then trusting in God's direction for the outcomes. When done right, this will take some of our stress away.

Those who work slavishly for things, on the other hand, are assaulted by fear, and it's difficult for them to trust God. We shouldn't let our plans for betterment interfere with our relationship with God. We shouldn't let our quest for tomorrow affect our personal communion with God. The words spoken by King Solomon put our faith to the test by challenging us to find the true and lasting meaning of life, which is to be found only in God.

If we carefully examine our lives, as did Solomon, we'll see how important communion and service to the Lord is when compared with materialistic options. Maybe God is asking us to think once more about the purpose and direction of our lives, following Solomon's example in Ecclesiastes.

Questions:

- What's the reason that material goods don't bring constant satisfaction in life (v.3)?
- Is there a situation in your life that makes you worry excessively? Reflect on its causes and how you can overcome it (v.8).

II. Fame and power don't bring lasting meaning to life (Ecclesiastes 1:12-18)

Solomon was famous because of his great wisdom. If the answers for the apparent vanities of life could be found through wisdom, Solomon was the one who could do it. The wisdom of this king was a divine gift. When God offered him whatever he wanted, Solomon asked for wisdom, especially that of leading the people of God (1 Kings 3:5-28). The Lord granted Solomon's request and made him so wise that he wrote thousands of proverbs. Likewise, he was considered the wisest of all men of his day (1 Kings 4:29-34).

A. The Dissatisfaction of Fame and Power (vv. 12-15)

The Preacher (Solomon) reflected on his dissatisfaction regarding the fame and power that wisdom bestows. This way of understanding life is natural for anyone who seeks worldly answers without considering eternal perspectives. Solomon was like those who seek wisdom instead of seeking the God who governs eternity. This wise king claimed that he had devoted himself from the heart to know wisdom (v.13), which had resulted in affliction of spirit - "*a chasing after the wind*" (v.14). The repeated and intense search for wisdom brought no final meaning. The solution wasn't to think harder and be the greatest investigator, because everything was still affliction of spirit.

As the Preacher understood more of life in the world, the greater was his despair. The more he learned, the more he realized that he didn't know much. And the more he knew, and the more fame and power he acquired, he also became more aware of the sadness of the life.

B. Recognition for Fame and Power Only brings Pain (vv. 16-18)

Solomon was frustrated and annoyed when he realized the outcome of his science and wisdom. There is value in seeking a healthier, happier and more prosperous life. It helps to be recognized. Many lives would be much better if they sought wisdom. But if this excludes a true appreciation of eternity and of our responsibilities in relation to God, this aspiration has no true answer to give to solve the insignificance of life. It only shows us how to live better in a meaningless life.

Jesus was also tempted to achieve fame and power. In Matthew 4:5-10, Satan tempted him twice on this issue; on the one hand to achieve fame and recognition as people would see the angels hold him up as he jumped off the pinnacle of the temple, and on the other hand, to have power over the earthly kingdoms if he prostrated and worshipped Satan. Jesus didn't agree because he knew that the only valid thing was doing the will of God. So, as Solomon discovered, fame and power don't give meaning to life.

God places within us the desire and feeling of need to search for meaning and fulfillment in our lives so that we know Him as the "true source of meaning". As Augustine wrote about God: "... because you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you" (Cardona Castro, Francisco Luis (translator). Confessions I. Spain: Editorial Olmak Trade, 2013, p.7).

Questions:

- Do you think that believers shouldn't be famous (v.16)? Comment.
- What do you think about the relationship between the desire for fame, recognition and social media 'likes' (v.16)?

III. Pleasures, Riches, Goods and Wisdom do not give Meaning to Life (Ecclesiastes 2:1-23)

It's interesting that more than 2,300 years ago, Solomon clearly spoke words full of realism about life even today (Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:23). He concluded that hedonism is not a sensible path for anyone. As so many people do today, King Solomon tried everything: knowledge, fun, drink, sumptuous properties, servants, money, women and, in short, all kinds of pleasures ("*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure*" (Ecclesiastes 2:10a). However, he wasn't satisfied.

The Spanish psychiatrist Enrique Rojas makes an analysis of our society and the man of the end of the twentieth century saying thus: "It is a society, to a certain extent, that is ill, and from it emerges the light man, a subject that bears a nihilistic tetralogy: hedonism-consumerism-permissiveness-relativity, in a frantic race to find meaning in life" (Rojas, Enrique. The light man: A life without values. Argentina: Editorial Planeta Argentina, 2000, p.11).

For many, the question is "how can I have a good time?", and so, they justify enjoyment and pleasure at all costs, in other words, what they get is, "hedonism without borders." Hedonism becomes the law itself of people's behavior. It's pleasure above all, as well as reaching progressively higher levels of well-being, considering consumerism as a value. Permissiveness is the code and relativity, its natural daughter. As a result, tolerance is endless, resulting in sheer indifference.

Now, it's not a question of claiming that enjoying life is bad and that it's not good to try to enjoy ourselves (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26). But we should enjoy ourselves considering our relationship with the Lord. When we do it like this, not only will we find meaning in life, but also we'll enjoy life in its broadest and truest dimension: a life lived in the love of the Creator and Savior who sustains us, and who at the

same time makes possible a love relationship towards our neighbors.

Christians must learn from the experience of the Preacher, and as we observe the people of our time who return dissatisfied after trying everything. We must strongly reject hedonism; it's 'anti-gospel'. It's 'another gospel' of false promises of happiness, creating a vulnerable and empty human being, hungry for truth and authentic love.

Happiness doesn't come just by enjoying ourselves, or owning stuff, which many times, as in the case of the Preacher, only leads to further frustration. Laughter is deceiving (v.2). Solomon said *"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards"* (v.4). He tells us *"I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart"* (v.8).

Solomon directed his search for the meaning of life as an experiment. First, he tried to go after pleasure. He started with big projects, bought slaves and won, amassed fortune, acquired singers, added many women to his harem, and he became the most important person in Jerusalem (vv. 4-9). But none of that gave him the satisfaction he was looking for. This makes us see that we must look beyond our activities to discover the reasons why we want to undertake them.

Questions:

- Is it bad for the Christian to feel pleasure (vv.1-3)? Comment.
- Is it wrong for a Christian to be rich (vv.4-9)? Explain.
- Is our goal in life to seek meaning, or to search for God who gives meaning to life?

IV. Pleasing God Brings True Meaning to life (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26)

A. Satisfaction in Life is a Blessing from God (v.24)

¿Could it be that in verse 24 Solomon was recommending that we make life a big irresponsible party? The answer is 'no'; but this verse challenges us to feel satisfaction in what we do now, and enjoy life because it comes from the hand of God. The true joy in life arises only when we continue following God's principles and commandments. Without this, searching for satisfaction is a lost cause. The people that know how to enjoy life are those who take each day as a gift from God, thank Him, and serve Him throughout their life.

The Bible says: *"There is nothing better ..."* (v.24a). This is a positive appreciation of life, not complicated by ambition or relative values, but a humble life. Nothing could be further from a hedonistic position. The Bible encourages us to live

in a humble way and not to seek pleasure for pleasure's sake. Living humbly is a gift from God.

We should be thankful and enjoy God's good provisions. *"Eat and drink"* (vv.24b-25) signify the provision and contentment that God wants for all, and that true satisfaction comes from His grace. Verse 26a says: *"To the person who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness..."* These three blessings that God gives us when we live a life that pleases Him: Wisdom is the ability to live, knowledge brings understanding and experience and finally joy.

B. When we please God, our lives will be Full of Meaning (v.26)

The Preacher pointed out the way we can have true meaning in our lives: we get it when we please God. The only way to find satisfaction in this life is to follow the Lord's principles and commandments. When we die, everything we own will stay here. So why bother to strive so much for earthly things? In the end, when we have passed on, all we have acquired might even fall into foolish hands. God allows us to have things to enjoy, but we need to live in the present, not thinking about how to get more and more as if we'll never die. We need to be grateful and thankful and be faithful to God. We'll find joy and satisfaction as we seek to please Him. It's better to seek to please Him at all times and with all of our heart.

Questions:

- What are the blessings of God that you're receiving at this time (v.24)?
- What does it mean to be pleasing to God in the context of Ecclesiastes (v. 26)?

Conclusion

Someone could achieve everything desirable in life: wisdom, fame, riches, power and human glory, as did King Solomon. However, this won't bring true satisfaction and, on the contrary, may lead to grief. The pleasure of having the goods of this world is ephemeral; and no matter how rich, or important someone is, they will continue to be empty and without meaning in life. We find true meaning when we know and believe in Christ. He gives us abundant life and adds everything we need in this world to be whole and complete. Only when we seek to do His will, His Kingdom and His righteousness, can we lead a life full of meaning and purpose, and satisfaction.



A time for everything

Macario Balcázar (Peru)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 3:1-15

Memory Verses: “That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God” Ecclesiastes 3:13.

Lesson aim: To learn that everything in life has its time and that we will have to give an account to God for how we use it.

Introduction

“The most expensive things in life are: a waste of time and words” (Vila, Samuel. Encyclopedia of moral and religious citations. Editorial CLIE, 1976, p.417). Is time important? Yes. Does time cost? Almost everyone will say yes, but not always, it depends on the way each one sees time or lives it. We all know about time: it rushes, brings joys, sadnesses, and other characteristics that are typical of experiences in different circumstances.

The writer of Ecclesiastes was also concerned about time, and he left us truths that today we want to examine very carefully. Although the Bible speaks of time in other passages, Ecclesiastes is unique in the way the writer approaches it.

I. There is a Time for Everything in Life (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

Ecclesiastes 3:1 says: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.” We could exchange the word ‘time’ for ‘moment’ in these verses to enhance the meaning. In this first verse, which introduces the content of the first eight verses, the writer examines different issues where there are special moments of time to define them.

A. What does ‘everything’ mean?

It’s easy to answer ... ‘everything’ means everything. If the Bible says ‘everything’, then it’s everything. It refers to life events, and although not all people go through the same ones, we all have our experiences.

B. What is Time?

The thesaurus dictionary defines time as: “A system of those sequential relations that any event has to any other, as past, present, or future; indefinite and continuous duration regarded as that in which events succeed one another”

(<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/time>).

The Message version of Ecclesiastes 3:1 says: “There’s an opportune time to do things, a right time for everything on the earth”. This seems to be the way the writer is referring to ‘time.’ In this lesson, this term is used as the exact moment when something happens. For instance: time to have breakfast, time to brush our teeth, time to rest, etc.

C. The things the Preacher listed (vv. 2-8)

1. *A time to be born:* This is the reality of every human being in this world.
2. *A time to die:* We all go there, unless Christ come back before we die.
3. *A time to plant:* We plant crops and flowers etc.; but we can also plant ideas, projects and actions.
4. *A time to uproot what was planted:* Harvest time.
5. *A time to kill:* Animals to eat, or fish for subsistence.
6. *A time to heal:* We do it in certain moments.
7. *A time to tear down:* The bad in us, what is useless, what threatens life, destroying bad habits and pernicious customs.
8. *A time to build:* The family, our homes, the church, our profession, society, etc.
9. *A time to weep:* There are many occasions: at birth, when we lose a loved one, when we regret our sins and mistakes, and when our joy is overflowing.
10. *A time to laugh:* They say that laughter is the best medicine.
11. *A time to mourn:* Grief for loved ones who have died, for those lost in war, for those who left without us being able to say goodbye.
12. *A time to dance:* The Jews danced at religious feasts.

13. *A time to gather stones:* There were a lot of stones in Israel. When the armies wanted to harm a nation or people, they spread more stones in their crops. Also, stones placed together make fences and walls for protection.
14. *A time to scatter stones:* This happens when the fields are ploughed in preparation for sowing the new crop
15. *A time to embrace:* How necessary this is! Therapists prescribe lots of hugs to encourage and reactivate self-esteem. Human affection needs to be expressed with lots of hugs.
16. *A time to refrain from embracing:* This is also necessary, since we cannot always hug someone.
17. *A time to search:* In first place seeking God; secondly, the good of all; thirdly, looking for lost things. It also seeks to improve human relations in all aspects.
18. *A time to throw away:* We all throw away missed opportunities, we sometime throw away our friends, goods or money.
19. *A time to keep:* We need to save our money, protect our loved ones, and of course keep our relationship with God, our families and our neighbors.
20. *A time to tear:* Breaking things may be necessary sometimes; but above we have to break with sin in all its forms, with bad friendships, with harmful practices, with habits and customs that are harmful and don't honor God.
21. *A time to mend:* Just as we mend torn clothes, we must also mend broken relationships, restore those who are broken-hearted.
22. *A time to be silent:* We generally talk far too much. Silence can be a virtue. Proverb 17:28 says: "*Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent, and discerning if they hold their tongues.*"
23. *A time to speak:* Let's learn to speak when is necessary: "*A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!*" (Proverb 15:23).
24. *A time to love:* Our lives should be full of loving God, we love our parents, our spouse, our children, friends.
25. *A time to hate:* We should hate sin, bad habits, perverse customs, bad words etc.
26. *A time for war:* We don't want it, but it's a historical reality. Any war is bad and harmful. If we have to live it, let us seek God's direction. And remember that the Christian always lives in war against the forces of the Evil One (Ephesians 6:12).
27. *A time of peace:* Peace with God is a great blessing (Romans 5:1). Many people live without peace, at war with God, for not submitting to God.
- We could add some more things: Time to study and time to stop studying; time to travel and time to stay home; time to read the Bible and time to meditate on life; time to turn on the cell phone and time to turn it off; time to check Facebook and time to close it; time to talk on WhatsApp or Messenger; and time to pray, etc.

Questions:

- What does "everything" mean?
- Give three different ideas about time.

II. All work has limited value (Ecclesiastes 3:9-10)

A. What different versions of the Bible say:

1. The New International Version translates this verse as: "What do workers gain from their toil? I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race,"
2. The Message version says: "But in the end, does it really make a difference what anyone does? I've had a good look at what God has given us to do—busywork, mostly."
3. The Living Bible says: "What does one really get from hard work? I have thought about this in connection with all the various kinds of work God has given to mankind."

B. Three thoughts to consider

1. God has given us work to do. Before the fall, God had already commanded Adam and Eve to work (Genesis 2:15). If it weren't for work, I think we would go crazy. Work is what keeps us sane and useful. It's God who gives us strength, energy and intelligence to work. Work is based on God Himself, who always works (John 5:17). There are good and bad jobs; those who build and those that destroy. Christians should honor God with honest, upright and faithful work.
2. Work causes fatigue. It's unavoidable. Although it's also invigorating and motivating, work is tiring. We get tired working. And sometimes working is risky, for example, those who work in mines, in drains, in cleaning city streets, doctors, nurses, firefighters, etc. They can get sick, have accidents or die as a result. A good attitude can help make work less tiring. Another issue has to do with working conditions that employers or managers provide for their workers. Christians Entrepreneurs must demonstrate their profession of faith by seeking the best working conditions for their employees.

3. The benefit of work is temporary. All work has a benefit or consequence. We expect the result of work to be pleasant, but it's not always like this. Many have reaped abundant results from their work, however, everything is temporary. That is, while we live, the benefit of work helps us, but all our achievements and assets acquired in this world will be left behind when we die (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Work gives us temporary results, but what we can do for our soul will bring eternal results (Mark 8:36-37). So, let's work for our soul first, and then for the earthly things.

Questions:

- Knowing that God established work as a human task, imagine what the world would be like if there was no work.
- What is the best benefit that you have had from your work?

III. Everything has a divine purpose (Ecclesiastes 3:11-15)

Our Creator is the great designer of everything there is in the universe. Few have contemplated outside the earth's atmosphere the vastness of the universe and how beautiful the Earth is from space. But what we see around us testifies with a 'loud voice' how wonderful everything is that the Lord has made (Psalm 19:1-4).

A. "He has made everything beautiful in its time" (v.11a)

Beauty is one of the divine delights. The earth is beautiful. Created beings, starting with humans, are beautiful as are plants, flowers and everything created by God. Although there are some of these elements whose beauty can be questioned, God made everything beautiful in its time. It's key that everything has its time.

Christians must be very respectful of time fixed by the Lord for each stage of life. So that childhood, adolescence, youth, maturity and old age should be enjoyed; everything is beautiful in its time. The Christian life on Earth is beautiful. It's not a life of privations, but of freedom in Christ, finely directed and with the beautiful purpose of honoring the Creator

B. "He has also set eternity in the human heart" (v.11b)

Human beings are conscious of eternity. All races, cultures and human groups are conscious of the future, and of what might transcend death. This is because we all come from a single trunk, from the initial pair who were

created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Every human being can respond to the call of salvation in Christ Jesus. Everyone can be saved if they believe in Christ, confess their sins and ask for His forgiveness (John 3:15-16; Romans 10:9).

C. Let's enjoy what God gives us (vv.12-13)

Being aware of the eternal, and living to honor the Creator, we can enjoy life on earth. The Preacher said: "I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live" (v.12). Doing good is what Christians always seek to do; they cannot do otherwise. If not, they wouldn't be true Christians. Our first delight on earth, then, is doing good. Something else we can enjoy is to eat and drink so that we remain healthy. Regrettably, many people just live to eat (often "junk food"); this affects their health negatively. Others drink alcoholic beverages which cause them harm, or take drugs which are seriously harmful.

We can also enjoy the result of all our work. We can see how our children triumph, serve in the church and see it grow, build or buy a house, car, acquire electrical gadgets, visit tourist places, etc. All those things increase our healthy pleasure as long as we always put God first (Matthew 6:33).

D. Let us remember that we'll give an account of everything (vv.14-15)

Life on earth is temporary; it's part of eternal time, barely a whisper. We'll each have to give an account to God of everything we have done (Hebrews 4:13; Revelation 20:11-12). Eternity is perpetual, earth is temporary. The Lord has made us to live forever. Let's live well so that when we're in front of Him, we'll be serene and happy, knowing that we'll be called into His wonderful presence in Heaven.

Questions:

- List ten beautiful things the Lord has made (v.11).
- Why do we always think ahead (v.11)?
- Human beings shy away from giving account for our actions. Why do you think this is so?

Conclusion

There is tranquility, serenity, peace and healthy delight in living life according to God's will. The affirmation of Preacher is as true now as it was yesterday. If we use the time we have been given well, we'll share in God's marvelous eternity next to Him.



God is the raison d'être of mankind

Daniel Ncuna (Equatorial Guinea)

Study passages: Ecclesiastes 3:16-19,22, 4:1

Memory Verse: "I also said to myself, As for humans, God tests them so that they may see that they are like the animals" Ecclesiastes 3:18.

Lesson aim: To understand that our lives here on earth are transitory and we need to keep our eyes on the Lord and what He asks of us.

Introduction

Ecclesiastes is a profound book just like Job and Proverbs and is part of Jewish wisdom literature. Some scholars believe that Ecclesiastes was read publicly at the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. So, it became so important that it was included among the books used on Jewish holidays. Samuel Schultz writes: "The author's emphasis on the enjoyment of life made the books of wisdom a proper reading in the annual seasonal amusement" (Schultz, Samuel J. *The Old Testament Speaks*. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1976, p.282).

Ecclesiastes is a book that talks about what is good and bad for human life here on earth. The Preacher often uses the expression 'under the sun.' Some of the author's reflections sometimes seem far-fetched and messy, but they can lead us to a thorough review the order of priorities in our lives. If it were possible to summarize the content of Ecclesiastes, we could say that it speaks fundamentally about people's search for meaning and satisfaction in things without considering God, the creator of all things. The conclusion is that everything that life without God offers is vanity (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

Our study passage focuses on the fact that whatever we humans do, we'll be judged by God, and physical death will overtake us. Based on this statement, we can affirm that as disciples of Christ, our greatest satisfaction consists in having a meaningful relationship with God without relying on pleasures or material things that the world offers us. To understand this statement in the context of Ecclesiastes, we must reflect carefully on the following points:

I. Wickedness Exists and it will be Judged (Ecclesiastes 3:16-19)

In one of my classes as an associate professor of the course of Theology at an interdenominational biblical institute in the city of Bata where I currently reside, one of my students asked me: "Professor... where does evil come from, according to the Bible?" I replied: "According to the information that I have and my little research, I find that the Bible doesn't explain to us with clarity about the origin of evil. On the contrary, it takes the existence of evil as a reality". Ecclesiastes 3:16 says, *"And I saw something else under the sun: In the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there."*

The Preacher, according to his research on life experiences, affirmed that there is impiety, "a rebellious attitude that opposes subjection to the knowledge of God in a conscious way, refusing to own Him as creator, sustainer and savior" (Vila, Samuel and Escuin, Santiago. *New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. USA: Editorial CLIE, 1985, p.521). The result of this life condition consists in dishonest or corrupt practices carried out by people in their daily lives. However, we cannot explain the origin of evil before its eruption in the life of humanity,

I think that the Bible does offer information about the cause of evil in human life (Genesis 3:3-8). Adam and Eve, making use of free choice, decided to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that God had warned them not to eat (Genesis 2:17). This was a reality that affected their relationship with God, their relationships with others, and their relationship with creation.

The Preacher found in his investigations that there was evil, corruption and injustice in the world; he didn't take time to explain its origin, but rather, he took its existence for granted in the social context of his time. If we could compare the world of the writer of Ecclesiastes and ours today, we would find few differences in terms of social and moral reality.

In our countries, corruption reigns in the judicial courts. Justice rules today in favor of the one with the highest money bribe offered to the judge. Governments lie to keep from being discovered. The righteous suffer violations of their rights frequently. Just like the Preacher said, no matter where you look, evil and corruption are present. Some of the conclusions to which the Preacher arrived are as follows:

a) *"As for humans, God tests them..."* (v.18).

b) Through these experiences, God shows us how fragile and fleeting our life is like the animals (v.18).

Regarding Ecclesiastes 3:19, some commentators argue that this verse doesn't teach that human are beings like animals, but rather clarifies that in some aspects, man has no advantage over animals. William MacDonald says: "... just like death comes to beasts, so it also comes to man. The same breath each has, and at the moment of death is cut off ..." (William MacDonald Biblical Commentary. USA: Editorial CLIE, 2004, p.382).

Questions:

- What is your attitude towards the injustices that some people suffer daily (v.16)?
- According to Ecclesiastes 3:18-19, how are men and beasts alike?

II. Violence and Oppression Exists (Ecclesiastes 4:1)

The writer of Ecclesiastes took a look at the situation around him and expressed what he had seen with the following descriptive words: *"Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors—and they have no comforter"* (Ecclesiastes 4:1). Many people can talk about violence and oppression from the armchair of their houses. Others can debate it from a luxurious office. Many others may feel sorry from afar for those who suffer violence or oppression. However, it's very different to suffer these things in one's own flesh.

The preacher's description in this passage is something that is lived out in my continent (Africa) day and night. It's a reality that is lived in my country every second. I also believe that the same things happen in other latitudes of the world. The law that we should uphold on many of our rights as citizens in Africa is just "wet paper." In other words, it's useless, not considered.

Religious, economic, political and social rights of citizens are trampled on without anyone saying anything. Those who dare raise their voice run the risk of suffering retaliation by the oppressors and executioners of the predominant system. A few months ago, my wife and I went to the hospital for a medical appointment with a dentist. After going through the hospital procedures, they took me to the office. The specialist told me that he had to put a filling in the tooth that had a problem. To treat the nerves, they gave me anesthesia in the place where the dental work was to be done. While working, the dentist always asked me: "Does it hurt?" My answer was always "No" because I didn't feel anything. During the time I was in that room, I was comparing my insensitivity to pain, thanks to anesthesia, with the moral callousness of human beings, thanks to the evolution of sin. It seems that morally, human beings have been anesthetized because few seek to identify with the oppressed, to help the needy, or comfort the one who cries (v.4). Notice what the Preacher said: *"... I saw the tears of the oppressed—and they have no comforter."* The implication is that this condition shouldn't be considered as a permanent situation. There should be comforters. Soon the Lord will come to judge people's actions, good or bad (Rev. 22:12).

On the other hand, as disciples of Christ, despite the difficulties and injustices that we suffer daily, we must not lose sight of the mighty hope we have in Christ Jesus. Hebrews says: *"Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God"* (Hebrews 12:2). John also stated the following: *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). We see that in the eyes of the Preacher, the human scene was sad with no deliverer. Today we can approach by faith the One who love us and gave himself for us, our Lord Jesus Christ: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

The earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ was fundamentally based on compassion. He preached the gospel out of compassion; he healed the sick out of compassion; he cast out demons out of compassion; he fed the people out of compassion; and much more.

The Bible says that Jesus viewed people as sheep who had no shepherd (Mark 6:34). The disciple of Christ must be aware that although we suffer hardships, oppression, and injustice today, we aren't alone in the midst of these crises. The Lord as a mighty giant is at our side and will soon work on our behalf: *"But the LORD is with me like a mighty warrior; so, my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten"* (Jeremiah 20:11). All unjust human acts, including abuse by fellowmen, will be judged by God.

Questions:

- Briefly describe a situation of violence with which you have identified, and mention why.
- What would you do to stop the above from happening?

III. There is Something to be Happy about: being Happy with Work (Ecclesiastes 3:22)

Generally in Equatorial Guinea, when we greet someone and are asked: "How are you?" the majority usually answer: "Holding on to life," or "Enduring misery." Almost no one is happy or satisfied with what they own. My cultural reality leads me to deep reflection when I hear the affirmation of the writer of Ecclesiastes saying that here under the sun there is something we can be happy about: work. The Bible says, *"So I saw that there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work, because that is their lot. For who can bring them to see what will happen after them?"* (v.22). This verse leads us to become aware that we can enjoy our existence here on earth or under the sun by taking pleasure in our daily activities. After all, what we do with all our hearts make us happy, even temporarily.

The Preacher concluded that man can be content despite oppressions and injustices that surround us, specifying that what we do, i.e. our jobs, can be this key element. Work is defined as "the investment of energy and time in a productive activity with a specific purpose" (Taylor et al. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.697). The life of the person here below the sun is fleeting. Our lives are like mist that soon fades

away (James 4:14). That's why the writer of Ecclesiastes encouraged us to be content with our work activities, and rejoice in them.

The study passage helps us put work into a correct theological perspective, since many Christians consider that work is a curse from God. I have heard many people say that the Bible says that human beings will eat with the sweat from their foreheads. Intrinsically, they relate the work or investment of energy and time in a productive activity with the curse. An in-depth look at the biblical text from Genesis cannot support this proposition.

The Holy Scriptures teach that work is part of God's plan for us. This is one of the ways that we can actively participate in God's command regarding the created: *"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'"* (Genesis 1:28).

Now work is done in pain, not because it was God's plan, but because of their disobedience. Genesis 3:17 says: *"To Adam he said, 'Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat from it, cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.'"* So, the Lord doesn't curse work, but the place where we perform our productive labors, that is, the land.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was recognized for His work. He was identified as the carpenter of Nazareth on several occasions (Mark 6:3). Despite all the misfortunes that surround us, we can be happy with our work as long as we keep God in our perspectives.

Questions:

- Regardless of the kind of productive activity you do, do you view your work as a blessing or curse from God? Comment.
- How is work part of God's plan for man? Explain.

Conclusion

Everything that life offers to the human being under the sun is fleeting. Our existence here is like a mist that will soon fade. So, if we want to succeed as human beings, we must live putting the Creator God as the center of our existence, because at the end of the day, He will judge us all.



Life's Vain Behaviors

José Flavio Martínez (Mexico)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 4:4-16

Memory Verse: "Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind" Ecclesiastes 4:6.

Lesson aim: To understand that selfishness deprives us of the companionship of others, making our life lonely, vain and insecure; and that true satisfaction of life is found only by living in community, within the fear of God.

Introduction

Wisdom, in its many manifestations, was considered to be a gift from God. For example, Joseph was considered to be one of the wisest men in Egypt because he interpreted dreams and was a good administrator (Genesis 41:37-39). Joshua was said to have been filled with the spirit of wisdom after Moses laid hands on him to be successor as leader of the people (Deuteronomy 34:9).

King Solomon was wise, and because of the political decisions that he made, his nation attained honor, goods, power, and was respected among all nations. This king's wisdom was also seen in his ability to administer justice and in the abundance of proverbs he composed. Although these manifestations of wisdom are linked to human participation, however in religious estimation of antiquity they had their origin in God himself.

Israel's cultural and religious heritage grew through the centuries in an empirical way. The elders were the representatives of popular wisdom that was inherited through the generations. In the time of Solomon, circles of wise men were formed in his court, who echoed the great wisdom of the monarch of Jerusalem. In I Kings 4:29-34, it's said of him: "*God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt... And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations... From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.*" Studying this lesson will provide us with a little glimpse of the preacher's great wisdom.

I. The Cost of Success (Ecclesiastes 4:4-6)

Solomon noted the origin of peculiar problems in people who do well, and included all those who work diligently and whose efforts are crowned with success. They often become large and prosperous, but this arouses envy and opposition. Others, seeing the afflictions of an active life, wait foolishly for more satisfaction from laziness and leisure.

A. "...I saw that all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another..." (v.4)

A contemporary way of referring to envy or jealousy, which is very old, is the concept of 'emulation.' We understand this as the feeling that leads us to imitate the actions of others, trying to match them or even outdo them. The passage from I Corinthians 13 presents a good example of these human attitudes when they lack love. Among the values of the Kingdom, rivalry is not acceptable; neither is jealousy or envy of other people's successes. "The author exaggerates the place of competition and envy as motives of life. These statements are, at best, half-truths. Whoever believes these dangerous falsehoods should look further and live better. Why is it that there are people who are driven by the spur of competing to achieve, rather than bypassing the millions who work just to meet the basic needs of those who love?" (Chapman, Purkiser, Wolf, and Harper. Comment Biblical Beacon, Volume III. USA: CNP, 2010, p.420).

When others envy us because of our own achievements, it hurts; and striving to achieve something only for the purpose of outdoing our neighbor is worse. Both are vanity and affliction of spirit. But of course, we need to dedicate ourselves to work so that as families we can live with dignity. In the philosophy of humanism, everyone competes for food, shelter, work, position, honor

and control! Power without God makes everything look right! In our societies we need to satisfy our egos. We are encouraged to be envious and to take advantage of others to reach our goals. People exploit their neighbors! Life without God is a life full of competition and unsatisfied lust, regardless of the price that has to be paid.

B. “Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves” (v.5).

Idle hands lead to mindless self-destruction as see also in Isaiah 9:20. Lack of effort leads to destruction, but effort alone doesn't have eternal benefits! The fool doesn't feel the need to emulate anyone; he's not moved by the example of others. He's starving, but stays with his arms crossed (Proverb 24:30-3. 4). Laziness is not acceptable either; it leads to ruin (Ecclesiastes 4:5). This may mean that the lazy people destroy themselves or maybe that they live off their relatives.

C. “Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil...” (v.6).

There must be balance and contentment in our job. The Israelites had learned in their history that what God gives is always enough (Exodus 16:17-18). They knew that sometimes there a distance between what we want and what God provides (Psalm 37:16). The fear of the Lord and righteousness add immense value to the little we may have.

Wisdom assumes a balance, avoiding both extremes: *“One handful of peaceful repose is better than two fistfuls of worried work...”* (Ecclesiastes 4:6, The Message). Our Lord would have supported this advice that goes against extreme activity and eager in the effort to make a material profit (Matthew 6:25-34). The ability to take a quiet time between the stresses and demands of life has power to heal and sustain. We call it relaxation, becoming aware of the blessed, and permanent rest. When we are out of balance, this verse tells us that we're *“chasing after the wind”* ... something impossible.

Questions:

- What should the Christian's attitude be towards the success of others (v.4)?
- What reasons does the Christian have to live satisfied (v.6)?

II. The cost of a lonely life (Eccl. 4:7-12)

A. “Again I saw something meaningless under the sun... There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother...” (vv.7-8).

For workaholics, work becomes the goal and purpose of their lives! Work is their god. The more they have, they more they want. They work so hard at it that they don't enjoy what they already have. Selfishness is the cause of this evil. The selfish person is not interested in anyone else. They're only interested in taking care of themselves. Work, work, and more work, and no time for rest and relaxation for them and their employees. They never think they have enough for their commitments and their family.

Many are so involved in the world that they're depriving themselves of the chance to enjoy this life, and most importantly, eternal life. Distant relatives or the strangers who inherit the wealth of people like this, generally aren't grateful. The irony is that we often see people who profess to be followers of the Lord who, although being rich, became poor (2 Cor. 8:9). These people have an insatiable love and greed for money, which turns them away from faith in God (1 Tim. 6:10).

Ecclesiastes 4:8 says: *“There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth...”* In many ways, riches without God become a curse. Soon they control us! Many of those who are rich in earthly stuff never seem to have enough. Do we need more wealth and possessions to find true happiness and lasting gains? We need God. We were created by Him and for Him. Outside of the Lord, there is no true purpose or permanent joy!

B. “Two are better than one ...” (v.9)

Almost any burden can be borne if there is a friend with whom to share it. Solomon clearly saw that great evils in life occur when a person is alone. To work and have to inspire others and have purpose in our work is certainly hard work. For life to be satisfying, we need to find a valid answer to the following question: *“Who do I work for?”* The answer must be beyond our needs, but needs to include the family, serving needy people, and fulfilling the will of God for our lives.

C. The Advantage of Fellowship (vv.10-12)

Solomon observed that being with others brings success. He demonstrated it with three examples: *“if they fall ..., if they sleep together ... if one is attacked”* (vv.10-12). We have been created to live in community. Two are better than one because they get more out of everything they undertake. Collaborative services bring fruit.

One of the greatest contemporary human problems is loneliness. In today's world, loneliness is a huge problem. Many people live in huge urban centers of millions of people where many people live alone.

They meet up with all the rush-hour pushing and shoving, but they are still alone as they go to work..

1. *"If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up"* (v.10) One of Diego Rivera's most famous paintings, the 'Flower Carrier,' depicts a woman carrying a huge basket of flowers. At first sight we see only the woman, but a good observer would see the man behind her back, helping her lift the heavy load. Solomon considered that we must support each other so as not to lose heart.
2. *"A cord of three strands is not quickly broken..."* (v.12) Human companionship and cooperation provide mutual help (v.10), warmth (v.11) and defense (v.12). This proverb suggests that if two are better than one, three is even better. For one to have friends, we must be friendly. Successful people rarely live in isolation. In these times of insecurity, it's not advisable for a person to go alone to certain public places. They always need to be accompanied by another person. We also have big problems of security in relation to robberies and violence in streets, especially in big cities. Frequently, the victim is the person who walks alone by certain places. Loneliness makes people vulnerable and defenseless.

The self-centered person will not find satisfaction in this life. An individual working alone could find some satisfaction for a time, but eventually, he will tire of that monotony. This also applies to traveling or playing sports. Where there are two closely united in holy love and fellowship, Christ will come to them by His Spirit. Then there is a triple cord. Solomon made the discovery that trying to live only for oneself, alone, is not the best way to be. We need friends, someone to accompany us and help us. That's to say, we can do many things together with other people that we can't do on our own.

Questions:

- What are some valid purposes for why we work (v.8)?
- What are some advantages of collaborating with others?

III. Wisdom and Folly (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16)

Verse 13 says: *"Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning."* A wise boy is better than an old king and a fool. On the other hand, it teaches us that poverty is not an obstacle to wisdom. However, there is nothing, not even the experiences of the wise young ruler, that will always be positive, as the following verses explain: *"I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind"* (vv.15-16). The above may refer to historical incidents (possibly Joseph and Pharaoh, or David and Saul). Nevertheless, the whole point of verse 16 is inconsistency. No permanent help can come from politics. Fallen humanity cannot be ruled in blessing and peace. Selfishness, corruption, and desire permeates everything!

Just as popular enthusiasm goes on, it goes out, or simply passes to the next generation and is forgotten. The glory of a moment in time turns into *"Chasing after the wind"* (v.16). Sometimes a president begins his term surrounded by popularity, but as time goes by, through the wear and tear of the work of government, the level of acceptance decreases until it reaches the point where a part of the population considers that this government is bad for the nation, leading to national decline. People are never comfortable and satisfied for a long time. People are fond of change. This is nothing new.

Questions:

- Why is it necessary, even in adulthood, to listen to the advice of others (v. 13)?
- Why don't the leaders always have the permanent recognition of the people (vv. 15-16)?

Conclusion

The Preacher analyzed different forms of bad deeds carried out under the sun. He described them as *"Vanity"*, *"affliction of spirit"* and *"hard work"*. His reflections have a contemporary scope. Our world today is full of abuses due to the greed and rivalries that only end in injustice. But true strength comes for the believers who always maintain their personal communion with the Lord. Following God is what brings true satisfaction.



Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness

Arturo Gasca (Uruguay)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Memory Verse: "Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, fear God" Ecclesiastes 5:7.

Lesson aim: To understand what true worship is, both collectively and individually.

Introduction

Far from being a book of pessimism, in Ecclesiastes, the preacher is reflecting about life on earth (under the sun) and its purpose: a call to fear God. For the Preacher, a life without God is a life full of wind (vanity). He confronts his readers with three empirical truths: (1) Time inevitably passes like the blink of an eye; (2) No one escapes death regardless of their socio-economic condition or how godly they might be (apart from those believers who will be spared death by the coming of the Lord); and (3) life is unpredictable, since the righteous are not always immediately rewarded for their deeds and the wicked don't always immediately suffer. The circumstances of life are random and don't always make logical sense.

In spite of all this, the Preacher invites us to worship God and enjoy the simple things in life with gratitude. Ecclesiastes doesn't project an idealized vision of life, where the righteous do well and the wicked do badly. What it seeks to expose is, "it is what it is," and the preacher makes a clear differentiation between the earth and heaven, between us humans and the divine.

For the biblical writer, humans are neither good nor bad, they are simply human, corrupted by sin. Corruption has affected their way of relating with their peers and with creation at all levels. Thus, we're led to conclude that peace and righteousness are built out of a relationship with God. This relationship is not random, it's established by certain guidelines (based on Hebrew thinking) where the central point is worship and adoration. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 is treating this theme.

To understand the meaning of worship in our passage, we need to consider the Hebrew Old Testament point of view. In Hebrew, the word used to refer to the worship of the Father is *hishtachavah* which means "to bow down, or surrender homage" (Judit Targarona Borrás, Dictionary Hebrew-Spanish. Spain: Ed. Riopiedras, 1995). This definition speaks of a corporal expression that expresses an inner disposition of devotion, reverential fear and respect. But that is not all. The same word is also used to refer to sacrificial worship. When Abraham said to his servants: "... *Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*" (Genesis 22:5). He wasn't saying they were going to sing some songs, but instead, they were going to offer a ritual sacrifice. That's to say, worship in Hebrew thought includes all service done for God, both the sacrifices and any attitude of reverence.

In the New Testament, there is a reinterpretation of the concept of worship. Here, the word used for worship is *latreía*, which derives from the verb *latréuein*. The latter was used to designate someone that worked for pay or wages; that is, someone who gave his time and effort in exchange for a salary (Barclay, William. Commentary on New Testament, Volume VIII. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1997, p.71). Worship and adoration in the New Testament denote a permanent attitude. They refer to a life (time, energy, intelligence and resources) fully consecrated. This is the living sacrifice mentioned in Romans (12:1-2).

Having made these clarifications, let's go to the study from Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. Although it seems that this passage mainly warns us about making false promises (and it's true that it does), its ultimate goal is to establish guidelines for a correct worship of the eternal God. Even though we aren't in control of everything that happens under the sun, there will always be a human need to worship God.

I. Silence as an Expression of Worship (Ecclesiastes 5:1-3)

Silence is a recurring theme in Scripture. There are numerous warnings not to rush to speak, and the fool is usually identified for not knowing how to keep silent. In this passage (as in others), silence is a spiritual discipline in our relationship with God. In Ecclesiastes 5:1, it's possible to find an equivalent from Samuel's words to Saul: "...Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). Samuel placed obedience over senseless rituals. However, obedience is not possible without an authentic attitude of listening, of paying attention. We can disobey or obey badly. We are consecrating our will and our lives when we listen with a humble and willing heart to obey - that is worship.

In our church services and in our devotional life, it's very easy to say a lot: in praise, in prayer, testimonies, etc. In an almost imperceptible way, we make ourselves very important in our worship. For example, we sing the choruses that we like and move us. We pray for our needs, and at best we listen to the sermon, but if it's too long or too critical, if it doesn't entertain us, it probably doesn't seem like a good sermon. Most of the believers forget the sermons after the days go by. Even worse, sometimes we leave church because 'we feel that we don't receive anything.' Is this the meaning of worship? Adoration puts God at the center of worship. Everything points to Him. Our role in that service is that of observing. We have no choice but to admire God's grace, and be thankful.

It's difficult for believers to be silent; we prefer noise, loud prayers, sometimes even with shouting (which is not necessarily bad). But it's in silence that God also speaks to us, confronts us with His holiness and with our miseries (Psalm 37:7a). In privacy, our conversations with the Lord are often

only monologues: a verbiage of petitions and little thoughtful ritual praise formulas that don't come out of a heart captivated by the beauty, splendor and magnificence of that encounter with God. It seems that deep down, the only thing we seek is to appease our needs, turning worship into a coin exchange to obtain God's favor on our plans and projects.

But true worship is the opposite. It's about holding those plans and projects and looking for the will of the Eternal Father. He makes our lives what He wants, since they aren't ours, but His. Ecclesiastes 5:2 says: "*Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth...*" We hear the echo of this expression when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, saying: "... Our Father who are in heaven..." (Matthew 6:9). In this sentence, Christ identified each one's place in prayer: He said that the Father is "ours", that is, He is close, accessible. He is the Abba who loves us deeply, and He showed himself to humanity in the person of Christ. But immediately later, he reminded us too that God is in heaven, and is still the Creator of the universe, a just and mighty King and Judge.

In the same way, Ecclesiastes invites us to recognize our place in worship. We are creatures, and the end of everything created is to glorify God. To worship is not an act of deep kindness and pity of being human, but the necessary consequence of finding ourselves with the Creator God, and ultimately, that is why we were created.

Therefore, turning our worship into an act of adjusting God's will to ours is sacrilege. Of course, the Lord loves us, He cares for us and He even pampers us, but our attitude towards Him must always be of reverence. Can we surprise him with any promises we make? Is there anything we can offer Him that he doesn't already have? When we make a promise, do we make it out of devotion or as a simple act of exchange? What God wants is that we ask for things according to His Word, and if He blesses us by giving it to us, it's by pure grace and not by human merit. On the other hand, let's reflect on this: "Yes, we have already given our life to him in worship, what else do we have to offer Him?"

Questions:

- What do you understand by “the house of God”?
- Have you ever practiced silence as a spiritual discipline? This consists of a time where we don't speak; we are only silently reading and listening to His Word. Comment.

II. When Making Promises, we must take Care of our Integrity (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6)

When we make a vow or promise, we commit ourselves. If we don't carry through, we run the risk of being singled out as sinners, which will affect our relationship with God. We acquire a debt that we must fulfill. These 'vows' or 'promises' were voluntary agreements celebrated with God, and accompanied with a request (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). The preacher warned us that if we make a vow, we must keep it diligently (Ecclesiastes 5:4a). But he also warns us that promises aren't required, and that we don't have to reduce our relationship with God to an exchange of promises and favors, binding us to a debt with the Father, instead of enjoying freely being His children. Promises aren't necessary and it would be better to avoid them. As Solomon wrote wisely: *“It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it”* (v.5). God is our Father, and He knows what's best for us. Let nothing stop us from approaching Him with confidence (Matthew 6:8).

Solomon was clear: We shouldn't make promises that we aren't willing, or will not be able, to fulfill. We shouldn't be quick to make promises because we feel we need something in exchange. Let's look at the advice of the Master: *“Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and aren't able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn't able to finish’”* (Luke 14:28-30). Before opening our mouths to promise, let's calculate the costs. This is valid both for worshiping God, as well as in our relationship with our neighbor, who is a temple and image of the eternal God.

Questions:

- Have you ever made a promise that you didn't keep? Share your story and your thoughts on it.

- What do you think of promises, and what Ecclesiastes 5:5 says about not promising?

III. Fear God (Ecclesiastes 5:7)

This verse represents the climax of Solomon's teaching, and our logical conclusion after studying the passage from Ecclesiastes 5:1-7. In the midst of everything that is fleeting and trivial in this world, we must fear God! This is the message of all the wisdom literature, not just Ecclesiastes. We can't tell God what to do or how to manage the universe, as well as our lives, better. It's not our responsibility. We aren't the creators. For this reason, our approach to the Father must be respectful, in complete admiration and submission. Worship of God involves love and awe; it's the surrender of the whole being. In the New Testament, the body (this is the life and actions of the human being) is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Consequently, life, one's own and that of others, is sacred and must be treated as such: with care, reverence, and not subjected to disorderly and destructive practices.

Expectant and reverent silence is an attitude we need to assume as we draw near to God, not the casual 'amens', 'hallelujahs', 'Glory to God', prayer without reflection, etc., in other words, empty rituals that don't produce fruit of righteousness and love in us.

Questions:

- Has your perspective on worship changed by the end of this lesson? Comment.
- What did you learn today about promises? How would you apply this to your life?

Conclusion

God shouldn't be worshiped like any other god. We shouldn't make promises to Him in order to 'twist His arm' so that He does what we want. If possible, let's avoid making promises. We have no need to exchange anything with God, for He will do His will. Rather, let's take advantage of having been called to a relationship of freedom and love with the Father who knows what we need before we ask. He knows what's best for us. We need to consecrate our lives to God as an expression of the relationship of love that we have with Him.



Love of money

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 5:10-20

Memory Verse: “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless” Ecclesiastes 5:10.

Lesson aim: To learn to have a healthy and wise attitude with regard to the accumulation and handling of money.

Introduction

Contemporary author Jessie H. O’Neill, granddaughter of one of the presidents of the General Motors car factory, coined a new word: “affluenza” to diagnose a spiritual problem, an unhealthy relationship with money. For her, many people suffer, although mildly, of this deadly disease (O’Neill, Jessie H. *The Golden Ghetto: The Psychology of Affluence*. USA: Editorial Affluenza Project, 1997).

What is this disease? It’s seen in the desire that dominates people’s lives to have more money, making every effort to obtain large sums of it, and living their entire lives lusting for more. However, money is necessary, and well managed, it can bring many material and spiritual blessings. In this lesson, we’re going to listen to the advice from the Preacher, the Qohelet, on the important theme of money.

I. Loving riches does not bring fruit, and takes away our sleep (Ecclesiastes 5:10-12)

The writer of Ecclesiastes began his commentary on money with a proverb: “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless” (v.10). No matter how much money they have, the people who live by it are never satisfied, for they always want more. John D. Rockefeller was one of the richest men in the world, but when someone asked how much money was enough, he said, “Just a little more” (<https://faithandmoneynetwork.org/how-much-less-is-enough>).

This attitude, according to the Preacher, is vanity; it’s not common sense. Saint Paul, in his letter to Timothy, was very clear: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1

Timothy 6:10). This apostle didn’t say that money itself is bad, but he pointed out that the problem lies in the love of money. 1 Timothy 6:9 says, “Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”

The more money we have, the more we generally worry. The Preacher warned: “The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep” (Ecclesiastes 5:12). There is something in the impulse to acquire more that moves us to seek more and more. If it’s insecurity that drives us to seek riches, wealth in itself will not cure that insecurity. If it’s the desire for power that pushes us, money will not satisfy that desire.

For many people, the thirst for more material goods is insatiable. Many, after meeting their basic needs, yearn for more. Others, after having the permanent security they seek, strive for more. Others, after having all the luxuries they covet, crave for more, and this anxiety robs them of sleep. The worker, or the wage earner, can sleep peacefully without worrying, because he gets paid for his work.

Questions:

- Is it a sin to have money? Comment.
- What are some practical examples of the effects of the love of money?

II. Hoarded Riches Hurt and Bring Evil (Ecclesiastes 5:13-14)

Riches can be a stumbling block in our lives. Living for money is not only bad for us, it’s also a very risky gamble. A bad business or investment, or a recession in the economy, strip the rich and greedy of everything.

Ecclesiastes 5:13b-14 warns: "... *wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners, or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit.*" This paints a sad picture of a person, who through losing his money, cannot leave anything for the future of his children.

In the gospels, we see some groups for which money was a stumbling block: the Pharisees "were greedy" (Luke 16:14); as were, the money changers in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13); and sadly, so was one of the disciples, Judas Iscariot (Matthew 26:14-16; John 12:4-6). One day, Jesus had an encounter with a rich young man. He was someone who kept the law, and had a good testimony, but when the Master challenged him to sell his things, and give the money to the poor: "... *At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth*" (Mark 10:22).

Although when we die, we won't be able to carry our accumulated wealth with us, Jesus tells us that we can accumulate treasures in Heaven: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*" (Matthew 6:19-21). Ask: How can we deposit treasures in heaven? We can find possible answers in the following verses: Matthew 19:21; Luke 12:32-33, 14:12-14.

James warned the rich: "*Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days*" (James 5:1-3). Ask: What kinds of treasures await the rich in the last days? Money, vanity and the quest for power really don't make us happy. The real treasures, have to do with love, patience, service to others and worship of God.

Questions:

- What people or groups in the New Testament showed a bad attitude toward wealth?
- How can we lay up treasures in heaven?

III. No one Carries the Riches of this World with them to the Tomb (Ecclesiastes 5:15-17)

Ecclesiastes 5:15 contains a great truth: "*Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart*" (see also Job 1:21). We can't carry

our money and stuff to the next life. Just as we come to this world, we'll leave with nothing in our hands. As Salinas points out: "We don't see that the hearse is followed by a removal van" (Salinas, Daniel. Contemporary Biblical Commentary. Argentina: Editorial Kairos, 2019, p.828).

Jesus told two powerful parables about the death of two rich men. In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus recounted the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the poor beggar. In life, the rich man never helped Lazarus, but lived for himself in his luxurious mansion. Then Jesus shifted the story to scenes after the death of these two characters. Lazarus passed away and was carried by angels into the bosom of Abraham (v.22), while the rich man found himself in the Hades, from where he could see Lazarus. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to refresh his tongue because he felt tormented by flames (v.24). Abraham replied: "*Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony*" (v.25). Lazarus, weak and oppressed, was really strong and splendid. On the contrary, the rich and powerful man was really destitute and weak, and his riches were a kind of delusion. As the Qohelet said: "*This too is a grievous evil: As everyone comes, so they depart, and what do they gain, since they toil for the wind? All their days they eat in darkness, with great frustration, affliction and anger*" (Ecclesiastes 5:16-17).

In Luke 12:13-21, we have another of Jesus' parables about a rich fool. This time, it was about a farmer who had produced a large harvest. This man decided to build huge barns saying to himself: "... *This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry'*" (vv.18-19). The plan was cut off by the Great Judge: "*But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?'*" (v.20).

The value of money is limited. Maybe we can live 80 years, but this is only a small fraction of our existence. Even if we manage to keep our wealth throughout our life, there is a point where we'll have to let go. Riches, jewels, luxurious houses, cars of the latest model won't serve us in our life beyond the grave. So, the preacher was right in saying that dedicating our life to these things is vanity. Pleasure is ephemeral, and life is like the grass of the field that comes and goes (Psalm 103:15-16; James 1:10; 1 Peter 1:24).

Questions:

- Who were the two rich men in the parables Jesus taught (Luke 12:13-21, 16:19-31)? What was the message that the Master wanted to leave?
- In the light of eternity, what is the value of riches?

IV. Riches are Good when they Come from God and are Administered according to Divine Direction (Ecclesiastes 5:18-20)

The Preacher presents us with the positive side of goods that we possess: *“This is what I have observed to be good: that it’s appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot”* (v.18). We must regularly see the good things that surround us as gifts from God, and receive them as means that can help immensely in situations where we are overwhelmed. To be happy is to find pleasure and satisfaction in what God has chosen to give us. God gives blessings, sufferings, work, days, and food and drink. God also gives the gift of joy and ability to enjoy the simple life. We must learn to enjoy every moment, every meal, our friendships and families; because God has given us these blessings to enjoy them.

Verse 19 says, *“Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God.”*

Daniel Salinas wrote that “happiness is a gift from God, not a human right, nor a product of the riches” (Salinas, Daniel. *Contemporary Biblical Commentary*. Argentina: Editorial Kairos, 2019, pp. 828-829). The preacher concludes this part saying: *“They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart”* (v.20, see also Philippians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 6:7-8; Hebrews 13:5).

The money we have is a gift from God, and the Bible gives us a series of tips on how to use it well:

1. We should save what we can. The believer too should make sure their family has enough to live if something happened to him (Proverb 6:6-8).
2. Take care of our families. The believer must make sure that their family has the needs and conveniences of life; that is, a sufficient quantity of healthy food to eat, clean clothes to dress in, as well as a place to live. This also includes the care of one’s parents if they are very old (1 Timothy 5:8).

3. Meet the needs of others. God gives money to his children to reasonably meet their needs, and he also gives it to them to be generous with others (Matthew 22:39; Philippians 2:4; 1 John 3:17-18).
4. Share with people who suffer from poverty. In both the Old and New Testaments, we see God’s desire for His children to show compassion for the poor and needy (Proverb 22:9).
5. Support the work of the local church and missions. The family of God, our local church, needs the support of all members as part of complying with the Great Commission (2 Corinthians 9:7).

John Wesley preached that Christians shouldn’t simply tithe, but also give away all their additional income once the family and debts were paid. He believed that with increasing income, the Christian giving level should increase, not his level of lifestyle ([https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article / four-lessons-on-money](https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/four-lessons-on-money)). In a sermon that he preached on money, Wesley said, “Earn all you can; save as much as you can; give everything you can.”

Questions:

- What does it mean to live a simple lifestyle?
- What is the secret of happiness and contentment?

Conclusion

The Preacher warned us that riches can bring much evil and disaster. Living to earn more and more money can take away sleep and cause restlessness, and in the life to come, it won’t do any good. We must enjoy with joy what we have received from God, and use it wisely as good stewards, remembering that in the final judgment, what we did for our brothers and sisters will be retold.



Reflections of the Preacher

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 7:1-29

Memory Verse: "It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. Whoever fears God will avoid all extremes" Ecclesiastes 7:18.

Lesson aim: To learn from the preacher's reflections to be wise.

Introduction

Ecclesiastes is one of the books in the Bible classified as wisdom literature. It was used, read, interpreted and applied by the Israelite people long ago. However, many of its principles and lessons can still be applied today. Ecclesiastes 7:1-29 contains a series of very practical and contemporary advice. Despite the antiquity of the text and having been written for a very different world from ours, the text doesn't lose its instructive power and freshness to speak to God's people, no matter where we live in our different contexts.

These reflections that we'll present below serve to help us live wisely; if we heed them, we can be living witnesses for God to the world.

I. Proverbial Reflections Applied to Life (Ecclesiastes 7:1-9)

Several of the teachings that come in this section are in a comparative form. The preacher wanted to get his message across about the wise way we need to lead our lives as we apply these truths. On the surface, some of these thoughts don't appear to be logical, which present a challenge for the reader, but they could also help us have a renewed mindset.

We'll make use of some other versions of the Bible to help us clarify the message of this ancient text, which belongs to its own literary genre and comes from a culture so different from ours. Let's analyze some of these reflections.

A. "A good name is better than fine perfume" (v.1a)

The NIV says: "A good name is better than fine perfume." The Message translation says: "A good reputation is better than a fat bank account." In this verse, moral good is placed above getting material goods or other achievements. The preacher emphatically points out that reputation is more important than what we can get or do physically. Perfume, or ointment was very precious in Israel. It had various uses (Exodus 30:34-36; Leviticus 16:13; 1 Chronicles 6:49); and even in Jesus' times, some were very expensive (John 12:3-5).

This verse is teaching that there is something very important - we need to cultivate moral values, have a good reputation. There are people who try to distinguish themselves from others by their material prosperity, "fat bank accounts," revealing their profound identity crisis. The preacher tells us that this is to be avoided.

B. "...The day of death better than the day of birth" (v.1b)

The Message translates this as: "Your death date tells more than your birth date."

The Living Bible puts it: "The day one dies is better than the day he is born!" These words may sound controversial. Let's understand the biblical writer a little. He wants to move us to value death, to pay attention to it. The Preacher seems to be saying that the day of death has more value for the righteous.

The Old Testament perspective was that the righteous had a good destiny. A life well lived makes its mark on society and family. From the Christian point of view, death for a believer is the passage to eternal life, and it's what we hope for, to be eternally with our Lord. By interpreting it like this, the text is easier to understand and apply. Note that the Preacher emphasized the greater value for the day that we pass on to eternity. That day is equally important for the Christian who goes to Heaven as for those who reject God and go to perpetual damnation. The Preacher is laying emphases on the fact that that day will come, and how we have lived and the choices we have made will introduce us to our eternal destiny.

C. Crying is better than laughter (vv.2-4)

The NIV says: "Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart" (v.3). The Message translates it: "Crying is better than laughing. It blotches the face but it scours the heart" (v.3). The Living Bible states: "Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us" (v.3).

Nobody prefers to be at funerals; parties would be the best choice. But wisdom teaches us that suffering is instructive; we learn from it. Suffering and crying teach us things that laughter will never teach us. Tears make us grow and mature.

Although nobody wants to go through those moments, God allows them for His glorious purposes in our life. Probably, most believers don't thank the Lord for the moments of suffering they have had to go through, which have worked for good (Romans 8:28). The text shows us that sadness is better, because it results in character building and maturity.

In this part of the study, get the students to share some testimonies about difficult moments that they have gone through which made them mature and helped them to understand God's purposes for their lives.

D. Anger is distinctive of fools (v.9)

The NIV says: *"Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools."* The Message puts it: *"Don't be quick to fly off the handle. Anger boomerangs. You can spot a fool by the lumps on his head."* God commands us in His Word to control our character, to know the negative consequences of uncontrolled anger. Anger produces a myriad of spiritual and physical consequences, and it can give rise to resentment, roots of bitterness, which are open doors for the devil. We need to always maintain self-control. On the other hand, the person who is angry is not wise, but foolish.

Questions:

- Mention a proverbial reflection that struck you; and explain how you will apply it to your life.
- How can we control our character?
- Share a personal testimony on the benefits of not getting angry.

II. Reflections on Wisdom (Ecclesiastes 7:10-25)

In this section of Ecclesiastes 7, the writer saw that human life must be dependent upon God. He evokes the need for wisdom, and presents a series of reflections on the true value of wisdom. Let's consider some of these reflections.

A. Longing for past times is not wise (v.10)

The NIV says: *"Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions."* The Message says: *"Don't always be asking, 'Where are the good old days?' Wise folks don't ask questions like that."* The Living Bible: *"Don't long for 'the good old days,' for you don't know whether they were any better than these!"* Some people always live in the past, and this doesn't allow them to enjoy the present. As much as we would like to, we can't relive the past.

That longing usually hurts. Comparing the present with the past is disastrous; it doesn't reveal wisdom. There's a tendency to say: "The past times were better" but in fact, it's meaningless to compare two different moments that have particular contexts and events.

Also, it's never wise to compare or complain. Let's be aware of our present moment that God is allowing us to live and be grateful, seeking how God will continue to lead and guide us.

B. The combination of wisdom and money (vv.11-12)

The NIV says: *"Wisdom, like an inheritance, is a good thing and benefits those who see the sun. Wisdom is a shelter as money is a shelter, but the advantage of knowledge is this: Wisdom preserves those who have it"* (vv.11-12). The Message translation puts it this way: *"Wisdom is better when it's paired with money, especially if you get both while you're still living."*

Double protection: wisdom and wealth! Plus, this bonus: Wisdom energizes its owner."

The term 'money' here refers to possessions; here the passage values wealth. Both wisdom and possessions can bring benefits, according to the Preacher: they open doors, they give protection. But at the same time, he clearly points out the supremacy of wisdom over money. His advice is that it's better to be wise and rich at the same time, but wisdom has to be more important than riches because it gives life to those who possess it, allowing them to advance in everything, including number of years.

C. Accept God's Action, and Fear Him (vv.13-18)

"Consider what God has done: Who can straighten what he has made crooked?" (v.13, NIV). The message says: *"Take a good look at God's work. Who could simplify and reduce Creation's curves and angles to a plain straight line?"* The Preacher's recommendation is that it's wise to accept the way God does things. Accept what He allows to happen in our lives. When we place ourselves in His hands, He will do good for His people, even when our perception is different. But no human being can go against what God wills, which doesn't change. Let's accept it.

There are things which seem to be senseless, but the important thing is to fear God (vv. 15-18) The Preacher revealed important truths about the things that we don't understand in this life. Verse 15 says: *"In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: the righteous perishing in their righteousness, and the wicked living long in their wickedness."* Even believers can go through some very difficult moments in their lives while the godless live well and long. These are realities that we see daily, as well as others; but the key is in the words of the next verse: *"A person who fears God deals responsibly with all of reality, not just a piece of it"* (v.18b The Message).

Although we don't understand everything the most important thing is to fear God and respectfully trust Him. This will always give us victory in this life. Ask: "In practical terms, what does it mean to fear God?"

D. Ignore gossip (vv.21-22)

"Do not pay attention to every word people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you—for you know in your heart that many times you yourself have cursed others" (vv. 21-22 NIV). The Message says: *"Don't eavesdrop on the conversation of others. What if the gossip is about you and you'd rather not hear it? You've done that a few times, haven't you—said things behind someone's back you wouldn't say to his face?"* (vv.21-22). One of the most destructive things in relationships is gossip. This is a devastating evil that causes divisions, crises and misunderstandings. The Preacher's twofold advice is: don't listen to gossip, and recognize that we too are guilty of gossiping ... something we need to avoid (James 3). The church should not permit this sin, which has affected the body of Christ for years, wreaking havoc. If we were wise, we'll put a stop to this terrible evil of which we are all guilty.

Questions:

- Mention the Preacher's reflections.
- From the reflections studied at this point, comment on how they can be useful in your personal life and / or in ministry.

III. Reflections on the Sinfulness of the Human Being (Ecclesiastes 7:26-29)

This wise preacher understood that sinfulness is intrinsic in every human being. Hence, he took several verses to talk about this topic. Let's see some of the reflections on the matter.

A. The dangers of the seductive woman (v.26)

"I find more bitter than death the woman who is a snare, whose heart is a trap and whose hands are chains. The man who pleases God will escape her, but the sinner she will ensnare" (v. 26 NIV). The Message: *"One discovery: A woman can be a bitter pill to swallow, full of seductive scheming and grasping. The lucky escape her; the undiscerning get caught"* (v.26).

The type of woman reflected here as seductive was part of the life of ancient people, including Israel. The book of Proverbs contains many quotes that describe this type of woman (Proverbs 5:3, 6:24,26, 22:14). The Preacher described her seduction strategy, and he warns about the bitterness that this implies. Today more than ever, in the era of sensuality on social media, in the workplaces, in the streets and even in the churches, there are such women. This reflection has a lot of validity and importance. We have seen many believers, leaders, and pastors fall into this

trap. This is a situation that is becoming more common every day and it's sinful. Let's take care of our children and each believer.

B. Obedience to God stops us from falling into the trap of sin (v.26)

Verse 26 says that the man who pleases God will escape the temptation of the seductresses (v. 26b). This verse is the key to victory over this sin which has been rampant throughout history, and is even more prevalent today. The secret is obedience to God. Knowing what would please the Lord will help us to always be faithful to Him. Men of the Lord must always be careful around seductive women who daily besiege their lives. No ground must be given to the enemy. If required we must flee temptation as Joseph did (Genesis 39:12). Also, women of God must beware of seductive men and not fall into the devil's trap, but please God in everything.

C. God made mankind upright, and we made a mess of things (vv.27-29)

The message translates verses 28-29 as follows: *"But the wisdom I've looked for I haven't found. I didn't find one man or woman in a thousand worth my while. Yet I did spot one ray of light in this murk: God made men and women true and upright; we're the ones who've made a mess of things."* This text teaches us that the Preacher didn't find a totally good, virtuous human being because sin ruined us, distorting God's image in us. Here in this passage we get a glimpse at the ancient patriarchal society. *"I found one upright man among a thousand, but not one upright woman among them all"* (v.28 NIV), pointing to male supremacy of the culture when the text was written. However, we know that we all were created upright and we all are affected by Adam and Eve's disobedience.

God allowed us to have a decision-making capacity, i.e., free will. God's purpose for us as our Creator was that we would do good. The sinfulness of mankind interrupted the project of God, although this didn't fail, but reached greater splendor in Christ Jesus.

Questions:

- Discuss about the dangers of the seductive woman, and the sexual sinfulness that exists today.
- What is the key to victory over sinfulness?

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, all these reflections of the Preacher help us live wisely if we apply them. They also help us understand our own weaknesses. Let's draw closer to God and place our full dependence upon Him.



Where there is life in God, there is hope

Daniel Pesado (USA)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 8:9-15, 9:2-6

Memory Verse: “Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!” Ecclesiastes 9:4

Lesson aim: To understand the struggle between the obvious inequalities in this life, and the faith that God is a good and just being.

Introduction

In approaching the study of the book of Ecclesiastes, we tend to look critically and even question some of the author’s statements, especially since he was regarded as a model of human wisdom. We have all heard people say: “Life is not as nice as it seems.” If we asked what we understand by this common expression, probably most would say that it refers to the suffering, troubles, stress, fatigue and dissatisfaction that sooner or later we all experience. It’s undeniable that every person, regardless of when they lived, their level of education, social status, or experiences during their lives, have felt very real feelings that we can define as painful, discouraging, or sad, producing dissatisfaction and insecurity.

One of the problems that we all have is how to understand the situations that have arisen throughout our life. The cause-effect law doesn’t work mathematically, automatically and constantly in people’s lives. It’s very hard to work out why people have bad luck or suffer.

We don’t always see the consequences of our decisions in an obvious and immediate way. This wasn’t a problem unique to the writer of Ecclesiastes. Facing fatigue, struggles and disappointments goes back to the beginning of time. Solomon’s father, King David, in one of his psalms expressed the enormous tension he was experiencing: “Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong... Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes” (Psalm 37:1,7).

Even so, we demand justice, and when we observe suffering of the righteous, we’re full of questions, our spirit suffers, and many rebel. But, we need to look at the work of God from a much broader perspective than its face value, discerning reality from the infallible

framework of God’s Word. Paul recognized: “... Now I know in part...” (1 Corinthians 13:12), referring to the limitedness of our knowledge, and therefore the risk of making conclusions disregarding all the counsel of God available in the Bible.

I. Inequality doesn’t always mean lack of Righteousness (Ecclesiastes 8:9-11)

These verses are among the most complex to interpret in the Bible. At least temporarily and partially, injustice and inequality are left without their deserved retribution. But we need to consider several aspects when reviewing this passage:

A. Inequality and lack of opportunities

At first glance, all social inequality seems to imply injustice. But we need to distinguish between inequality and unequal treatment. Inequalities can have various causes, some of them self-initiated. For instance, if a person is lazy and doesn’t want to work, they’re causing economic inequality because that person won’t have the same resources as the people who work hard.

But unequal treatment is discriminatory or unfair since it’s inflicted by another person, an institution or a law, among others. For example, if we apply for a job and are sidelined on the basis of race, and another less qualified person is selected. In short, we can affirm that not all inequality is caused by unequal treatment since some can be self-inflicted. But injustice is real and it always produces inequality, as it deprives people of the opportunity to have decent lives. There are many reasons for this. Just by looking at some examples around us, we notice the following:

1. Inequality in educational opportunities is very evident all over the world, less so in developed countries, but all too common in developing or underdeveloped

countries. Many are not able to acquire the competencies or knowledge necessary to function in society, increasing their chances of socio-economic marginalization. ECLAC (Economic Commission for America Latin America and the Caribbean), states that whereas there is almost universal primary education in developed countries, in many underdeveloped countries only 30% enjoy primary education (information obtained from a document prepared by Daniela Trucco and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is available at <http://flacso.redelivre.org.br/files/2014/10/1138.pdf>).

2. Racial inequality. In many countries if a person belongs to a certain racial group they'll enjoy fewer educational and work opportunities and access to social benefits.

3. Gender inequality. Women too are often discriminated against. Many women have fewer educational and work opportunities and lower wages. The UN reports a difference in global average salary of 16% less for women (data obtained from the World Report on ILO Salaries 2018/2019, available at <https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-wage-report/2018/lang-en/index.htm>).

God's Word includes very strict warnings for those who abuse the workers and the poor of the earth: "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty" (Malachi 3:5). Jeremiah points out: "Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor" (Jeremiah 22:13).

Amos was one of the most emphatic prophets in the fight against inequality caused by the abuses of the rich. Inspired by the Lord he said, "Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?'—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat" (Amos 8:4-6)..

B. Inequality and Culture

But at the same time, there is another type of inequality that we can call cultural. In many countries, there are cultural habits that seriously condition all kinds of development, and that generate great inequalities. Obviously, there are countries and their respective

cultures that are characterized by efficiency, creativity, effort and even important details, such as attendance and punctuality.

When these cultural aspects are ignored, they generate inequalities. We must recognize that every culture is affected by sin in the hearts of its citizens and this has been true throughout the history of mankind. For this reason, we find serious warnings in the Bible. Negative cultural elements can be transformed by the efficacy of God's grace.

Some examples are very clear, such as the warning against laziness: "*Lazy hands make for poverty, but diligent hands bring wealth*" (Proverb 10:4; see also Proverb 6:6-8). And even more resounding is the apostle Paul's statement: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.' We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12).

But it's fair to ask ourselves: "Is there any meaning to life?"

Questions:

- What do you think about the difference between inequality and unequal treatment?
- Mention biblical and current examples of unequal treatment.

II. Inequality never means lack of purpose (Ecclesiastes 9:4)

The Bible says: "Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!" (Ecclesiastes 9:4). This saying sums up the Preacher's thinking: while there is still life, there is hope. God established his purpose that the image that he shared with mankind in creation be restored in each of his creatures. But what does it mean to restore God's purpose for us?

A. Spiritual Restoration

First, God can complete what he originally planned, that every descendant of Adam reproduce His image (Genesis 1:26-27). Dr. Jorge A. Leon explains that men and women are incomplete beings, and we need to learn and grow because we live in a permanent tension: "Man has received the disintegrating influence of sin and (also) of the integrating work and ministry of Jesus Christ" (León, Jorge A. *Achieving the New Man?* Argentina: Ed. Certeza, 1979, p.6).

B. Restoration of purpose

Through Jesus Christ, God restores His original purpose in all those who receive Him by faith in their hearts. The obvious way to concrete this is by serving Him in every area of our lives; in other words, loving God with all our hearts and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-33).

When we return to the original purpose of God, His image begins to be restored in us, and all inequality moves into the background. We learn to not just seek for individual and/or family improvement, but rather to look for the good for all people in our societies. We share the gospel with them because it's transformative. We now live according to a higher purpose: to honor God. In the purposes of God, inequalities disappear. As Paul said: *"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28). This is one of the first evidences that our relationship with God and his purpose for us are restored.

Questions:

- What Bible verses can you add that describe God's purpose for your life?
- What does it mean that you have been transformed through Jesus Christ?

III. Inequality never means lack of reward (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13)

In these verses, the writer expressed a fight for faith. These verses reveal a common problem for many people since the beginning of time: we forget that God never leaves the wicked unpunished or the righteous unrewarded.

A. Punishment of the unjust man

The preacher shared his evident despair: *"This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all..."* (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Here he reveals "the spiritual unrest of all those whose beliefs do not give them a vision beyond the grave, but whose very nature cries out for such faith" (Chapman, et. al. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume III. USA: CNP, 1969, p.593). The main reason is the following: "The punishment for sin seems so far away and even it seems unlikely that it will happen, so the wicked continue sinning..." (Chapman, et. al. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume III. USA: CNP, 1969, p.591).

But his faith helped the Preacher believe that: *"Although a wicked person who commits a hundred crimes*

may live a long time, I know that it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him. Yet because the wicked don't fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow" (Ecclesiastes 8:12-13). It's also necessary to remember that much of the unjust man's gain is temporary and apparent (Proverb 11:18); and that the abundance of material goods doesn't necessarily make the human being happy (Proverbs:15:16; Ecclesiastes 5:10; 1 Timothy 6:9).

B. Reward of the Righteous Man

In Ecclesiastes 8:12, he preacher states: *"It will go better for those who fear God."* Although brief, this expression is eloquent and powerful because it announces that the man who loves God will receive full blessings. We know that there are more than 3,500 promises in Scripture, some of them describe in a simple but broad way that blessing. One of the most outstanding was made by Jesus himself (Mark 10:29-30). One of the main conditions to these promises is that they need to be accepted by faith (Hebrews 11:6), because as we have seen, the complete reward is not always received in this lifetime. Another promise that sums up the idea of blessing is the following: *"For I know the plans I have for you, - declares the LORD, - plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future"* (Jeremiah 29:11).

What's more, God promises us rest (Matthew 11:28), provision (Malachi 3:10; Philippians 4:19), a secure future (Psalm 23:1-6), and the most important promises: Jesus Christ, His Son (Jeremiah 33:14-16), salvation from sin (Romans 6:7), His peace (John 16:33), and eternal life (James 1:12; 1 John 5:11).

God promised all these things to those who please Him with humble and sincere hearts. Faith and obedience are the only requirements to begin to receive the rewards promised by God. He promises that it will all be made right (Ecclesiastes 8:12).

Questions:

- Mention blessings you have received from God.
- What is your best hope of reward, and when do you think it will become an unquestionable reality?

Conclusion

There's a gigantic struggle between earthly mentality or philosophy, and the desire to maintain faith in a God who is fair, compassionate and gives many opportunities to the wicked to repent of their lifestyles. Our part is to follow and obey, even when we're struggling or going through dark times.



How to enjoy true happiness?

Joel Castro (Spain)

Study Passage: Ecclesiastes 9:7-12

Memory Verse: “Go, eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do” Ecclesiastes 9:7.

Lesson aim: To encourage the students to make good use of their time, enjoying the true happiness in line with God’s will.

Introduction

One of Solomon’s requests to God in his youth was for wisdom, and God granted him that desire (1 Kings 3:3-15). This was the only way he could reign over Israel. However, when he was an adult, the wisdom that he was granted was combined with his maturity, and we see the fruit in the book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon left us many lessons based on what he had learned in his life.

Ecclesiastes 9:4 tells us that where there is life, there is hope. We have a real chance to be happy, which is God’s plan for us. The best way to be wise is to act on divine advice. Although we know that lions are much bigger and fiercer than dogs, what’s the use of a dead lion? The term ‘dog’ implies someone who is foolish, but if they’re still alive, they can change their course because there’s still hope. So as Christians, we must pay special attention to three areas of our lives on which our true happiness will depend.

I. Eat and dress with joy and contentment (Ecclesiastes 9:7-8)

Both eating and the way we dress should be based on contentment. The writer of Ecclesiastes exhorts us to do things with joyful hearts, according to God’s will.

A. “... eat your food with gladness” (v.7a)

The command goes far beyond a physical joy. In today’s world, there are many people who live to eat. They’re gluttonous and full of selfishness and individualism. These people who live to eat believe that the joy of eating is found in the decoration of the environment, or how expensive the menu is. Others think that it’s in the celebrations of some special date, but all the joy ends when the event ends. And then they are left with lonely hearts because they didn’t consider their neighbor’s needs.

Mealtimes, according to Solomon, should be enjoyed in peace, with inner contentment. (Proverb 17:1). Jesus also encouraged us to remember the poor and disabled, and if possible, to invite them to our celebrations and/or dinners (Luke 14:12-14). We may not be able to receive them in our homes, but we can share some of our food with them for their tables.

This is what eating with joy looks like! There is a nice story that happened in Brazil about Paula Meriguete and Victor Ribeiro, 23 and 24 years of age respectively. These two young people leave us a good practical example of what love is. February 16, 2019 was their wedding day. They decided to invite 160 needy people to eat with them at their party, and although for some of their relatives and friends such a decision seemed crazy, they ended up convincing their friends and family to collaborate with them. It was a very emotional experience. They said: “We received much more than we gave.” When they had finished dinner, their hearts were full of gratitude. Paula said: “I gave up something in exchange for the peace that God left in my heart” (www.cope.es portal).

Eating our bread with joy implies being careful not to waste food. We live in a society that cares less and less about throwing food away. This is insensitivity to the needs of others, and in addition, waste further destroys our ailing ecosystem. The World Food Program states: “Today, 811 million people don’t know where their next meal is coming from while tons of perfectly edible food rots in landfills and poor storage containers. Reducing food waste and losses is key to ending global hunger, fighting climate change and fostering healthy food systems – and every person can be part of the solution” (<https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/8-facts-to-know-about-food-waste-and-hunger/>).

In Latin America, 348,000 tons of food are wasted per day, enough to feed, for example, everyone in Peru. In Spain, each individual throws away weekly more than half a kilo of food, that’s 76 kilos per year per household.

This data should make us aware of this fact and make us more careful about not continuing to waste food. We must buy and eat only what is fair and necessary, and maintain this discipline in our homes with our children and other family members. That's how we can eat our bread with joy.

B. Clothing and perfume! (v.8)

This is a very old text. It's expressed in the language of those times, and appears to have an origin before the Hebrew writings. According to the foot notes in the New International Version: "the Epic of Gilgamesh, which comes from Babylon, contains a section (10.3.6-14) remarkably similar to this passage." This undoubtedly reveals the parallelism of the text and its antiquity. The Commentary Mundo Hispano interprets this text: "In vv. 7 to 10 we have a positive appreciation of life, the enjoyment of elemental goods, but in their proper proportion. As soon as we want to make an absolute of them, they become affliction of spirit" (Collective of authors. Commentary- Mundo Hispano, volume 9. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1995, p.275).

The Message translation puts verses 7 and 8 beautifully: "Seize life! Eat bread with gusto, Drink wine with a robust heart. Oh yes—God takes pleasure in your pleasure! Dress festively every morning. Don't skimp on colors and scarves." The preacher encourages us here to enjoy life the way God wants us to. However, we do need to consider the context and culture where we live. Dressing well for one person might not be the same in each context. Also, dressing well doesn't mean buying expensive clothes. That's not what the writer wanted to tell us. The message of the Preacher is that we see the action of dressing and perfuming ourselves as something that pleases us, that we can enjoy, as a blessing and even more for the believer; because God wants us to enjoy life and be happy. We must be careful not to dress in such a way that might provoke sensuality, or to try to look better than others within society or church, to demonstrate economic supremacy or just to follow fashions dictated by society.

Let's not make clothing our idol, but always use how we look as an opportunity for joy, fulfilling God's purpose. Every time we get dressed we can think about how we can please our family, look good in our work situation, wear appropriate clothes to attend worship. We need to share what we have with someone in need, or share with brothers and sisters in the congregation.

God wants us to be happy. Choosing what to wear shouldn't be a burden but rather we should enjoy dressing ourselves; it's a blessing. When we all go to church feeling good and looking good, it's part of our collective worship. Lack of good clothing must never be an impediment to worship. There are those who say that they cannot go to church because they don't have 'fancy clothes.' The way we dress should never

keep us from going to church. Dress shouldn't be cause for concern (Matthew 6:31-33).

Questions:

- Eating with joy involves at least two applications; what are they?
- Who should we consider at our tables (see Luke 14:12-14)?
- How can you make an idol out of your clothes? Share.

II. Enjoy your Marriage (Ecclesiastes 9:9)

The Message translates verse 9 as follows: "Relish life with the spouse you love each and every day of your precarious life. Each day is God's gift. It's all you get in exchange for the hard work of staying alive. Make the most of each one!" Marriage is another of God's gifts to us. Married couples should enjoy living together. Marriage is one of the issues that, in social circles, television shows, series and movies, is highly defamed, or is referred to with mean jokes. Sadly, the statistics also reveal a pitiful status of this divine institution in the Christian context. We could say that this first institution created by the Lord is in danger of extinction. If we want to enjoy our marriage, let's pay attention to the following:

A. Two enemies that can take away marriage enjoyment

There are many enemies of marriages, but we'll quickly refer to two, which in the last years are having a greater diabolical boom. The number one enemy of marriage is divorce.

According to data published at www.observadorportal.com and www.mundo.sputniknews.com, in Europe and the United States there are twice as many divorces, and countries like Belgium quadruple the cases, that occur in America Latin. For example, in Spain there is a divorce every five minutes. This is a terrible fact! And although Latin America maintains a low profile regarding the number of divorces, what is alarming is that the number of marriages is decreasing since many people prefer just to live together or just have a civil union.

The world may have its way of enjoying sexuality, but sex outside of marriage and adultery aren't God's way for us (Hebrews 13:4). These sins bring destruction. Those who are single should pray for God to give wisdom to choose an ideal partner, and for those who are married to be happy with their partner! Enjoy your marriage!

The second enemy of marriages is gender violence. The latest news alerts us because of the number of domestic deaths. When did spouses lose respect and start attacking each other? Certainly, when God is not guiding the marriage

relationship, there will only be destruction (Psalm 127:1-2). Today's couples believe that their marital relationship will be good only if they have a job and have money to pay for their material and physical needs. But this is a hoax of Satan. If a relationship is not based on a daily search for God and on working to help your marriage grow and improve every day, everything else will be in vain.

Many couples start with attraction and love. However, then they let the secondary issues and material needs invade their relationship. If they don't seek God soon to sustain the love that united them, there will be an emptiness that will soon be filled with loneliness, resentment and revenge. This is an open door to the devil, who spends his time stealing, killing and destroying (John 10:10a). As a result, many couples become victims of murder. The portal of the newspaper El País (www.elpais.com) maintains that in Latin America, every day nine women are murdered. This is how our society is. Just watch the news and you'll see more about this scourge. Let's pray for couples to truly enjoy their marriage.

God's Word urges us to be happy with our spouse (Proverb 18:22). It's sad to be married and not enjoy conjugal companionship. Therefore, pay attention to these three tips on how to enjoy or take delight in your spouse.

B. Three ingredients that will give you enjoyment in your marriage

1. Spend time together and have fun. Work that both perform to sustain the home is not everything. The marital relationship grows when the two spouses are intentionally planning to share time together. We all know how monotonous the days can be, so, have fun, schedule outings in order to have time together as a couple. Yes, there are babies or children, take advantage of some vacations.
2. Revitalize your marriage with counseling. Marriages go through different stages and need to be guided. Therefore, it's important to seek God's advice. They can take advantage of couples' study groups. If there aren't any in your church, establish one.

Don't be one of those who think they don't need them. Our marriages must be cultivated with wisdom that comes from on high. In these meetings, you'll be helped on how to manage anger, misunderstanding, jealousy, consumerism, etc. In addition, you'll share your burdens with other couples.
3. Face adversity together. Testing times can help us build our marriage. Similarly, both spouses must be firmly committed to protect the marriage, so when difficulties come, both will be ready to meet the challenge.

When problems arise, don't look for culprits, rather for possible solutions (Romans 12:12,15-16a).

Of course, these three ingredients must be seasoned at all times with our daily time with God.

Questions:

- What are the two strongest enemies of marriage in this 21st century?
- List the three ingredients for a healthy marriage:

III. Enjoy Everything that Happens According to the God's Timing (Ecclesiastes 9:10-12)

An anonymous thought about time says: "No, you cannot go back in time; but with a correct attitude, you will be able to recover in the future more than what you lost in the past." If for some reason we believe that time has flown by, and we have not taken advantage and enjoyed ourselves, the good news is that there's still time to consider the following advice from wise King Solomon:

1. Enjoy spending time doing things according to His strength (v. 10a). This involves doing things well, with the greatest effort and without wasting time.
2. Enjoy now that we are alive, because after death, we'll no longer have time to do what we were supposed to do (v. 10b). James invites us to be aware of the present moment (James 4:14). So, take advantage of it now by doing God's will.
3. Enjoy doing things wisely and considering the opportunities because there will be good and bad times (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Someone said about words, time and opportunities, once they leave, they can no longer return. Remember, today is what's real, yesterday has gone and tomorrow doesn't exist yet.
4. Enjoy today since tomorrow we may have to face adversity (v. 12; Matthew 6:34).

Questions:

- How will you best use your time according to the advice of wise King Solomon?
- What does Matthew 6:34 advise us? Explain in your own words.

Conclusion

It's clear that we must enjoy the time doing the right things. Let's not waste our time on things that don't have purpose. We need to pay attention to the advice explained in this lesson. So, enjoy life with your family and keep on doing God's will.



Helpful tips for life

Leticia Cano (Guatemala)

Study passages: Ecclesiastes 11:1-10, 12:1-8, 13-14

Memory Verse: "...Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

Lesson aim: To understand that listening to timely advice and taking God into account from our youth is important for a life of fullness.

Introduction

"Who doesn't listen to advice, won't grow old" is a popular maxim that reflects reality: few people seek advice before acting, while others only do it when they have a serious problem. Some people, despite giving them prior advice, despise it, and later lament for not having listened to counsel, or blame someone else for their bad decisions.

In this lesson, we'll study the wise counsel of God's Word, enabling us to make smart decisions, and thus avoid sadness, pain or shame. In the passage, we find counsel from an elderly man who, after experiencing many situations, offers advice to the younger generations to stop them from making the same mistakes he made.

I. Practical tips for Life (Ecclesiastes 11:1-8)

When adults give advice, it's because they have already traveled along the way and are aware of the risks and challenges that crop up along life's pathway. Young people who listen can take advantage of the experience of those who have suffered firsthand the consequences of their mistakes. God's Word is the best counselor.

A. Act kindly (v.1)

It's easy to worry only about our needs, and at the same time be indifferent to the needs of others. It may seem silly to do something for another person, especially when we may not receive anything in return. Many have a hard time being kind. Kindness goes beyond philanthropy. It's the result of a heart filled with the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The next verse: "*Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return*" (Ecclesiastes 11:1), is written in figurative language. The expression implies that we should share what we have, without expecting revenue or profit. God will take care of those who, even with sacrifice, share with people in need. Proverb 19:17 says: "*Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.*"

Goodness that springs unselfishly from the heart will always come back to us, maybe not precisely from the same person, but from God. Sometimes the people who receive our acts of care and compassion won't be able to repay us, neither should we expect it, but without a doubt, we'll always receive God's care and sustenance.

B. Share what God has given you (v.2)

It takes hard work to satisfy our needs and help those who are in need. There are people who hide away in order to not share. That may be admissible among children who are still in the process of maturing, however, some reach youth and mature adulthood without correcting this attitude. This verse from Ecclesiastes 11:2 teaches us the importance of investing in doing good since we don't know what difficult situations we could face in the future.

C. Cultivate Good Attitudes such as Prudence and Diligence (vv. 3-4)

The sky shows us what weather we should expect, whether we see blue sky or dark clouds. Our weather forecasters have greatly improved and so if they say it will rain, we should take an umbrella. However, many get wet and sick from not acting with caution. In the same way, the text teaches us the importance of being prudent and preparing to face future situations. It's reckless for us to spend the years of youth and vigor without preparing for old age. Although we all think that old age will come, we don't always cultivate good relationships with our family, we don't have a savings account, or plan to have somewhere to live. Many live each day without having these basic goals.

Some young people, while living with their parents, rely on their parents' care and don't study, even when they have the opportunity to do so. Others are irresponsible, unnecessarily prolonging their student days. When they start to work, they never have money saved up because they spend it all. But later, without much thought, they make commitments to

get married without having a regular job, and thus not having an economic base to face responsibilities. That's absurd; they received the appropriate advice and rebuke, but they ignored it. So, if you see the clouds darken, get your umbrella ready or you'll get wet.

"So too, when the tree has fallen, we cannot lift it and sow it again" (v.3). It's essential to take heed to advice to avoid unnecessary damage to us and those around us. Let's consider our actions and decisions intelligently. Also, we must think before acting. Nevertheless, we cannot always be thinking without doing anything because time and opportunities pass and they don't come back. Verse 4 says: *"Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap."* There are those who are always justifying their negligence, blaming their stagnation on the situation, on the government, time, people, etc. Others face the same circumstances, and fight to overcome obstacles, and achieve their goals.

Some justify their lack of commitment to God by hiding at work, in the distance, behind their children and grandchildren, making health or the weather their excuse, and they never make room to search and serve God. Meanwhile, their lives pass without having enjoyed enriching times of communion with God and with His church, without having shared the gospel of Christ with others, and without having guided someone else to the path of eternal life.

There's no fruit in negligence, in idleness or in laziness, just as the person who doesn't sow cannot expect a harvest.

D. Trust God, He knows what He's doing (v.5)

Nature created by God has many aspects deep and difficult to understand. When Ecclesiastes was written, there was no technology, like today, to monitor the amazing process of a baby developing in its mother's womb, or the direction or speed of the wind. With all the advances made by science today, there are still mysteries that man cannot understand, but we can have complete security knowing that God is in absolute control of His creation, generated only by the power of His Word (Genesis 1). Although human beings cannot understand the mysteries of nature, God's in control.

E. Take advantage of our opportunities (v.6)

Rest is very rewarding, but whoever passes time dreaming and relaxing will see their dreams fade like the mist. The Bible emphasizes the value of work and the good use of time (Ephesians 5:16). In addition, we're warned against conformity, just accepting things as they are, since there very well might be another option. So, if something doesn't work, look for another alternative. There are millionaires who from one day to the next wake up poor. Let's not minimize the value of work. Let's not waste time.

F. Love life, and prepare for eternity (vv.7-8)

It's a gift to wake up and watch each sunrise. It's a pleasure to be able to get up and do all the tasks of the day. But let's not forget that life is short, ephemeral, the years go flying past and suddenly, we discover that we're old, and one day we'll be on the threshold of death. People who have lived long lives have the privilege of seeing up to four generations, but eternity doesn't compare to many years that someone can live. We need to prepare for this by putting our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice.

Questions:

- How does it benefit us to share what we have with those in need?
- What should we do when we are faced with incomprehensible situations?
- Why should we love life and reflect on eternity at the same time?

II. Practical advice for Young People (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10)

A. Enjoy your youth wisely

Youth is a wonderful stage of life in which we are healthy and energetic. We begin to exercise our autonomy, and tend to have conflicts with the figures of authority because we want to do our will. During adolescence, with a few exceptions, we don't have big commitments, so we can really enjoy companionship and fun. As long as we're responsible, all this is good, bearing in mind that decisions bring consequences which we'll have to assume (v.9). Finally, one day we'll have to give an accounting before God for everything we did or didn't do (Matthew 16:27; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

We need to be fully aware of our commitment to God so that we think carefully before doing anything. Young people who walk close to Jesus will enjoy their lives. Those who choose to live by their own rules may bring shame and pain on themselves. So, let's enjoy life, but let's enjoy it with Jesus.

B. Don't waste your life engaged in bad interpersonal relationships

Adolescence and youth are characterized by a tendency to reject imposed standards. It's a time when young people question, censure, criticize and fight with everything and everyone who think differently from them. But youth and adolescence are but fleeting moments. Bad relationships result in wasted years that won't return. We must remove from our hearts anger which is a voluntary act in which each one is responsible for their actions.

Young people must learn how to deal with anger. They must not waste time fighting with parents, spouses, teachers or siblings. When they're old, they'll realize that they have lost their opportunity to enjoy beautiful relationships and the presence of loved ones.

Questions:

- Is it possible to enjoy youth? What must we consider to enjoy life to the fullest?
- What can happen if we're frequently fighting and getting angry with others?

III. Advice for Every Believer (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, 13-14)

There was a king who despised the council of wise elders, and he chose the advice of inexperienced youth. The result was the loss of most of his kingdom (1 Kings 12). We don't know everything, and we must value the experience of older folk. Know-it-alls are very unpleasant people who always criticize, mock and belittle the knowledge of others, believing themselves to be self-sufficient. They think that they don't need to learn anything from anyone, even from God. That attitude is a "breeding ground" for personal and social chaos.

A. "Remember your Creator ..." (v.1)

How many years do you think you'll live? Sixty maybe ... eighty...? For sure, only God knows. Yet we all wish to live a good number of years, but time will roll on. While we wait for the end to come, what will we do with our lives? We can think of different options like study a profession, get into business, start a family, and more. There are so many things to do in the course of our lives, and others that if not done soon, it will be too late. But there is something we must not forget: to remember our Creator (v.1). When we're young, we have many years ahead to do many good deeds with our life.

An old woman received Christ and was baptized when she was 80. This is a pleasant memory, but at the same time, a bit sad because she spent most of her life away from God. When she finally gave Him her heart, she no longer had enough health and energy to enjoy the Christian life and serve the Lord.

B. Don't wait till it's too late (vv. 2-8)

The poet Rubén Darío said: "Youth, divine treasure, now you're leaving never to return!", alluding to the fleeting nature of youth. It's imperative to remember God and learn to live wisely, reaching retirement age with peace of heart. Let's get out and obey and serve God before facing weakness, health conditions, lack of work, and before our ailments are a burden to others.

What does it mean to remember our Creator? It means to recognize Him as the sovereign of our life, that everything belongs to Him, and that all we have achieved is due to Him. To remember God is to give Him our heart, thanking him for His love, forgiveness, patience, care, provision, mercy, and so many more blessings.

Remembering our Creator means living to honor him every day, cultivating a relationship with Him, and confidently seeking His help in difficulties, submitting our plans to His scrutiny and accepting His will. By remembering our Creator from our youth, we'll have more to be thankful for and less to regret. Remember God before the bad days of economic and relational conflicts and illnesses come. Remember God when we are well before the loss of our physical and mental abilities makes our lives complicated.

The passage describes metaphorically the arrival of old age: decreased sight and hearing, weakness in the legs, curvature in the back, loss of teeth, insomnia, fear that we'll lose out, and white hair (vv.2-6). Life subtly evaporates until we're on our way to the threshold of death when nothing will have meaning (vv.7-8). What really matters is that we'll have walked life's pathways with God in our lives.

C. The corollary of wisdom (vv.13-14)

In the end, these sobering words are no less important and they are the crux of living wisely:

1. The sage shares his wisdom with grace, even if it's uncomfortable for others.
2. Fearing God and keeping His commandments are the only things that give meaning to our lives (v.13).
3. God will bring all our good and bad deeds to trial (v.14), but embraced by the redeeming grace of Christ, we'll be declared righteous by faith in the Lord (Romans 5:1).

Questions:

- When should we remember God? Comment.
- What should we do when wise people give us advice?
- What will God do with all of our actions?

Conclusion

Practicing kindness and generosity result from our relationship with God. Good advice in time is an invaluable gift, although sometimes we don't like it. The Word of God contains vital norms. If we abide by them from youth, we'll avoid many mistakes and be satisfied and at peace. Success in life consists of fearing God and keeping His commandments; ignoring them brings ruin.



Introduction to Song of songs

Germán Picavea (Argentina)

Study Passage: Song of Songs 1-8

Memory Verse: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine” Song of Songs 1:2.

Lesson aim: To discover the background of Song of Songs to have a better understanding of the book and enjoy reading it.

Introduction

A large number of experts from different disciplines, Christian and non-Christian, catalog the Song of the Songs as the most beautiful love poem in universal literature of all times. The paradox of this is that for many Christians today, Song of the Songs is not valued in the same way. In fact, it turns out to be one of the least read books in the Bible.

Several aspects contribute to this. The narrative is so vivid and explicit, full of sensuality and eroticism, often producing a certain feelings of shock and discomfort for those who dare read it. Its literary genre, which many people aren't used to reading and understanding, along with the use of endless images outside of our own culture, make the most avid reader frequently quit reading it. We turn to this little book when we need some biblical text about love, and there are so many that verses like 8:6 or 8:7 get printed on invitation cards to wedding. These are some of the best-known texts of all the book.

In this and the next two lessons, we'll study the Song of Songs. In this lesson, we'll look at generalities of the book, such as cultural background and other general things, which will help us understand it.

I. Name of the book, author, date and canonicity

The phrase “Song of Songs,” which appears at the beginning of the book (1:1), shows how the Hebrew language used to make superlatives. What it wants to convey is that it is “the best of all the songs.” It's the same expression used by other Hebrew writers. For instance, the saying “King of kings” gives Him a place of power and preeminence over his equals (Ezra 7:12; Ezekiel 26:7). In the New Testament, we find the equivalent in the Greek language when its writers used it to refer to God as “King of kings” and “Lord of lords” (1 Timothy

6:15; Revelation 17:14, 19:16). Now, it's worth clarifying that the superlative also applies to singing; that's why it's the Song of the songs. It means that of all songs, this song is the best. So, it wouldn't be correct to apply the superlative to the author's work.

The authorship of the Song of Songs, when it was written as well as its inclusion in the canon, are aspects which are debated. However, the Judeo-Christian tradition holds that Solomon is the author, and that it was written during his monarchy in the 10th century BC. The fact that they attributed authorship to King Solomon, together with the interpretation given to the text, is why it was included in the Hebrew and Christian canons.

Regarding the authorship of the book by Solomon, on the one hand there are internal references in the book (1:5, 3:7,9,11, 8:11,12); and punctually, Songs 1:1 starts off by saying: “*Solomon's Song of Songs.*” Although it's Solomon's song, he may not have written the book, which could have been composed 'for', 'about' or 'dedicated to' Solomon (Hoff, Pablo. Poetic books. USA: Editorial Vida, 1998, p.265). This gives rise to the idea that the figure of Solomon was important to the text, but we cannot necessarily surmise that he wrote the text.

On the other hand, this monarch was considered the father of wisdom literature in Israel. There was a Solomonic tradition beyond Israel, backed by the extraordinary wisdom that God had given to him (1 Kings 4:29-31). This is what we read about him in 1 Kings 4:34: “*From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.*” This fact placed him as the author of Song of Songs among the Wisdom Books in the Jewish tradition, and for this reason, in the Council of Jamnia (90 AD), it was included in the section ‘Writings’ of the Tanakh, or Hebrew Bible.

Questioning the authorship of Solomon, several exegetes and experts in the field argue that in the text there is the use of late Hebrew, typical of the postexilic time along with Aramaic, Persian and Greek words. Because of these evidences, Giuseppe Ricciotti (1890-1964), an Italian biblical scholar and archaeologist, placed the writing of Song of Songs in the 4th century BC. The same argument is supported by the Spanish philologist, Emilia Fernández Tejero, who in turn incorporates into the discussion the possibility that the author is a woman (Recovered from <https://www.march.es/conferences/above/voz.aspx?pl=101140>, June 5, 2020).

Biblical texts, in general, are written by men, and, even though in some books (Ruth and Esther) the protagonist was a woman, we don't expect that they wrote the books under their names. In the case of Ruth, its author is unknown, and the authorship of Esther is attributed to Mordecai. In the case of Song of Songs, there are two reasons that suggest this possibility.

The first is that Solomon lived surrounded by women; since according to the Bible, "...*He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines...*" (1 Kings 11:3a). This fact doesn't seem to put him as the best candidate to be the author of a book that evokes love, and this, towards a single woman.

And the second reason is that the main character of the book is a woman, and the language used is of a more feminine than masculine style. In addition, if we think about the sensual and delicate descriptions used in the narration of each episode in that tireless search for her loved one, we discovered that there is a feminine touch in the composition of the book, which leaves open the possibility that there is an authoress, rather than an author.

Questions:

- Why is the expression "song of Solomon" (1:1b) not conclusive to affirm that Solomon wrote the text?
- Which opinion do you agree with most regarding the authorship of Song of Songs?

II. Interpretations given to the Song of Songs

Throughout history, when faced with this poem of sensual and erotic love, and without any explicit mention of God in the entire book or any indication of any religious character, the rabbis ignored the immediate interpretation, giving it an allegorical interpretation. Later, Christians, seeing that the Song of Songs was never quoted by Jesus or any of the writers of the New Testament, maintained the same interpretation.

The allegory consists of using the literal text as a vehicle to reach a spiritual sense. According to this interpretation, the Jews held that the Song of Songs recounted the love between Yahweh and Israel. Later Christians, influenced by Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD), followed the same line of interpretation, changing Yahweh for God and Israel for the church.

According to this church father, "Song of Songs doesn't benefit the readers, and may even incite them to carnal love" (Fernández Eyzaguirre, Samuel. *Origins. Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Spain: Editorial Ciudad Nueva, 2000, p.8). So as a result, the faithful have been discouraged from reading this portion of scripture. The traditional idea is that Christ is the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley (Song of Songs 2:1). An example of this type of interpretation applied to this book is found in the introduction of a series of messages from the preacher Watchman Nee. He says: "This song speaks of Solomon. Therefore, the Lord takes the position of king in this book ... The Song of Songs guides us to know Him as king" (Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/40280273/Cantar_de_los_Cantares_Watchman_Nee, June 5, 2020).

Allegory carries the danger of straying from the text, forcing us into spiritualization beyond the intention of the author. We shouldn't let ourselves be carried away by the fantasy of the interpreter, who has limited himself by allegorizing almost every word. When the interpreter uses allegory, he's in danger of constructing his own ideas that, on many occasions, will help him defend his views.

In the third century, there were those who proposed drama as a way of interpreting the book, but the allegorical method silenced them for many centuries. In the XIX century, German scholars Franz Delitzsch and Georg H. Ewald developed their own dramatic interpretations of the book. However, "the main problem with the dramatic interpretation is the lack of evidence of dramatic literature among the Semites, especially among the Hebrews" (Hoff, Pablo. *Poetic Books*. USA: Editorial Life, 1998, p.268). On the other hand, it should be noted that Jews regarded dramas as pagan.

Others have used typology to interpret the book. It establishes historical connections between certain facts, people or things that act as 'types' of the Old Testament with other facts, people or New Testament things that act as 'antitypes.' It should be noted that the connections aren't arbitrarily established, but they correspond to the development of the progressive revelation of God. There are type and antitype which are historical realities.

For example, in Matthew 12:40 and Romans 5:14, Jonah and Adam are a type of Christ.

“A medieval interpretation, which many Catholics accept today, identifies the Virgin Mary as the bride. In his opinion, Songs 4:7 - “*You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you,*” teaches the doctrine of the immaculate conception” (Hoff, Pablo. Poetic books. USA: Editorial Vida, 1998, p.267). Clearly, that view doesn't comply with the rules of hermeneutics that an Old Testament type requires its corresponding antitype in the New Testament.

Another way of approaching the text of the Song of Songs is the literal one. There have been many through the centuries who see it as a love poem, and many today argue that this is ‘the way’ to interpret the book. It had its background in the acting school of Antioch in the fourth century (Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great and Gregory de Nyssa). Afterwards, the allegoric interpretation silenced this view for a few centuries, until the reformers of the sixteenth century brought literal interpretation back to the forefront. Dr. Alfredo Tepox Varela, a Mexican specialist in linguistics and Hebrew, who has translated the poetic books for three translations of the Bible into Spanish, and has participated in translations into various indigenous languages, says: “literalism in poetic translation doesn't fit, it has no space “ (Rivera Velázquez, Melvin. 156 Challenges in translation of biblical poetry [Audio podcast]. Recovered from <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/cambio-180/id881835891>, on June 5, 2020).

Questions:

- Why have rabbis and Christians given an allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs?
- After reading the interpretations given to the Song of Songs, with which of them do you agree the most? Why?

III. Poetry in the Bible and some keys to reading Song of Songs

We tend to think that in Scripture, there are only some poetic books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs). But the Bible is really full of poetry. In the ancient Hebrew towns that depended on oral traditions, poetry was one of the best ways to preserve their history. Poetry is easy to memorize. With its descriptive style and abundance of metaphors, poetry sounds like music, and its very well-chosen words are the perfect vehicles to connect emotionally.

In the case of the book we are studying, its poetry is sensual and erotic. This type of poetry was very common among the Semitic peoples. Within the Sumerian mythology, for example, there is the Song of love of the goddess Innana, who when reading it we find a lot of similarity with the Song of songs. “Husband, you have delightfully led me to the bedroom. On the bedstead, in its perfect flow of honey let us enjoy your love, that sweet. The god says: Innana bathes, she anoints herself with fine oil, the mistress of heaven advances, goes to the door, to Dumuzi. She creates for him a light, like the light of the moon, she loves him, he rejoices. She hugs him” (Retrieved from <https://www.arch.es/conferencias/antiores/voz.aspx?pl=101140>, June 5, 2020).

By having this kind of poetry in the Bible, and as we are so many centuries away from its origin, we need to have some keys to read and understand its meaning for us today. Song of Songs shouldn't be interpreted literally: “If we steal from poetry its metaphors, its vigorous expressions, the wide flights of the imagination and the finery of its language, it would completely cease to be poetry” (Ross, Guillermo. Studies in the Holy Scriptures, volume 3, The poetic books. Mexico: Publications House El Faro, s.a., p.6).

Poetry is not pedagogical in itself. It's not a manual of sexuality or conjugal love. It's about the romance between a man and a woman in the form of erotic poetry, which brings us closer to human emotions and experiences. It connects us with the experiences from the interior, from the depths our beings.

Poetry, and in particular this book, should be read in its entirety; it shouldn't be analyzed verse by verse. In doing so, it will be easier to get closer to the whole idea that the author wanted to communicate. We should read Song of Solomon as the Word of God, waiting for Him to speak to us, wanting to be confronted to continue growing. In this particular case, in relation to love and married life in all its dimensions.

Questions:

- What kind of poetry is Song of Songs? Explain.
- Is Song of Songs a sexuality manual? Give your reasons for your answer.

Conclusion

Song of Songs is a love poem that many consider to be the most beautiful in world literature of all times. Let's get closer to this poem, without preconceptions and already established interpretations. Let's be captivated by its metaphors, aromas, sounds and the way that it leads us to the purest and finest love relationship.



A poem to human love

Germán Picavea (Argentina)

Study passages: Song of Songs 1-8

Memory Verse: “How beautiful you are, my darling! Oh, how beautiful! Your eyes are doves”
Songs of Songs 1:15.

Lesson aim: That by reading and enjoying the love poem that God left in the Song of Songs, we can approach the depth of the manifestations of human love.

Introduction

The Song of Songs is one of the shortest books in the Bible. In its 117 verses, we see scenes where human love is the main protagonist. This beautiful drama is what God planned from the beginning where humans (female and male) play a central role. Made in the Image of God and united with each other by the love that He gave them in their creation (Genesis 1:26-27), the woman and the man were commanded to administer everything that God had created. When God contemplated all that he had created (the complete work of art), He saw that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). The very best! It included everything He had created, including human love in all its manifestations.

Often the church is accused of having a rather demure attitude about romanticism, expressions of love and sex. The Bible, on the contrary, doesn't have this attitude, but rather the complete opposite. In Genesis 1 and 2, before sin, God created everything and revealed His attitude toward to the relationship between man and woman, and the sexuality of both (Genesis 2:25).

This leads us to observe that the Bible teaches us that sexuality is God's gift for our wellbeing as human beings, and Song of Songs reminds us of this through the dialogue of love between two true lovers. Luis Alonso Schökel explains: “God created human love, particularly conjugal love, in his image and likeness, because ‘God is love.’ God uses the facets of human love, especially conjugal love, to make more intelligible the mystery of his love for mankind and the mystery of Trinitarian unity. Where there is human love, there is also God's loving relationship with people. Also, Love needs to be expressed poetically” (Schökel, L. Alonso. ‘The Song of Songs or the dignity of love.’ Spain: Divine Word, 1990, p.79).

I. Song of Songs exalts love

A. Human love

The term “love” in its different variants appears 55 times in Songs of Solomon, which means that a variant of the term is used every two verses on average. Although the term is not found in all the verses, there are inexhaustible expressions that speak of love between lovers.

Starting from the truth held by all Christians that, “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8), human love in all its manifestations, paradoxically, reveals the closest expression of God among us. But frequently, when speaking of human love, we detach it from holiness, and we don't relate it to God. When speaking of human love, we think about the down to earth stuff like putting food on the table, allowing ourselves to be dominated by budgets of yesteryear, giving us the feeling that stuff to do with our bodies is bad, and only spiritual things are good. Hence, it's easy for us to think about the love of Christ, but very difficult to think that God is present in the intimate relationships of a married couple who make love passionately.

In each verse of the Song of Songs we're invited to value human love as a divine gift to enjoy with total naturalness. When we read: “*I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine...*” (2:16, 6:3), it reminds us of what God said at the beginning: “*That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh...*” (Genesis 2:24). Some interpret this union as exclusively sexual, but it has to do with a total unity, a complete one, which is built up daily in the exercise of human love. When a man and a woman unite in love, they remain fully themselves, and, at the same time, they are fully one. This mystery can only be understood as coming from the gift of love lived in a lifetime commitment (Matthew 19:5-6). “The insistence in the

possessive (“mine”, “yours”, “my beloved”) suggests that love is understood here as generating a relationship in which each of those involved is unique and irreplaceable for the other “(Ruiz, Eleuterio R.” Beyond language: metaphor as an expressive resource in the Song of songs”. Available online:<http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/revistas/beyond-the-language-ruiz.pdf>).

Love leads lovers to a total giving of themselves, mutually, integrally connected with each other, losing themselves in the encounter where they leave the “me” and become “us,” reaching the climax of human love.

B. Passionate love

The Song of Songs shows passionate love between a woman and a man. From the beginning, the woman expresses her desire by saying: “*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth...*” (1:2a). From the beginning, passionate love makes its appearance, passion ignited with the kisses of the beloved. And she ends by asking her lover: “*Come away, my beloved ...*” (8:14). This is a typical expression of someone who claims the presence of her loved one to satisfy the love she feels for him. Of course, in the first reading of the Song of the Songs, it won't be possible to appreciate the sensual language and erotic feelings of a deeply pure human love. But if we go a bit deeper as we read, we'll find carefully selected metaphors and words that definitely exalt passionate love.

Women and men live passion differently. For women, passion is related to good things like loving words, seductive glances, delicate caresses, active listening, gifts, security offered, support, respect and care given in multiple ways by her spouse. Men, for their part, although they also need and receive everything mentioned for women, are more visual, and passion has to do with the arrangement, smells and with what they can see and touch.

The Song of Songs is full of words of flattery between lovers, from one to the other, as well as of metaphors they use to compare themselves with what is beautiful. They play with the looks (4:9, 6:5) and caresses (1:13, 16, 2:4, 6-7, 7:8, 12, 8:3-5). They observe their bodies and exalt every aspect of them (5:10-16, 7:1-7). They hug and hold each other with affection and delicacy (8:3). They aren't called by their names. Instead, they use loving terms typical of Semitic poetry (beloved, beautiful, friend, dove, sister, wife, perfect and princess). In some cases, they include the possessives “mine” and “yours,” referring to the force of love that brings them together deeply.

The whole book of Songs of songs is an exaltation of passionate love between spouses. In this little book, God invites love to be lived in the marriage relationship with passion in the exclusive encounter with the spouse.

C. Physical love

It's curious that today many still hold on to Medieval concepts, considering the body as bad and the spirit as good. Expressions like “saving souls” underline this and denotes a division of our beings that doesn't reflect the creation of the whole person by God. He breathed the breath of life (Genesis 2:7) upon the body of the human being (female and male), yet this doesn't mean that they are independent parts and out of the reach of the sacred (1 Corinthians 6:19). In the New Testament, Jesus shows that we are whole beings (Mark 12:30-31). Without falling into the error of worshipping the body, we need to take a look at what God says about it in the Song of Songs.

The body is the reality of the total human existence. The experience of love in its sensual manifestation and eroticism wouldn't be possible without a proper understanding of the body as a gift from the Creator, and a concrete reality to enjoy. Song of Songs celebrates the body (male and female) and shows it as a loving instrument and means for the fulfillment of divine purposes. The woman takes the initiative and in 5:10-16, she points to every part of her loved one's body, extolling his beauty and showing her desire.

She ends with the following loving declaration: “...*he is altogether lovely*” (v.16), with which she declares that the body of her loved one is adorable and attractive. In 7:1-7, the man describes his beloved's body with special dedication, exalting every detail and using beautiful metaphors that provide endless possibilities to enhance her beauty.

Questions:

- What does the book of Song of Songs mainly exalt?
- Will the experience of love in its sensual and erotic manifestation be possible without a proper understanding of the body as a gift from God? Why is this important?

II. Song of Songs calls for Mutual Dedication

As we enter the Song of Songs, we immediately notice that there is mutual dedication between the lovers expressed in the time invested. In many verses, things appear to happen in slow motion, calmly, with patience, both enthralled by the object of their love. Quite the contrary with the love-life of many today who run doing things all day, when they finally get alone together, they're totally exhausted, with a total inability to connect, and without time to dedicate to their partner.

We have already seen the time that each of the lovers of Song of Songs has taken to discover each other; to get to know and appreciate each part of their bodies. They aren't in a hurry, looking carefully and for the best of images to make an exact comparison that extols their beauty.

Song of Songs underscores several aspects that must exist in the marriage relationship as God planned it (Genesis 2:24-25):

i). Firstly, we need to leave, cut the "parental umbilical cord" in order to grow;

ii) Secondly, each one must join and merge in the meeting with the spouse in a relationship of exclusivity, equality, respect and deep love;

iii) Third, to be one, to make the marriage relationship itself a priority in their lives; to grow in unity, constantly discovering each other patiently together; intentionally dedicated to each other;

iv) finally, free, through mutual dedication, to live love in all its manifestations.

Song of Solomon 2:3 says: *"Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men. I delight to sit in his shade."* This statement conveys total calm. Something that stands out in her description is the identification that, in the midst of other men, he is her beloved. He is not just anyone, but her special man (2:3, 5:10). The first verse quoted denotes that both spouses take time to sit down together alone; although in her story, she makes it her own. So, what we see here is the meeting of both. *"I delight to sit in his shade"* indicates that this is done constantly. This verse, along with the next two (2:4-5), make metaphorical reference to sexual intercourse.

Verse 5 refers to a raisin cake which was considered to be an aphrodisiac, like mandrakes in 7:12. This implies dedicating time, preparation and food, because she says that she is *"lovesick"* (2:5). And verse 6 indicates the most tender and romantic scene there can be: *"His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me."* This scene is repeated in 8:3, giving us to understand that it's a daily event: *"Mutual caresses should never be done in a hurry. Just lust and self-gratification is done in haste. Husbands and wives should take time to fully enjoy each other!"* (Dr. Ed Wheat and Gaye Wheat. God-ordained sexual pleasure. USA: Editorial Betania, 1980, p.66).

Questions:

- Name the four things involved in the marriage relationship as God planned it (Genesis 2:24-25).
- How do you think caresses should be expressed between spouses?

III. Song of Songs invites us to revive pleasure in our marriages

We live in times where, on the one hand, pleasure is sought at whatever price, but, on the other, one lives in displeasure. Where it seems that nothing is allowed, everything is work and sacrifice, compliance with rules, and stress, while guilt, pain, and depression grow. What is driving us to live like this in our marriages, far away from what God planned, without enjoyment, without tenderness and without freedom, but with frustration, rudeness and prejudices? Let's remember that "Marriage as a sacrament wasn't accepted by the Church until the Medieval Age, almost twelve hundred years after the death of Christ. What's more, it was never seen as a blessing but as a medicine to control the disease of sexual lust. The idea was that with this sacrament the couple could dedicate to procreation and leave out all pleasure in sexual intercourse" (Martin, Dale B. Sex and the Single Savior. USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, p.103).

When we go to the Song of Songs, we see that lovers indulge in pleasure without prejudice, getting carried away by the feelings that the Creator wisely included in their perfect design. We were made for pleasure. Yes! God allows us to enjoy sex.

Song of Songs 7:6 says: *"How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights!"* It's certainly an indication of that man enraptured by the woman he loves. His words define the experience as beautiful and smooth, bringing him immense pleasure. She, for her part, affirms: *"I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me"* (7:10). This reveals the mystery of the unity described in Genesis. When one delights in the other, both hearts are filled. Aligned with the Lord in perfect unity, we find full satisfaction (Psalm 37:4). This is true too in marriage.

Questions:

- How should we experience love in marriage?
- Why is it thought that husbands shouldn't indulge in pleasure in the expression of their physical love? (Songs 7:6,10).

Conclusion

Through reading the Song of Songs, we discover that men and women were designed to love. In the marital relationship, God shows that in his original design, He always contemplated human love in all its manifestations as the perfect bond. Through this book, he calls on every married couple to deepen their relationships, giving to each other, with total intensity, enjoying sensuality and eroticism as a natural part of human love.



Loving with the five senses

Germán Picavea (Argentina)

Study passages: Song of Songs 1-8

Memory Verse: “Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue. The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon”
Song of Songs 4:11.

Lesson aim: To understand that the Song of Songs invites us to love with our five senses to discover the depth of conjugal love.

Introduction

We have already said that the Song of Songs is a love poem about human love between two people who were made in the image of God. It's a poem describing the passionate experience of a woman and a man who love each other. Their love is intense, exclusive and fiery. Reading this poem may make us feel uncomfortable, so we don't like to read it. But we must remember two important issues:

- i) Throughout history, a false Christian piety has shied away from expressions of human and sexual love underscoring what is considered to be spiritual love;
- ii) This beautiful book is in the Bible and therefore we understand that it's inspired by God.

So, if by God's inspiration this poem is in the Bible, we must conclude that God wanted to include a poem that exalts human love in all its dimensions. Therefore, instead of blushing while reading it, let's approach the Song of Songs with calmness and be grateful to God for granting us the gifts of tenderness, sensuality and eroticism expressed in the feelings and shared pleasure of love which strengthen the conjugal bond.

To love is a verb; consequently, it leads to action, and as a general rule, we say that we love with our hearts. That's how we've always understood it, almost without question. But is it always true? Or are there other ways of loving? Could this be possible? Do we only love with our hearts?

The Bible speaks of the heart as the center of our lives. With the heart we make decisions and we establish the focus that determines the course we're going to follow. However, God also created us as sensory beings. We perceive and experience many things with our senses, including sexual attraction. “The scent of a flower, the heat of the sun, or the first smile of a baby cause us

joy. Our senses are a great gift from God; what if we use them to praise and honor him, to bring us great happiness” (Arnold, Johann Christoph. *God, sex and marriage*. USA: Plow Publishing House, 2014, p.33).

The Song of Songs invites those who read it to use their five senses as they read these verses. Each of the protagonists makes use of all the resources available to express and receive the love of their lover. With their eyes, each one travels over the other's body, creating beautiful metaphors from the landscapes of their environment. The lovers allow themselves to be invaded by aromas, enjoying their perfumes with the sense of smell. They enjoy the sense of taste, conveyed by the delight in the flavors of the seasonal fruits, food and drinks, even the aroma of each other's body. They listen as each one feels the caress of the sweet voice of the one they love, and with touch, they transmit the wonderful experience of the meeting of the bodies of the woman and the man united in one.

Let's enter the fascinating world of love presented to us in Song of Songs, through the five senses.

I. Loving with our eyes

The sense of sight allows the lovers of Song of Songs to enjoy the scenery and colors of life around them. Even though we don't know for certain where the events occurred, they describe very well the places and geography of the area, the animals and flowers, trees and fruit.

The young man says: “*You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride; you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes, with one jewel of your necklace*” (Song of Songs 4:9). Later, he turns to his beloved: “*Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me...*” (6:5). The idea is something like this: Seeing her raises his adrenaline!

Apparently, the woman's eyes communicate her love very well to the man she loves. It can just be her eyes themselves, or also the seductive glances that she gives to her loved one. In 1:16-17, she looks all around the place where they are and she declares: "... *And our bed is verdant. The beams of our house are cedars; our rafters are firs.*" Clearly, she begins to leave the "I" to give way to the "we" expressed in the possessives: "ours" and "us"

When the lovers first meet, they look deeply into each other eyes. Both of them make use of this sense to internalize their loved one. With their eyes, they caress from top to bottom. There is no part of the body that's not described with equal mastery. From the head down to the feet. Making use of abundant metaphors very typical of their time, each one describes the body of the other. However, there is a progression in relation.

First, he describes her; but only the public parts of her body (1:10-11); then he does it with much more detail (7:1-9). She does the same; she looks at her loved one with careful attention and describes him with metaphors that tell of his strength, concluding that all of him is desirable (5:10-16).

Questions:

- Name two ways a spouse can love their spouse with their eyes.
- Explain in your own words what the following verse expresses: "*Turn your eyes from me; they overwhelm me*" (Song of Solomon 6:5).

II. Love with taste and smell

A. To love with taste

In Semitic cultures, the intimate encounter of the couple was accompanied by food; and normally, there were those plates considered as aphrodisiacs. Fruits, cakes, among others, were part of the intimate decoration of the space reserved for the couple. Therefore, it's no coincidence that in Song of Songs, the sense of taste is wrapped up in the whole book so vividly.

Both of these lovers play their love game, and in the middle of it, they're tasting different delicacies. In a special relationship, everything is sweet. In fact, they used it metaphorically to refer to the taste of themselves: "*How handsome you are, my beloved! Oh, how charming!*" (Song of Songs 1:16a); He is likened to a fruit tree: "*Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest is my beloved among the young men... and his fruit is sweet to my taste*" (2:3), a clear indication that there was the opportunity to taste him and find him sweet. He continues "*for your voice is sweet...*" (2:14), connecting her voice with the taste of sweetness.

She invites him into her garden: "*Let my beloved come into his garden and taste its choice fruits*" (4:16), a very sensual invitation that she makes to him after he has described her from top to bottom with very suggestive metaphors. "*His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely*" (5:16). Here she dares to go one step beyond savoring it, since she sees him as totally palatable, revealing her desire to be physically his. Verse 7:13 says, "... *and at our door is every delicacy...*" with which the woman in love invites her lover to eat the sweet fruits that she has saved for him, with clear allusion to his virginity.

B. Loving with smell

Smell is one of the most important senses, although it's often ignored. Just think that through the encouragement of this sense, we can travel back in time. Certain aromas transport us to different moments and times of our life, reviving relationships. Smell is one of the erotic senses par excellence. Hence, candles and incense are so popular today as scents, as well as fragrances, perfumes and creams for personal use.

In Song of Songs, the lovers enjoy different fragrances and make them part of the game of love that they play. From the start, she's attracted by how he smells: "*Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out*" (1:3). Even his name to her is like a sweet perfume.

The Message translation fills the air with fragrance. It says: "*When my King-Lover lay down beside me, my fragrance filled the room. His head resting between my breasts— the head of my lover was a sachet of sweet myrrh. My beloved is a bouquet of wildflowers picked just for me from the fields of En Gedi*" (1:12-14). Myrrh had various uses at that time, but here its erotic character stands out. Apparently, she used it as a personal perfume since she carried it in a bag between her breasts (1:13, 3:6, 4:6, 14, 5:1, 5, 13). He says that he is deeply convinced that the smell of her perfume is better than all the others scents (4:10), "... *The fragrance of your garments is like the fragrance of Lebanon*" (4:11b).

The different fragrances of spices, flowers, ointments and aloe are an important part of the game that these lovers play (4:13-14). She always smells good, which is a sign of attention to detail. He tells her: "... *the fragrance of your breath like apples...*" (7:8d). "Fragrances represent, in addition, the experience of those realities that aren't seeing or touching, but are perceived, in a more subtle and deep way. Like that mysterious force that unites the lovers" (Ruiz, Eleuterio R. Beyond language: the metaphor as an expressive resource in the Song of Songs. Available online: <http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/revistas/beyond-the-language-ruiz.pdf>).

Questions:

- What is an aphrodisiac? What foods were considered aphrodisiacs in Semitic cultures? What about today?
- Mention two ways to love with taste and smell respectively.

III. Loving by hearing and touching

A. Loving with the ear

The ear is a sensory organ that allows us to perceive sounds. With the ear, each one feels the caress of the sweet voice of the one who is loved. The voice is recognized, unmistakable, there is no other voice like it. She knows that voice is her beloved's, therefore, she cries: *"Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills"* (2:8). He too seeks his loved one: *"show me your face, Let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely"* (2:14). At some point, the voice of the loved one becomes almost food for the soul. They need to hear each other's voices to survive.

One day, she was asleep but her heart was still attentive, awaiting the return of her lover. She didn't know when he would return, but her hearing was attentive. Suddenly, she recognizes the voice and exclaims: *"I slept but my heart was awake. Listen! My beloved is knocking..."* (5:2). Her heart was tied to her lover, a sample of it gives us what she says: *"I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer"* (5:6c). In a moment, she feels jealousy of those who all day listen to the voice of her loved one. Then she asks: *"O my beloved, living in the gardens, how wonderful that your companions may listen to your voice; let me hear it too"* (8:13) (Living Bible).

B. Love with touch

We are relational beings, and that implies closeness and contact. The sense of touch is probably the most primitive of the senses, and many experts think it's vital to our survival. Touch is essential to development, and with its two square meters, the skin is the main and largest sensory organ as it envelops the whole body. All types of touch receivers are concentrated in the skin. Therefore, with all our skin we can perceive stimuli that the brain will interpret.

Through loving and tender physical contact, like caresses, hugs and massages, the brain secretes endorphins that convey a feeling of well-being and confidence, which relaxes and gives a feeling of happiness. The woman in love who starts in Song of Songs, from the beginning of the book, imagines the physical contact

with her loved one (1:2). That fills her with happiness and empowers her to ask him to draw her to him (1:4). Her skin had undergone the color transformation by the action of the sun, something that wasn't often seen in women of that time. But her wish is that her loved one approach her, touch her, to discover that she is dark (1:5-6); she herself says that she is a very appetizing woman!

There are many moments when they share physical contact in different ways. Tenderness is highlighted. For example, he leans on her breasts (1:13). They embrace, rest (2:6-7) without haste while enjoying the presence and contact of each other's bodies (2:7d). The meeting progresses and the beloved, free and surrendered to love, says to her: *"Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue..."* (4:11a). Obviously, they had already kissed passionately, and enjoyed the tender encounter of the kiss. Later, in a scene where they are almost playing games, they chase each other and he finds, she is already naked and in her bed, and he is outside asking to enter. She lingers, and he reaches out his hand to touch her, and she says: *"My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him."* (5:4). There is a profound dedication and a deep connection between lovers.

Another image of tender love is revealed to us when he declares to her: *"How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights!"* (7:6). This indicates that he has been stroking her whole body, over and over again, sensing the softness of her skin. Again, the image of tenderness appears when the friends say: *"Who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?"* (8:5a). They have found each other. They have found bliss in each other's arms.

Questions:

- Name two ways in which the protagonists of Song of Songs loved each other with their ears.
- Are caresses a manifestation of loving with touch? Explain.

Conclusion

Song of Songs is a call to Christians to approach the issue of sexuality with total naturalness, just as God planned from the beginning, to explore and seek the depth of conjugal love in all its manifestations. Our Creator left in the hands of His creatures the task of administering everything He created. This includes ourselves and the pure and sacred love that links us to each other. To love passionately with the whole being must be done using our five senses.

The Church: model for the world (1 & 2 Thessalonians; 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus)

Fourth quarter

Powerful Witnesses of Christ
A leader who loves the church
Lives that pleases God
Maranatha
Mandates for today's Christians
The Second Coming of Christ
Warning Against Idleness
Ministerial training
Qualifications for Overseers and Deacons
The portrait of a pastor
The implications of being a pastor
Paul's Final Charge to Timothy
Building a blameless church



Powerful witnesses of Christ

Jorge L. Julca (Argentina)

Study passages: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, 2:1-16

Memory Verse: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit" 1 Thessalonians 1:6.

Lesson aim: To challenge the students to be an example to others by imitating Christ.

Introduction

We've all heard and seen testimonies from believers that impact our hearts. This may have nothing to do with how long they've been members of the church or with how well they spoke. Some witnesses, although they haven't verbalized their experience with Christ, communicate the powerful change that has been happening within them.

The truth is that in order to be a witness of Jesus, words sometimes aren't necessary. What makes a powerful testimony in the life of a believer? Thessalonica was a busy port city where we find one of the first century Christian churches founded by Paul during his second missionary journey, about 50 AD (Acts 17:1-8).

Paul and Silas, having been expelled from Philippi, arrived in the great city of Thessalonica. Faithful to their call from God, they began to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue for three weeks amid much opposition (Acts 17:2). As a result, some Jews and Greeks believed. Later, Paul and Silas continued their missionary work in the house of Jason, but the Jews who didn't believe gathered a mob (Acts 17:5), and eventually they ended up expelling them from the city. However, the gospel had already been sown in the hearts of these new Thessalonian believers.

We find in Acts 17 what the Jews thought about Paul and Silas. This declaration of the Jewish opponents in front of the city authorities has become one of the most precious descriptions of what the primitive Christians were. They declared: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here..." (Acts 17:6). Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is one of the oldest of all his canonical epistles. (Some believe that the epistle to the Galatians could have been written at an earlier date - 48-49 AD). In his correspondence with the Thessalonians, Paul the pastor encouraged these new believers, and he congratulated them on their exemplary Christian conduct.

The first verse of this letter shows the typically Pauline greeting. For Paul, the terms 'grace and peace' are inseparable, with one being the result of the other. By God's grace, which is His unmerited favor toward us, we can have the long-awaited peace with Him and the restoration of all our broken relationships. In fact, the word 'grace' had so much theological significance for the apostle Paul that he began and ended his thirteen New Testament letters with that term.

I. Exemplary disciples (1 Thess. 1:1-10)

In this first chapter, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonian church, which was a common way Paul introduced many of his letters. It's interesting to note that in this case, He gave thanks to God for the exemplary testimony of the brothers and sisters in Thessalonica, as we'll see.

A. Theology and action complement each other in the Christian life

At the beginning of this letter to this first century Christian community, Paul highlighted the three Christian virtues that its members practiced: "We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (v.3). What was outstanding was how these virtues were manifested in practical ways as shown in their daily lives as disciples of Christ.

This implies that the Christian life doesn't just mean intellectual acceptance of a list of creeds or confessions, but rather, these need to be externalized through concrete actions.

1. "Your work produced by faith" (v.3a): What was required wasn't just an intellectual agreement with a certain doctrine or theological statement. They accepted the truth, which then resulted in tangible practice. Faith is not just a spiritual treasure to keep; it must be translated into action. James affirmed this in his letter (James 2:17). Genuine faith will naturally produce works of love and mercy towards others.

2. *"Your labor prompted by love"* (v.3b): This is another powerful combination in the Christian life: love plus work. The Greek term used for the word 'work' is *kopos*, which refers to hard work (Brown, Fitzmyer and Roland. *Biblical Commentary Saint Jerome*, volume III. Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1972, p.580). This implies that Christian love has to be supplemented with committed, dedicated hard work. Love or compassion becomes a reality when it's demonstrated in relation to others, as Romans 5:8 puts it clearly. The love of the Father declared for us must be translated into real actions. In Christ, we find the incarnation of God's love, and his life must be the model for us to follow.

3. *"Your endurance inspired by hope"* (v.3c): The Greek term for 'endurance' could also mean patience. That is, the Thessalonians lived their Christian experience patiently waiting for the fulfillment of Christ. Christian hope doesn't paralyze us or detract us from our present life experiences. The present longing for what will come gives us strength and patience in our daily journeys, even in the face of adverse situations and trials.

This Pauline statement that introduces us to the profile of Thessalonian Christians frees us from the polarization between theology and practice, and the discussion of what could be more important: what we believe or the way we live. We too must be like those early Christians whose Christian virtues were embodied in concrete actions.

B. We must be imitators of God (vv. 6-7)

This is another characteristic that Paul highlighted from the Thessalonians' experience; they had become imitators of the Lord and of their spiritual mentors. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul emphasized this same truth (1 Corinthians 11:1), showing his own longing to become more like the Master. It's this imitation of Christ that produces joy in our hearts, even in the midst of tribulations and persecutions.

Undoubtedly the hostile environment of Thessalonica had shaped the Christian experience of these believers. That powerful mix of being imitators of Christ, and the joy produced in their hearts by the work of the Holy Spirit, had made them an example of Christian living.

C. Through their testimony, the Thessalonian church grew, evidencing radical change (vv.8-9)

When the Word of God reaches our hearts, it takes root, and new believers not only become faithful followers and imitators of Jesus, but also, because their lives are changed, the Word is extended to others. There was no need for courses on evangelism or a sermon to push them to go out and share what had happened because spontaneously, the message of salvation was proclaimed. So, these new Thessalonian believers were transformed from being new

converts into missionaries; they carried the message of Christ to the Macedonian provinces and Achaia.

What is the impact of the testimony of new believers? Without a doubt, we can see the change experienced in their lives and the certainty of salvation. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). That transformative power of the gospel is what brings miraculous and surprising changes to people's lives.

In this case, the Thessalonians were impacting the neighboring cities through the radical change generated through their conversion. 1 Thessalonians 1:9 says: *"They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."* Many of the members of this community came from paganism, and their conversion meant abandoning pagan practices and the worship of false gods to become worshipers of the one true God.

D. Living hope in the risen Christ (v.10)

The exemplary testimony of these brothers and sisters would have been incomplete without a glorious hope in resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the promise of eternal life through Him. The Thessalonian brothers and sisters clearly understood that our days here on earth are just a prologue to eternity, and that the gospel of Christ has made provision not only for forgiveness from our past, but helps us live with the joy of the Spirit now in the present. This inspires us to look forward to the coming of glory and eternal life.

Actually, this first chapter of 1 Thessalonians wonderfully establishes the profile of a believer in the first century. The constituent elements are keys which should be present in the Christian life such as conversion, Christian virtues, valuable testimonies, joy of the Spirit, persecution and eschatological hope.

Questions:

- What are the five aspects of the Christian life of the Thessalonians that made them powerful witnesses of Jesus Christ?
- Why is it important that Christian virtues are evidenced in concrete actions?

II. Exemplary Ministers (1 Thes. 2:1-12)

In the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians, the apostle Paul presented a defense of his ministry because presumably, after his first visit to Thessalonica and the expulsion from there, the Thessalonians continued to receive negative comments about Paul, his co-workers, and his ministry (vv.1-2).

The church in Thessalonica was a faithful, committed church with a missionary vision. They had been able to observe those characteristic qualities of Jesus through

Paul's ministry during his visit and the planting of the congregation. The apostle had spent at least three weeks with them, sufficient time to inspire their lives and guide them in their Christian walk.

In the following verses of this chapter, we're introduced to the characteristics of an exemplary ministry.

A. Fidelity in the midst of opposition (v.2)

Paul's second missionary journey was bumpy. While he and Silas were in Philippi, they were imprisoned for preaching the gospel. While they were in jail singing with joy to the Lord, there was a great earthquake at midnight, and although they stayed in jail when they could have escaped, they were released by the magistrates the next day (Acts 16:23-36). They started from Philippi and came to Thessalonica. There they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ in the synagogue, emphasizing His death and resurrection (Acts 17:1-3).

Probably most of the believers to whom this letter was addressed (1 Thessalonians) became Christians on that occasion, but Paul and his collaborators faced open opposition from non-believing Jews. They were persecuted, accused, and finally violently expelled from the city (Acts 17:1-9). However, Paul's assessment of that visit was that suffering was useful for the early church.

Consider the following question: Is it possible to bear fruit in our ministries in the midst of adverse situations? The birth and development of Christianity in the first century always faced persecution and all sorts of mistreatments. However, the faithfulness of the evangelists and missionaries remained unchanged.

B. Support from God (vv. 3-4)

In these verses, Paul made a profound statement about his convictions related to the ministry. He mentioned at least three aspects:

(1) Approved by God, that is to say, he had the assurance that the Lord Himself had called him. His task wasn't simply an altruistic human commission, nor was it just his effort. This work was born from the heart of God.

(2) God had entrusted him with the gospel. Paul linked his calling with his commission, his life mission. The passion of his heart was to communicate the gospel ("*we dared to tell you his gospel*").

(3) His message was to please God first and no one else. This implied that fundamentally, the development of his ministry was centered on the divine call and in the quest to be approved by God who had called him.

C. Right motivations (vv.5-6)

What are the reasons that should drive us to preach the gospel? Paul mentioned what it was that motivated him in Thessalonica: "*... we never used flattery ...*" (v.5a). He never said nice things to try to convince them. This refers to not conditioning or making the gospel message light to gain followers. The purity of the message in preaching the gospel is a crucial matter in maintaining the integrity of the messenger and the effectiveness of the message.

"*... nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed...*" (v.5b). This means that ministry isn't about profit or achieving personal benefits. In verse 9, Paul emphasized the same idea when he states that he and his companions had worked hard to not be a financial burden to the congregation, which could have brought confusion to their faith. "*We were not looking for praise from people...*" (v.6). Doing things to get recognition and fame in ministry can be a very subtle aspect that can ruin a ministry.

The correct motives of a Christian mentor or leader are to always act with integrity which doesn't condition the message, honesty that doesn't seek personal gain, and humility that doesn't expect recognition and admiration of others.

D. Pastoral affection (vv.7-12)

The apostle closed this paragraph with the fourth characteristic of an exemplary minister, which, in a way, is the natural result of the three previous characteristics. He used the tender figure of a "nursing mother", or a "father" (verse 11). Verses 7 and 8 show the great affection that Paul had for these new Christians, which prompted him not only to present the gospel, but also to take care of them with affectionate pastoral love. Part of that pastoral relationship had to do with consolation and exhortation on some topics that would be covered later in the letter.

Questions:

- What relationship exists between the opposition to the preaching of the gospel and the integrity of the message, according to the letter of 1 Thessalonians?
- What would be the correct motivations to preach the gospel today?

Conclusion

The Thessalonians learned from their mentors (Paul and his collaborators) that the transformative gospel had to reach out to others. They had become powerful witnesses of Christ, not only in this city, but in all the Province. This is also our call and challenge: to be powerful witnesses of the gospel of Jesus, making it visible in concrete actions in the world we live in.



A leader who loves the church

Mary Prado (Venezuela)

Study passages: I Thessalonians 2:17-20, 3:1-13

Memory Verse: "Indeed, you are our glory and joy" I Thessalonians 2:20.

Lesson aim: To identify the characteristics of a minister who loves the church.

Introduction

"Love is what gives the magic touch in ministry, both to God and to men" (Unger, Merrill F. Unger's Bible Handbook. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1993, p.547). A loveless ministry is lacking in the essential nature that distinguishes Christian service.

This lesson will teach us the characteristics of a ministry filled with the love of Christ. We'll study this taking a look at Paul's ministry to the Thessalonian church. Let's begin by reminding ourselves of the circumstances surrounding the ministry of this servant there. Paul visited Thessalonica during his second missionary trip, leaving a large number of believers in this city (Acts 17:1-4). Later, the apostle continued his journey to Athens, first passing through Berea (Acts 17:10-14). From there, he sent for Timothy to find out how the church was doing in Thessalonica (I Thessalonians 3:1-2). "The excellent news brought by Timothy greatly encouraged the apostle, but it seems that he had to face accusations against his character, as some said that he had worked among the Thessalonians for his own material benefit" (Lockward, Alfonso. New Dictionary of the Bible. USA: Editorial Unilit, 1992, p.1010).

This brings us light on the vocation and love of Paul and his helpers towards this church. They felt more than rewarded just knowing that those in whom they had sown the gospel were persevering and were growing in faith, despite the struggles they had to face (I Thessalonians 2:18-20).

I. The reward of a leader who loves their church (I Thessalonians 2:17-20, 3:1-5)

A leader's relationship with his church creates deep ties as time passes and they share experiences. As we'll see in the first part of the passage we'll study, I Thessalonians 2:17-3:5, this church brought Paul and his team great joy.

The Thessalonian church was more than just believers for Paul. He considered them to be his brothers and sisters, children and friends in Christ, whom he loved in a very special way (v.17). They were the most valuable prize of his ministry (v. 19-20). The deep love that the great apostle felt for this church exceeded the innumerable obstacles put in his way by the enemy.

A. A leader who enjoys the growth of believers

The prize or reward for Paul was that the Thessalonians were doing fine in every way and growing in their faith: "*You are our glory and joy*" (v.20). The main cause of rejoicing for a leader whose vocation it is to love people is to see spiritual growth in those whom he or she leads. To see the believers grow and persevere amid their countless struggles and persecutions was what gave Paul real joy.

The rhetorical questions of verse 19 are very significant: "*For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?*" In Greek there are two words for crown. One is a headband, which usually refers to a Royal Crown. The other is *stephanos* (**στέφανος**) which is used almost exclusively to designate the victor's crown in a sports contest. *Stephanos* is the word Paul uses here. "The only reward he really appreciated in life was to see his converts live according to the Gospel" (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament, The First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.787).

Paul was so conscious of God's call that he dedicated his whole life to win others for Christ. The life of this apostle, as we all know, was full of many difficulties, but he didn't let that get in the way of the purpose to which God had called him. His great joy was to see the success of the gospel and the conversion of the lost, and for this he invested all his assets, even his own life.

Leaders who love the church have in their heart the beautiful purpose of delivering not only the gospel message, but also, if necessary, even their own life. This didn't just imply being willing to die physically, although we must be also willing to do so if necessary for the cause of Christ, but rather, to live for others, for those whom the Lord has called us to serve. This passage shows us that the result of selfless dedication to the ministry is the blessing of God and the growth and love of the believers. "Such a service always has the blessing of God and bears fruit, as happened with the Thessalonians" (Unger, Merrill F. Unger's Bible handbook. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1993, p.547).

B. A leader who cares about their church

Another expression of the leader's love is a deep concern for the needs of the church. The main focus is not the needs of the building, neither the furniture nor the liturgy, but the people and their spiritual needs. Today, when technology has replaced the closeness of interpersonal relationships, very little pastoral care is given in direct affectionate relationships. Instead, impersonal means and empty methodologies devoid of human warmth are used. But Paul, for his part, strongly felt the need to know if the Thessalonians had persevered in their faith, so much so that he couldn't stay calm in the absence of news of the church, which made him send Timothy to learn about them and give them the moral and spiritual support that they needed (1 Thessalonians 3:1-5). "His anxiety was such for the spiritual welfare of the Thessalonians that he preferred to stay alone so that he could send Timothy to take care of their spiritual interests and strengthen them against the tribulations they were enduring" (Unger, Merrill F. Unger's Bible Handbook, USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1993, p.548).

Paul's great concern for the welfare of the Thessalonians evidences his pastoral heart and great love that he had towards the church.

Questions:

- What did Paul mean by saying that the Thessalonians were his crown? (v.19).
- What do you think of Paul's great concern for the welfare of the Thessalonians? Explain.

II. The motivation of a leader who loves their church (1 Thessalonians 3:6-8)

Despite so many trials and needs that the apostle was experiencing on a personal level, the good news that he received through Timothy about the perseverance of the Thessalonian church, and learning of the great affection and respect that they had for him, were his

great motivation. There were two reasons why they had been a source of comfort to Paul. First, Timothy gave him good news (lit. "glad tidings," Robertson) of their faith and love ... The second reason was the joy of the apostle since they always remembered him fondly and looked forward to seeing him again face to face (Earle, Ralph, ed. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IX, Galatians to Philemon. USA: CNP, 1969, pp. 488-489).

In this second part of the lesson, we'll study 3: 6-8, where we'll observe what motivated this great leader.

A. A leader who serves selflessly

Today, it's very common to see some church leaders who work mostly for material gain. Numerous pastors have abandoned God's work when economic resources have been scarce in the church or material advancement has been presented to do something else. This is characteristic of some salaried pastors. We'll use a parallel passage located in John 10:7-15 to study this issue.

Paul is the antithesis of the salaried pastor. Barclay wrote on this passage: "... the hireling shepherd did the work not out of vocation, but as a way to earn money ... What Jesus meant was that he who works just to complete hours thinks only about money, but he who works for love thinks of those whom he is trying to serve" (Barclay, William. Commentary to the New Testament, The First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.441).

Paul taught us the value of selfless and faithful service as an expression of the minister's love for the church and God, which in no way contradicts the text of 1 Timothy 5:18. "*Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,*" and "*The worker deserves his wages.*"

B. A leader who wins the heart of the church

Perhaps the greatest reward of Christian leadership is the appreciation of those whom they serve. Hearts who have been comforted, who have been helped both in spiritual and material needs, will return love as a response of gratitude. But winning the heart of the church is not an easy task for a leader. Paul had to pay a high price for it. The affection of the church comes as a result of a deep dedication to service on the part of her ministers: "There can be no doubt that a life so full and open hearted with all its inherent risk of suffering is a basic requirement for success in the work of the gospel. Perhaps it can also be said that this is the price to be paid if today's pastor is to be loved by his sheep as Paul was by the Thessalonians" (Earle, Ralph, ed. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IX, Galatians to Philemon. USA: CNP, 1969, pp. 489-490).

As this part of the biblical passage shows us, winning the heart of the church is not an easy task, but neither is it impossible. Love is the church's natural response to a leader who loves the congregation and strives to build it up.

Questions:

- What effect did the good news that Timothy brought have on Paul? (vv.6-7).
- How does the minister win the heart of his church today? Comment.

III. The prayer of a leader who loves their church (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

What we have studied so far has taught us those things that bring joy and motivate Christian leaders. In the last part of the passage (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13), we are shown Paul's love for the church because he fervently interceded for them.

A. A prayer full of gratitude

One of the clear evidences of a minister's love toward the church is shown in his/her intercessory prayer for them. This implies, sharing the needs of the congregation and considering the members as their spiritual children. Pastors have the privilege of giving thanks and interceding for each of the lives that God has put in their care. "It is significant to note how Paul's intense joy for the converted is seen in the way he pours into a cascade of eager thanksgiving prayer for them" (Earle, Ralph, ed. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IX, Galatians through Philemon. USA: CNP, 1969, p.490).

Paul asked the Thessalonians: "*How can we thank God enough for you...*" (v.9). In other words, the apostle was so pleased with the believers of that church that he couldn't find a proper way to thank God for them. His deep joy for those brothers and sisters motivated him to intercede for them: "*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith*" (v.10). This is a beautiful example for us today of how we continually bring to the Lord's feet, through prayer, all those people who we have been given the privilege of serving.

B. A prayer for sanctification

Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians not only had an emotional component, but also showed his concern for everything related to their spiritual life and morals: "*May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father*

when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (v.13). Taking as a reference 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 which follows this passage, and is part of its context, we find Paul's requests for the church in the field of Christian ethics. He spoke of the new life they should lead now that they were Christians, contrary to what they had experienced before. Those defects had undoubtedly been reported to him by Timothy, so the abundant joy Paul was experiencing gave him freedom to deal with ethical concerns (Earle, Ralph, ed. Commentary Biblical Beacon, Volume IX, Galatians to Philemon, USA: CNP, 1969, p.490).

1 Thessalonians 3:10 says: "*Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*" "Supply what is lacking" is a key phrase regarding Paul's interest for the moral life of the church. His profound desire was to be able to visit them again in order to edify them in everything they still needed to learn so that their faith could be perfect. Ralph Earl suggests that this phrase implies tidying up, adjusting or mending rickety things. (Earle, Ralph, ed. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IX, Galatians to Philemon. USA: CNP, 1969, p.491).

The duty of every Christian leader or minister is to express love for the church, and also, to pray continually for the sanctification of believers so that the Holy Spirit can build and sanctify the church (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2).

Questions:

- Do you think it's important for the leader to give thanks for the believers? Comment.
- What did Paul hope to "supply" for the Thessalonians? (v.10).

Conclusion

It's wonderful how Paul was so connected with the Thessalonian church through his love and service. The tenderness with which the apostle treated his sons and daughters in the faith is truly overwhelming. But also, we see the affection and gratitude that the church had towards him. Here we see a significant reference to the relationship that should exist between the pastor and his/her church.



Lives that please God

Sharon Viquez (Costa Rica)

Study Passage: I Thessalonians 4:1-12

Memory Verse: “As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live, in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more” I Thessalonians 4:1.

Lesson Aim: To understand the call that God makes to the believer to experience sanctification, live in sexual purity, and manifest brotherly love.

Introduction

“Oh, my children! For the love of God, I ask you Be good!”, my grandmother used to tell us when we were going to a special gathering at school, a birthday party or a family activity. She was worried that our actions would not be worthy of the family and the values that we had been taught in our home. When I read Paul’s opening words in our Biblical passage, I seem to be hearing the same recommendation that my grandmother made to us (I Thessalonians 4:1).

This passage is the beginning of a new emphasis on the Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, in which he gave them practical exhortations on the Christian life. In this specific case, the apostle appealed to the Thessalonian believers to continue to carry out all that they had learned from his teaching. He made it clear that all the instructions were not from him but had been given from the Lord Jesus (v.2). The young church at Thessalonica was encouraged to receive Paul’s words of exhortation to continue living a life pleasing in the eyes of God, as they were already doing (v.1). The Christian life is a process of growth, cemented by faith.

The following question arises: “What sort of life pleases God?” This is the question we all have to ask ourselves once we have accepted Christ and understand that now our life belongs to Him. The principles that Paul taught in I Thessalonians 4:1-12 are still powerful for the contemporary church that wants to live pleasing the Lord.

Doing God’s will is recognizing that He is the one who reigns in our lives, and therefore, doing His will is above our interests and personal wishes. Paul indicated that whoever wants to do God’s will will live a life of holiness (I Thess. 4:1-8) in brotherly love (I Thess. 4:9-12).

I. Called to Holiness (I Thess. 4:1-3a)

A. What is Sanctification?

I like to define sanctification as that work of God in the depths of our being that transforms us into the likeness of Christ, changing us from sinners to holy people set apart for God. Keith Drury explains that process of sanctification: “When you received Christ, it was done, Live in Christ, experience your own resurrection, for the Word of God says that we were all dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2.1.). By faith we have received a new life. God changed several aspects of our lives. Perhaps you remember observing in the weeks following your conversion, different values, new interests and desires. God had changed you internally. It may be that you changed some of your habits. Other people would have observed the changes. Maybe someone told you “You look different.” Each person changes at the time of conversion. God instantly works some significant changes” (Drury, Keith. *Spiritual Disciplines for all Believers*. USA: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1996, pp. 13-14).

B. Sanctification: A Moment and a Process

The believer is sanctified at conversion, nevertheless, the sanctifying work doesn’t end there. Initial holiness is just that: the beginning of the new life with Christ. Pleasing God implies totally surrendering our wills to Him. Believers come to the point of recognizing that there is a time to make the decision to let the Lord work within us, surrendering our will to Him completely, and setting ourselves apart to do His holy will. We call this entire consecration or entire sanctification. This is a work of God that follows regeneration, when the person is freed from original sin. This act is performed by the Holy Spirit.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about spiritual development, confronting them by telling them to go further and further in that process of submission to God's will, living in a way that pleases God. The fullness of the Holy Spirit is the only means to achieve total sanctification. Paul urged them to go deeper in their experience with Christ (v.1). We don't know if the Thessalonian believers, to whom this letter was addressed, had experienced entire sanctification, but Paul was telling them that they had to grow more and more, indicating that they must not stagnate in the process of the life of holiness.

We are holy by virtue of our relationship with God in Christ, and of this aspect there is practical advice for the life of holiness described in Jim Packer's book, *The Rebirth of Christian Holiness*, which can be vital in this lesson point. Let's briefly look at some of these.

1. Holiness is God's process of refining, cleansing, broadening, encouraging, strengthening, and maturing us and so on progressively until we reach the moral and spiritual way in which He wants us to be.

2. Holiness is taking God's moral law as the norm and his Son incarnate as a model.

(Packer, J. I. *The Rebirth of Christian Holiness*. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1995, pp. 14-17).

Questions:

- Describe the sanctification process explained in the lesson.
- What is entire sanctification?

II. Called to Sexual Purity (1 Thess. 4:3b-8)

A. A Hedonistic World

The harmful practices that threatened the life of holiness of the church in Thessalonica are no different than those that the church of the XXI century lives today. When God calls us to a life of holiness, it includes every aspect of life.

Paul was specific in indicating a concrete practice in which they must be different as God's people: "... you should avoid sexual immorality" (v.3b). In the Roman Empire, sexual norms were very low, similar to our contemporary society. Because of this, Paul exhorted the Thessalonian church to be completely separate from all sexual immorality. The Beacon Biblical Commentary mentions that "one of the barriers that pagans had to jump was the Christian attitude towards sex, since they had been raised in a world in which polygamy, concubinage, homosexuality and promiscuity were accepted as a common place" (Howard, Taylor. Beacon

Bible Commentary. USA: CNP, 1965, p.497).

We live in a hedonistic society where people live to satisfy their desire for pleasure. This is what is called living for pleasure's sake. Christians cannot let the world and its practices define their values or undermine the meaning of correct sexuality.

B. Biblical view of sexuality

Merriam Webster's online dictionary defines "sexuality" as: "The quality or state of being sexual: a) the condition of having sex, b) sexual activity, c) expression of sexual receptivity or interest, especially when excessive" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sexuality>).

The Bible is the manual in which the believer, who walks in holiness, finds the framework for given practices and behaviors related to the pursuit of sexual pleasure and reproduction. So, let's see what the Word of God says about sexuality in Genesis 1:27-28; 2:18,22,24-25. Those passages show us that God created human beings, and this included their sexuality.

So, we can affirm that men and women were sexual beings created to have sex together. That corporal-spiritual intimacy implies and requires exclusivity, honesty, and openness in communication for trust to prevail. This celebration of sexuality wasn't accidental, rather, it requires the framework of fidelity. Marriage is that framework created by God for procreation purposes, but also for mutual companionship where we can find help and comfort. Marriage is for mutual commitment of a generous love that finds its natural expression in sexual union (intercourse) in a relationship of fidelity.

Human beings are considered by God to be responsible and more than mere sexual creatures, but rather sexual persons, responsible before God for the care of the earth, called to remain in communion between their fellow men and their Creator.

C. The influence of sin on sexuality

Like all areas of life, the practice of sexuality has been distorted by the influence of sin. "A distortion is a change, twist, or exaggeration that makes something appear different from the way it really is. You can distort an image, a thought, or even an idea" <https://www.google.com/dictionary+definition+of+distortion>.

From that perspective, God's original plan regarding the sexual meeting between a man and a woman, as a means to their own fulfillment and communion as individuals, can be distorted. Question: what distortions in sexuality come as the result of sin? Apart from the practices in themselves, we could mention a few principles

that help us discern distorted forms of human sexuality:

1. When the sexual approach is merely a physical act which only seeks pleasure or to provide a service. When sexuality becomes depersonalized and dehumanized, it lowers our value as people.
2. When the exclusive commitment to sexual intimacy is broken (infidelity in marriage).
3. When the union is contrary to the original nature of the heterosexual union as established in the book of Genesis.

D. The manifestation of grace

The church has a prophetic responsibility to witness to the standards that God revealed, and a pastoral responsibility to show compassion to those who haven't been able to stay within these cited principles. We cannot forget that it's the grace of God that elevates and liberates our sexuality and enables it to fulfill the role for which it was originally created, inside of the framework of marriage, to express love, intimacy, fidelity and communion.

As Christians, we must understand that we shouldn't act as judges of those who have assumed distorted practices of sexuality. That role corresponds to Him, our just Judge. This doesn't mean that we'll act with tolerance of wrongful practices, but with consideration and compassion on those who sin, based on the fact that they can receive God's amazing grace and forgiveness. We must face with sensitivity the tragedy of many who suffer the distortion of their sexuality because often, they are victims of a situation that is out of their control and that needs to be viewed with compassionate eyes.

Questions:

- There are sexual practices that the Bible mentions as deviations from the divine standard, but that human rights have endorsed as correct. Does this mean that civil law makes God's moral law worthless? Comment.
- What are the harmful practices in human sexuality that may be taking place within the people of God?

III. Called to Brotherly Love (1 Thess. 4:9-12)

Paul wrote to the church *"Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other"* (v.9) Brotherly or fraternal love is the second aspect which pleases God. When we love each other, we are reflecting the character of Christ. Brotherly love (fileo) is the love that is expressed between siblings or friends. Jesus commanded us to love like this (John 13:32-35). The early Christians practiced it (Acts 4:32-35), and the

apostles permanently exhorted Jesus' followers to love each other (1 John 4:7-21), because loving like this is evidence of new birth.

Paul told them: *"...in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more"* (v.10). They were doing well, not just among themselves, but also with Christians from other regions - the Macedonians. However, the apostle invited the Thessalonians to abound still more in that brotherly love, as a characteristic of progress being made in the process of holiness of life.

Loving each other implies not being a burden to others. So, Paul encouraged the believers to work. Not only to obtain their own support, but also to avoid the life of leisure and excess of free time, which could lead them to interfere in the life of others. So "brotherly love and honest work, hold hands as evidence of Christian life" (Howard, Taylor: Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 9. USA: CNP, 1965, p.505).

Loving one another is reflected with concrete actions in the Christian life. In 1 Thessalonians 4, we find three examples: - collaboration with others (v.10); diligence at work (v.11); and behaving honestly with others (v.12). Like the previous points, the demand for the gospel for us is the same. We are called to show our love of neighbor with concrete actions, sharing our bread with the needy, showing compassion for the migrants of our countries, separating part of our income for acts of solidarity, as recommended in Ephesians 4:28.

We need to work with honesty and dedication because it's a way to express our love and holiness of life to our employers. In Colossians 3:23, Paul takes up this point, indicating that our work honors God and testifies to our faith.

Questions:

- How does the principle of brotherly love, that the church should express to those who live in a community, apply?
- Give examples of how brotherly love can be used in evangelism.

Conclusion

Whoever seeks to please God is not exempt from temptations, limitations, or strife. What is guaranteed is that when we live like this, we'll have peace with God, knowing that our deeds are bearing witness to the transformation that Christ has brought about in our lives. As my grandmother used to say: "For the love of God, I ask you to be good!" Let's live as good and holy people, not in our eyes, but in the eyes of the Lord.

Study passages: I Thessalonians 4:13-17, 5:1-11

Memory Verse: “So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober” I Thessalonians 5:6.

Lesson aim: To understand that the church, the body of Christ, must be prepared for the Second Coming of the Lord.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the early church believers loved God with all their hearts. In spite of persecution and the danger of death, those Christians showed signs of receiving the gospel as their most precious treasure. We aren't talking about the commotion produced by the miracles that the apostles performed, but there was something both significant and valuable for them: The Second Coming of Christ.

In Macedonia, which was famous for personalities like Alexander the Great and Aristotle, the polytheistic and capricious dynasty of Olympian gods permeated the religious scene. Around the year 50 or 51, a group of fervent Christians continued to build up the church which had been planted by the apostle Paul.

Those Thessalonian Christians understood that none of their previous deities had offered them what Christ had given them through His blood. None of the dazzling heroes, like the famous Homeric epics, had died to forgive their sins and give them eternal life. Therefore, they had a special greeting which was at the same time a prophecy: “Maranatha, a Greek transcription of an expression of Aramaic origin which means, among other things: The Lord is coming” (Vine's Expository Dictionary of the Old and New Testament Words. Nashville, USA. Thomas Nelson, 2003).

The Thessalonians internalized this truth to the point that they saw His coming as imminent, and many abandoned their usual tasks since Jesus was about to come back. Paul, in this letter, not only reaffirmed the indisputable truth of the Second Coming of Christ, but he called the recipients to carry on their daily lives in holiness as they pursued that great prize at His coming. The timing of the Second Coming wasn't predictable, but even the dead in Christ would experience it.

Today, even though the coming of Christ is closer than it was for those believers, the attitude of many,

paradoxically, doesn't imply this. We can affirm that although the position of some of the Christians of that epoch may have been out of focus, many today act as if Jesus is never coming back! But it's true that Jesus is going to come back again. We need to learn and have 'Maranatha' written on our bathroom mirrors to remind us daily of what the Bible declares to be true.

I. Christ will come to seek His people (I Thessalonians 4:13-17)

This portion of Scripture is eminently eschatological because it announces the glorious end for the righteous, for those with clean hands and pure hearts. It's the consummation of that expectant hope of psalmists and biblical patriarchs who lived in the midst of blunder and pain. That hope they prophesied wasn't mere poetry or myth, but the certainty that something extraordinary would occur. Job knew what he was talking about when he said: “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:25-26).

In Hebrews 11, we read of an assembly made up of the heroes of faith who “were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39-49). The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:19 said: “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Certainly, the one who promised to come soon (Revelation 22:20) will come with a commanding voice and trumpet sounding from heaven. This is synonymous with joy and power, of authority and crown, of judgment and victory. Jesus Christ said that he would come, and He will. We'll receive the promised gift or reward of our salvation that will have its consummation when the Lord takes His church home. Now we need to recognize that Christ died on the cross for us, repent of our past life, accept Him

as our Savior, imitate His life, serve Him faithfully, and live consciously waiting for His inescapable return.

The prophecy of Christ's Second Coming is important. It should motivate us to live and work for Christ, and even die if necessary. The second coming of the Lord is also the consolation as we say good bye to the faithful in our funeral services. Obviously, we harbor sadness and longing for those who are no longer with us, but it's comforting to know that they are closer than we are to receiving the Lord since they will be the first to be raised from the dead in that triumphant encounter (1 Thessalonians 4:15-16). Yes, if we abide in Christ, one day we'll all be together, gathered at the marriage feast of the Lamb.

There is a defining word in verse 13 - 'hope.' We are exhorted to appropriate it because it's what distinguishes us from those who don't have God. Death can no longer rule over us, nor will it rob us of joy, nor cause us to fear, because it's the key to eternal life, to the encounter with our Creator.

Death is a transition for which we must be prepared for at any time. It comes from the hand of God. We know that He awaits us, and one day, He will raise us up from that condition in a glorious way (v.16). We can then say with the apostle Paul: "*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*" (1 Corinthians 15:55). As God's people, we have the conviction that the Lord Jesus' return will come to pass, and He will be coming for His bride, the church. The question is: How prepared is the bride for that meeting?

Questions:

- What does the Second Coming of Christ represent for God's people?
- What will happen to Christians who die before the Second Coming of the Lord?

II. Christ will come suddenly (1 Thes. 5:1-3)

The Second Coming of Christ is an absolute truth that cannot be questioned. It should motivate us to live for constant sanctification and to preach the gospel to the lost. We should also mention that for centuries, this momentous fact has disturbed many people in such a way that they have speculated immensely about the topic. By virtue of this, they've made forecasts, announced dates and have taken actions in light of those alleged prophecies, ignoring what the Scriptures reveal about it (vv.2-3). Sadly, this has contributed to the fact that many times, the world sees this event as something imaginary and laughable.

The Word of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, talks about the death of Christ and His coming again, as well as other events concomitant to this,

but neither the day nor the hour is revealed. The current world scenario with wars and conflicts among nations, the proliferation of diseases, famines and epidemics, the event of earthquakes and catastrophes, the appearance of apostates and false prophets, the multiplication of evil by the devaluation of love, among others, constitutes a photograph of what Christ announced in Matthew 24 as signs before the end.

But not only non-believers ignore the Second Coming of Jesus, but the church also with her activism. God's people quietly presume that they have plenty of time to meet spiritual demands and to fulfill their role. The agenda about what is urgent, spiritually speaking, is postponed. People aren't encouraged to get ready for the Second Coming, and they get distracted into thinking that things will continue as they are.

No biblical passage speaks of the Second Coming of Christ as a gradual process, fragmented into stages or at different times, but as an event that will come at the end (Matthew 24:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:2), that is, once and for all. After this there will be no more chances to repent. The expression "... like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2) suggests surprise and bewilderment. The church that is waiting and ready will not be taken by surprise or bewildered.

Questions:

- Do you consider that the Second Coming of Christ is near? Why?
- How do you think such an event will happen?

III. The children of light are alert, waiting for Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:4-11)

Imagine a sailor who has been summoned for his latest and most exciting journey. He has prepared everything he needs for the journey, anticipating any contingency. While he waits, he gets to know what the company is like. He makes the best use of his time preparing in practical ways everything that could be useful to him. So, day after day, he works towards success, yearning to be called to set sail, and above all, to be found fit. We, the children of light, are like those sailors, uniformed with truth and the breastplate of righteousness (Ephesians 6:14). We pass many years battling the rough sea and storms of life, which is part of the training. We'll always be victorious because our ship has the best captain - Jesus Christ, whom we don't see now with our physical eyes, but who will bring us to a safe harbor. However, this last trip is definitive and singular. Then we'll see our leader and Lord face to face.

The Christian needs to understand that our final destination and greater wealth is heaven. Whoever has believed God and has understood the true meaning of

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross will live focused on getting to heaven! It's not about achieving social, economic or academic prizes. It's about achieving spiritual health that is required if we want to see the Lord.

Today, neoliberalism and the philosophy of the so-called new age, already announced in the Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:1-5), has also invaded the church. The adjective 'blessed' in some Christian circles has been reserved for those believers who amass solid capital, or who are in the lifetime chair of a 'prosperous' ministry, or those with as many followers as new doctrines abound.

Neither the prolific ministerial life, nor the contribution of great offerings, nor the repeated times spent in church, will ensure going to Heaven with the Master. Christ comes to seek a church without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:27). Our spiritual condition is the passport to heaven. The Lord has placed access to eternity in our hands.

The truly blessed person is the one who has been crucified with Christ and who lives every day dying to self so that the Lord can continue to work in their life. The man or woman who, without measuring consequences or price, battles with the help of the Holy Spirit to eradicate every trace of carnality in their life is the one who is truly blessed. To do this, they insist on redoubling their guard and being constantly on the lookout. They maintain spiritual disciplines and constantly seek the Lord to sustain, council and guide them. They meditate on God's law by day and night (Psalm 1:2). They pray without ceasing, and the Holy Spirit's voice is not alien to them because they have a close and intimate relationship with God, so much so that they are sensitive to what is right and wrong and submit to God's will. Likewise, they don't compromise their testimony and are always seeking to grow in their relationship with the Lord.

They are like a tree planted next to streams of water which always bears fruit; and everything they do prospers because it's for God (Psalm 1:3). They do whatever it takes to win the lost. They work for the Kingdom, although they get no wages for doing so. They believe that their payment comes from heaven, and consider that they have already been more than paid. They always feel indebted to the Father because they don't forget the cost of their redemption.

That blessed brother or sister would do the same even if there was no heaven, even if there was no eternal life, because their motivation is genuine. They're moved by love and gratitude to God. It's that kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13, long-suffering, kind, without envy, doesn't boast or is puffed up, and rejoices in justice and truth. That kind of love that believes, hopes and supports everything, an unconditional love

for God and neighbor. Whoever acts like this is certain of salvation.

When the Lord comes back, He will gather first those who have died in the Lord, and then those who are alive at His coming. But there is a condition, as Hebrews 12:14b says: "... *without holiness no one will see the Lord.*" Would our Creator demand from us something that we cannot achieve? That doesn't fit the attributes and nature of the God of love.

Knowing our human weaknesses and imperfections, many times we fear the apparent fragility of our access to salvation. But God has given us everything necessary to be able to confidently enter His Kingdom. With the Holy Spirit in us and with us, we can walk towards eternal life. John 16:13-15 states: "*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth... He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine...*"

The Holy Spirit has the divine capacity and mission to help us achieve sanctified lives if we want it and ask for it. He not only executes in us a genuine act of regeneration or new birth, but already as children of God, he transforms us into the likeness of Christ. He frees us from original sin by leading us to whole devotion to the Lord and a holy obedience to Him. In this way, we'll be continuously trained by the Comforter to take ascending steps of consecration.

In Revelation 16:5, after announcing that he will come suddenly, the Lord calls blessed the one who keeps vigil. In Hebrews 2:3, we are asked a very controversial question: "*How shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?*"

Questions:

- In what way do the children of God assume a position of alertness before the return of Christ?
- Do we Christians count on God's help to be able to achieve holiness that leads us to salvation? Explain.

Conclusion

As we search the scriptures and look around at how our world is, we can affirm that the Second Coming of Christ is very close. This should be cause for joy and hope for God's children. His coming will start a great celebration, but at the same time, implies holy fear and diligence, given the mission that we have to assume as the body of Christ, and the holiness that He demands of His people. We don't know if we'll die first or if the Lord will come back in our lifetime, but we need to be ready to give an account to our Lord and be able go confidently with Him.



Mandates for today's Christian

J. Víctor Riofrío (EE. UU.)

Study Passage: I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Memory Verse: "Test them all; hold on to what is good" I Thessalonians 5:21.

Lesson aim: To learn how to fulfill Paul's mandates regarding leadership, dealing with other Christians and with ourselves.

Introduction

One of the human characteristics today is to want to be given specific and clear steps to proceed in certain circumstances. For example, we want to know exactly how to lose weight. Once we have achieved the first, second, third indicated steps, we feel that we'll surely achieve our goal. It seems that the Thessalonians needed instructions about how to proceed in different situations of the Christian life. It was thus that the apostle Paul, without detours, promptly indicated to them what they should do.

This passage can be divided into three detailed, urgent and relevant command groups for all Christians, giving instructions on how to proceed, especially in relation to leadership, dealing with other Christians, and necessary personal practices.

I. Commandments to honor leadership (I Thessalonians 5:12-13)

The apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, detailed three commandments related to the honor that we must give to the leaders in the church.

A. First commandment: "acknowledge those who work hard among you... and who admonish you" (v.12)

The Message translation puts it this way: "...Honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience." Paul invites us to recognize, respect, honor and be considerate of the leaders of our congregation. He gave us three reasons for such recognition or consideration: for their work, for their guidance or direction they give to our lives, and for their difficult but successful task of admonishing us in love. Leaders' work is hard. Their ministry for the Lord requires hours of conscientious study of God's Word, giving timely and appropriate advice. They have to reprimand, or attempt to 'open the eyes' of wrongdoers, which at the beginning brings pain, but in the end serves to correct their ways.

Barclay notes: "Respect your leaders, says Paul, and the reason why we must respect them is the work that is performed. It's not a question of personal prestige, it is the work that makes a person great, and it is service that they are lending that constitutes their emblem of honor" (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2006, p.790).

B. Second commandment: "Hold them in the highest regard in love" (v.13a)

This is another command that Paul made to the Thessalonian, and which also has repercussions for us today. With good reason, Paul used the word 'highest regard', because today, just like in biblical times, people often take their leaders for granted. Our leaders deserve "highest regard and love." Matthew Henry's comment correctly captures the intent of the apostle Paul when he commands us to hold church leaders in high esteem and love: "And, knowing how difficult it is sometimes to really love those who admonish and rebuke us, the apostle uses, to give the caliber of esteem that such leaders deserve, the strongest adverb you can: *huperekperissoú*, superabundant (a lot) (as in 3:10 and Eph. 3:20)" (Henry, M., & Lacueva, F. Matthew Henry Biblical Commentary. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.1730).

C. Third commandment: "Live in peace with each other" (v.13b)

On this occasion, Paul spoke in both directions. He encouraged leaders and believers to have peace with each other. The daily dealings between leaders and members of the church will bring friction, and the enemy (Satan) will try to use such friction so that there is enmity. It's in these moments that we must remember this mandate to be in peace and put it into practice immediately.

The Beacon Bible Commentary broadens the understanding of this mandate: "Church leaders aren't always, as perhaps we suspect to have been the case in Thessalonica, as prudent, competent or full of tact as they could be.

However, some understanding of leadership burdens, added to the estimation which is based on Christian love, would solve most friction caused by mistakes and criticism of such leaders” (Howard et al. Beacon Bible Commentary: Galatians to Philemon, volume 9. USA: CNP, 2010, p.519).

Questions:

- Which of the three commandments to honor leadership stood out to you the most? Why?
- Which of the three commandments to honor leadership would you like to implement in your life? How would you do it?

II. Relational Commandments (I Thes. 5:14-15)

Paul also thought it pertinent to specify six commandments related to the treatment we must give to other Christians.

A. First commandment: “warn those who are idle and disruptive” (v.14a)

This requires, of course, a certain degree of maturity, diligence, subjection and humility on the part of the one who admonishes. Such rebuke must be in a spirit of redemption for the idle or undisciplined to correct their life. Burt explains: “Disruptive (idlers) could be those who questioned the authority of the pastors and didn’t want to submit to their direction. They didn’t accept the ‘Order’ established by Christ. They rebelled against him and they were “out of place” in the church ... The original meaning of the word used by the apostle (idle) ...was initially a military term and referred to the soldier that doesn’t keep in line. That is, it applied to cases of indiscipline or insubordination in the army, to all those who didn’t want to obey the orders of their officers or submit to military discipline. Similarly, it seems obvious that there were certain members in Thessalonica unwilling to abide by the rule of the elders” (Burt, David F. Living as Children of the Day: I Thessalonians 5:1-28. Spain: Andamio Publications, 2003, pp. 106-107).

B. Second commandment: “encourage the disheartened” (v.14b)

This mandate is more bearable since it’s easier to address the discouraged than the undisciplined. The one who is discouraged, though he acts without malice, can still cause harm to the life of the church in general. Discouragement is contagious. The whole congregation can be overwhelmed by a pessimistic spirit. “Therefore, the disheartened must be cared for with a view to solving their discouragement, so that do not drag others with them into apathy or despair” (Burt, David F. Living as Children of the Day: I Thessalonians 5:1-28. Spain: Andamio Publications, 2003, p.109

C. Third commandment: “help the weak” (v.14c)

The strongest Christians are called to sustain (lift up) the weak. The biblical context doesn’t appear to refer to physically weak believers, but to those who were ‘weak in faith,’ that’s to say, those who had not matured enough along the way of the Lord. “There are strong and weak in the church today. ... How should we treat them? With patient and constant love ... We must support the weaker believers and help them stand firm in their Christian life” (Wiersbe, Warren. Prepared in Christ: Expository Study of the Epistles to the Thessalonians. USA: Independent Baptist Publishing House, 1992, p.101)..

D. Fourth commandment: “be patient with everyone” (v.14d)

Paul invites us to be patient, not only with those who are easy, but also with the most difficult ... with everybody. Jesus Christ is the perfect model of patience. He’s patient daily with us, despite all our sins and weaknesses. “Our brothers in the faith have weaknesses and characteristics that sometimes irritate us. God’s love in Christ gives us the patience we need to live and work with them in the congregation” (Kuske, D. P. I and 2 Thessalonians. USA: Northwestern Editorial, 1997, pp. 65-66).

E. Fifth commandment: “Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong” (v.15a)

We must counteract the diabolical principle that affirms that “revenge is sweet.” God’s Word restrains us in this regard, pointing out that we must leave revenge to Lord (Romans 12:19). We are called to be vigilant so that no one does “justice” with their own hands. Rather, we’re all exhorted to forgive our offenders.

F. Sixth commandment: “Always strive to do what is good for each other...” (v.15b)

Paul makes it clear that we shouldn’t do good to everyone only occasionally, but ‘always.’ Only Christ’s love can enable us to always seek the good for others. It’s not sufficient to be patient and avoid revenge. We must intentionally pursue doing good to the others, including those who hurt us.

Questions:

- Which of the six relational commandments stood out to you the most? Why?
- Which of the six relational commandments would you like to implement in your life? How would you do it?

III. Personal commandments (I Thes. 5:16-24)

In this part, the apostle Paul was very clear and detailed regarding the eight commandments that we must fulfill in a personal capacity.

A. First commandment: “Rejoice always” (v.16)

Joy is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It's that absolute confidence that God is in control of everything, which makes us act with serenity even in the middle of the most terrible storms. So, we're impelled to seek the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that that joy is constant. It's a personal responsibility.

B. Second commandment: “pray continually” (v.17)

Another personal responsibility is prayer. Paul deciphered the secret of a growing Christian life: pray continually. Why don't many Christians pray more often? Or maybe they don't even pray. We must assume prayer as a vital necessity to the spiritual life, and a delight of every believer always and everywhere.

C. Third commandment: “Give thanks in all circumstances” (v.18)

The apostle also encouraged the Thessalonians to be thankful continually, because this is God's will. “Giving thanks comes from the root word from which the word ‘Eucharist’ comes from, and that simply means ‘thanksgiving’ ... ‘In everything’ means ‘In all circumstances’ rather than ‘at all times.’ ... Because this is the will of God’ refers to ... what God wants. ...” (Henry, M., & Lacueva, F. Biblical Commentary by Matthew Henry. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.1731).

D. Fourth commandment: “Don't quench the Spirit” (v.19)

As Christians, we're urged to keep the flame of the Holy Spirit light in our lives. “Denney has a broader interpretation, since he sees in this sentence an exhortation that includes in a general form the suppression of spiritual fervor in the life of the church. But in its positive aspect, it's a call to conserve the fire of the Spirit burning in our hearts, at whatever cost; to keep open the channels of faith, of obedient response, and of constant devotion” (Howard and others. Beacon Bible Commentary: Galatians through Philemon, volume 9. USA: CNP, 2010, p.523).

E. Fifth commandment: “Don't treat prophecies with contempt” (v.20)

Paul warned the Thessalonians not to despise spiritual gifts. The prophets were the equivalent of the preachers of our time, those who carried God's message to the congregation. Paul was saying: “If a person has something to say, don't stop them” (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament, volume 11, Spain: CLIE, 1995, p.92). The apostle wanted the Thessalonians to not disparage the Word of God, in contraposition with false doctrines that were aired in that time, which were intended to be more authoritative. Hence (prophecy) generally denotes Christian preaching, rather than ‘predicting the future’, although the latter meaning is not completely absent (cf. I Cor. 14:24-25). Since the spurious

could be mixed with the authentic, it would be very easy to belittle all the prophecies.” (Howard et al. Beacon Bible Commentary: Galatians until Philemon, volume 9. USA: CNP, 2010, p.523).

F. Sixth Commandment: “But test them all; hold on to what is good” (v.21)

“Examine” or “test” means “inspect, explore.” Paul invites us to examine everything related to doctrine and practice of the Christian life, and retain only the good. “The apostle says: Once you have examined what the prophet (or preacher) says, separate the slag from the metal and keep the good ... The immature believer, lacking true discernment, runs into the danger of falling into one of these extremes: criticizing the preacher (or the writer) without thoroughly knowing the subject (envy and prejudice add new force to that danger), or accepting as good without passing everything the preacher (or writer) says through the sieve of discernment” (Henry, M., & Lacueva, F. Matthew's Bible Commentary Henry. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p.1731)..

G. Seventh commandment: “reject every kind of evil” (v.22)

We're in a world where there is evil everywhere. The apostle declared that it's imperative that we don't give in to any kind of evil. “The thought is to avoid evil, wherever it appears. It's a sign of robust spiritual health to fear anything that would offend our Lord, and to recoil before this in order to obediently separate oneself from everything that the Spirit points out as wrong” (Howard et al. Beacon Bible Commentary: Galatians up to Philemon, volume 9. USA: CNP, 2010, p.524).

H. Eighth commandment: Reach entire sanctification (vv.23-24)

Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to seek sanctification in body, soul and spirit; that's to say, their whole being. The word of hope is that the same God who's faithful will do it for those who long for it and believe it. It's the perfect way of closing our prayers, as well as the mandate of God's Word.

Questions:

- Which of the eight personal commandments stood out to you the most? Why?
- Which of the eight personal commandments would you like to implement in your life? How would you do it?

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul's directives to the Thessalonian Christians are appropriate for us Christians of the XXI century. We too need to be told promptly how to proceed in the three relationships we've discussed: towards our leaders, towards other Christians, and towards ourselves. If we're obedient, we'll reflect that we're authentic Christians in Jesus' likeness.



The Second Coming of Christ

Marcial Rubio Idrogo (Peru)

Study passages: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-12, 2:1-17

Memory Verse: “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction” 2 Thess. 2:3.

Lesson aim: To understand that the Christian life is something that begins here and continues for eternity with Jesus Christ, and to let the glorious hope challenge and encourage us to a live a life full of holiness and love in the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Introduction

Two pieces of news shook the heart of the apostle Paul regarding the church of Thessalonica: the first, very pleasant and encouraging, was that the brothers and sisters, in the midst of the harsh persecution, were growing in their faith, passion for God, and love for each other. But the second news was that there was confusion in the congregation regarding the Second Coming of Christ. Because of this, the apostle Paul was compelled to write a second letter to the Thessalonians to clarify these issues.

The times in which the contemporary church lives are very similar to those that the Thessalonians had to live through. There’s a lot of doctrinal confusion, and quite a few prophetic signs announcing the arrival of that great event that will shake our civilization: The Second Coming of Christ. Let’s take a look at these signs, the timing of His coming, and how we should expect this glorious event.

I. God will judge the World (2 Thes. 1:3-12)

In this first section, we’ll look at the believers’ persecution and the fruit that this produced. Afterwards, we’ll look at the judgment for sinners at the Second Coming of Christ.

A. Qualities of the Thessalonian church (vv. 3-5)

Faced with the good and encouraging news regarding the spiritual growth of the church of Thessalonica, Paul rejoiced and proceeded to praise the church by highlighting its main characteristic qualities:

I. A church with growing faith (v.3).

The church of Thessalonica was growing exuberantly and healthily, “like a vigorous tree planted in good soil, and like a fruit tree that produces an abundance of

fruit to compensate for the farmer’s labor” (Clarke, Adam. Commentary of the Holy Bible, Volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.535). This was a church that abounded in the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

2. A growing church in the midst of troubles (vv. 3-5).

The Thessalonians abounded in patience and faith (v.4), and gained strength in love for others (v.3b). The scourges of the persecutions coming to both Jews and their countrymen contributed to a their more fruitful faith and refined character (1 Peter 1:7). Faith grows and strengthens as believers feed on the knowledge of the Word of God and practice a lifestyle cultivated in Christian love. Certainly, the “... love for this church wasn’t a diffuse sentimentality..., but rendered as a service and as a mark of true believers as the Lord said in John 13:34-35” (MacArtur, John. MacArtur Commentary of the New Testament 2 Thessalonians. USA: Editorial Spokesperson, 2012, p.19).

This was the supreme reason why Paul felt so thankful to God for the church in Thessalonica. In spite of persecution and suffering, this church had passion for God, even in the worst conditions, as well as genuine love for their neighbors and a desire to share the Good News about Jesus, essential elements of the new life in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:7; Galatians 3:6; Ephesians 1:15-23). A devout Chinese Christian said: “The suffering in China has multiplied the blessings because it has purified the church” (Wiersbe, Warren W. Outlines of The Bible, New Testament, Volume V: Colossians-Revelation. USA: Editorial Caribe, 2002, p.42).

It was in the terrain of tribulation that they had grown and become fruitful, and many believers had been filled with the Holy Spirit. It's always in the fire of trial that a holy, Christlike character has been able to develop. A church with these qualities brings deep satisfaction to the heart of its leader, and that's what the apostle Paul experienced, and for which he was motivated to thank God.

B. God's righteous judgment (vv. 5-12)

The emphasis of these verses is on the final judgment day.

1. The purpose of tribulation for his people (vv.5b, 11).

Today, apparently, we are facing a winning enemy. But the glorious day will come when the sufferings of the righteous will end completely, and the wicked, who troubled them, will receive just punishment, and the righteous will receive their reward. Just as sowing leads to reaping, the fruit of sin will be punished (v.6; cf. Galatians 6:7).

2. The rest granted to God's people (v.7).

The believers' suffering, both that of the Thessalonians as well as of all our brothers and sisters in all times past and present in all countries in the world, is temporary. The Lord Jesus Christ, with His glorious coming, will put an end to all kinds of tribulation.

3. Those who don't know God will end up in a flame of fire (v.8).

Our Lord is a consuming fire, and as Hebrews 10:31 says *"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."* Doom is not annihilation, but separation (v.9). It's the perpetual exclusion of the source of love and peace: God.

4. When will this happen? (v.10).

There's no date. The day or the hour of the Second Coming of Christ has not been revealed to us. The glorious power of the Lord will be manifested when countless millions of people will be snatched away in the blink of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). There will be a moment of dreadful amazement.

C. Apostolic prayer for the church (vv.11-12)

The great prayer of the Apostle Paul was that the *"name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ"* (v.12), Let's pray now too for the church ... that she may be glorified in the future (Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-19).

Questions:

- What were the characteristics of the Thessalonian church which are worthy of imitation by the churches of today?
- What was the doctrinal issue that was confusing the Thessalonian church regarding the Second Coming of Christ?

II. The advent of apostasy (2 Thessalonians 2:1-12)

This section includes topics about events that will occur at the end time in connection with the Second Coming of Christ, as well as the prevailing mystery of iniquity.

A. Firmness in the face of voices of false alarm about the second coming of the Lord (vv. 1-2)

Paul exhorted the Thessalonian church to remain firm in faith and not get carried away by speculation and rumors of the false teachers as to the coming of the Lord. The apostle told the Thessalonians that they shouldn't let their faith be confused "by spirit" (any alleged disclosure), "or by word" (of any false apostle, pastor or teacher), "or by letter" as some paragraphs of his first letter that had been misinterpreted, or by some apocryphal writing, and even less by any announced dates, because they had already been told that the Lord would come *"as a thief in the night,"* referring to the rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). However, at His Second Coming, He will come *"with the clouds, and every eye will see him"* (Matthew 24:26-28; cf. Revelation 1:7-8); but first, other events must occur, like some of the following.

B. The manifestation of apostasy and man of lawlessness (v.3)

Christ won't come before apostasy appears in the scene of world Christianity, that's to say, the abandonment of the basic principles of sound doctrine, and corruption of the essence of the gospel message in order to generate confusion and invalidate its efficacy for the salvation of the lost and the edification of believers.

C. The appearance of the antichrist (v.3)

Also called “the man of lawlessness” or “the man doomed to destruction,” who will be a highly exalted character with a fierce opposition to the Christian religion. “This character will usurp the titles and attributes of divinity; and he will arrogate the rights that belong to the Most High and he will demand that he be recognized and worshiped as God” (Clarke, Adam. Holy Bible Commentary, Volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.537).

D. The full manifestation of the “Wicked one” (vv.8-12)

The antichrist will appear and install his world government based on deceiving those who are lost (v.10); but the Lord will kill him “with the spirit of his mouth.” This will be the instrument that will overthrow the antichrist, “with the radiance of his coming”. When the people persist in rejecting God’s only provision for their salvation, they will be lost for eternity.

Questions:

- What are the main threats to sound Christian doctrine today?
- What will be the outcome for the suffering of God’s people; and what will be the end of those who trouble them?

III. The fate of those who remain firm and retain sound doctrine (2 Thess. 2:13-17)

God’s creational purpose was to create a people for Himself.

A. Chosen for salvation (v.13)

When God called us, he showed us the purpose that He had for us since before the foundation of the world. That is, of calling the Gentiles to the same privileges as for the Jews, but without circumcision or observance of the law, but through faith in Christ, which leads to the same end: A life of holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). It’s not an arbitrary and irresistible choice, it’s freely given as we see in John 3:16 where we read: “...so that everyone who believes in him ...”

B. To achieve the glory of Jesus Christ (v.14)

The Apostle Paul drew the line of personal salvation from the moment each of us received the call to be saved in the proclamation of the gospel until glorification with Christ at the end of time.

C. The pastoral exhortation (v.15)

Paul exhorted the Thessalonian believers to keep up their spiritual steadfastness, to retain sound doctrine that they had learned, to continue growing in faith and in love towards God and men, not to be fooled, or forgetful, ignorant, incredulous, insecure, or weak, because the God who loved them also chose them to be holy. He redeemed them and will glorify them.

D. The apostolic invocation (vv.16-17)

The apostle concluded this second chapter by praying for the faithful of Thessalonica, emphasizing the idea of firmness to think, speak, and act with such conviction that no deceiver could mislead them. He prayed: “*May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word*” (16-17).

Questions:

- Is Paul’s pastoral exhortation to the Thessalonian believers applicable to the church of our time? Why?
- What is the scope of salvation in time?

Conclusion

Persecution has always strengthened the faith of the disciples of Christ, and the fire of trial has served to clarify and refine it. So, there’s no need to fear being tested. God wants us to be prepared for his Second Coming, which is one of the most important future events in world history. That’s why Satan tries so hard to keep God’s children distracted and divided by unimportant matters, inciting them to waste time, work and money. We’re called to live holy and godly lives. This we must do.



Warning Against Idleness

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

Study Passage: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Memory Verse: "... Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat" 2 Thessalonians 3:12.

Lesson aim: To understand that God designed work to help us obtain a decent living.

Introduction

The world we live in today in many ways is different to the worlds we see in the Bible; however, people haven't changed much. The Word of God describes attitudes we see even today. Our fallen nature tends to adulterate God's original design, so, society seeks in various ways to provide a solution to human coexistence. Mankind's need to work has been abused by employers, and innocent people have been enslaved to work long hours for no pay down through the ages, including our present day in the form of modern slavery. Many people have had to work very long hours with not much pay.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) was created in 1919 after the First World War to legislate and provide solutions for labor problems around the World. They understood that bad labor relationships are a source of conflict, preventing peace in society. Although this organization hasn't yet completely resolved labor problems in the world, God's church needs to look at what happens within our congregations. The apostle Paul was concerned about the work ethics of the Thessalonians and gave the church instructions on the matter.

I. A brief summary of biblical teaching on work

Although some folk see work as a curse, in fact it's a blessing. God Himself worked, creating the world in the period of the first six days, after which he rested, declaring that what had been created was very good (Genesis 1). Before the fall, God gave responsibilities to Adam and Eve. They were to name the animals and have a family to look after God's creation. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, the land was cursed by God,

meaning that they would have to toil harder where thorns and thistles were added to the good fruit.

Work is a blessing because it benefits others as well as ourselves. Ecclesiastes 3:12-13 says: "...there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God." We'll be working in the New Jerusalem, according to Isaiah's vision of the New Creation. Isaiah 65:21 states: "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit."

The Bible condemns laziness (Proverbs 6:6-11; 13:4; 18:9). Let's examine this passage to see what counsel Paul gives his readers.

Questions:

- Why is work a blessing?

II. Teaching by example (2 Thessalonians 3:6-12)

To resolve this pressing situation, the Apostle Paul sent Timothy to confirm the Thessalonian brethren, exhort them about their faith, and also to bring him news about their life in Christ (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Paul had taught in Thessalonica about the resurrection of Christ and the imminence of his Second Coming. He had warned them that the Lord Jesus would come like a thief in the night, without warning, and they had to be prepared.

Paul looked forward to the coming of the Lord, and expressed it openly on various occasions. He considered himself included among those who would be in the land for the Second Coming (1 Thessalonians 4:17), and expressed his longing to be in the presence of the Lord (Philippians 1:23).

But just because Jesus' Second Coming seemed to be imminent, that was no reason to "down tools and stop working," which is what it appears was happening with some of the believers in Thessalonica. At all times, Paul gave the example of doing work that pleases God.

A. Paul orders them to not be idle and disruptive (vv.6-7)

Verse 6 represents a strong reprimand from Paul: "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and doesn't live according to the teaching you received from us." Paul warned the church to "keep away" from the "idle and disruptive." The Thessalonian church is called to disassociate from those who shirk their responsibility to work, to discipline them so that they would change and come back into the fellowship again.

Ask the students:

1. When and why should our church leaders discipline members today?
2. Were these people just lazy or had they adopted a position that they weren't going to work anymore because Jesus was about to come back?
3. In what way were they 'disruptive'?

In this second letter, Paul is correcting a misinterpretation about the implications of the imminent Second Coming of the Lord. Paul used his own experience to underscore the correct teaching: "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example" (2 Thessalonians 3:7). Paul reminded them of the way He had led his life in an orderly way amongst them.

B. Paul set them the example (vv.8-9)

Paul reminded them that they hadn't received anything for their labor among them in Thessalonica: "We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you" (vv. 7b-8). They hadn't been a burden on anyone. In fact, they had worked for their own resources to pay for their needs while they were with the Thessalonians. Their example was sterling. They shared the gospel, taught the Christians, and at the same time, 'made tents' (Paul's personal skill) "Night and day" to supply their needs.

Work as a Christian virtue was valued by Paul. Although he himself chose to cover his own costs and not be a burden to the churches, he made the clarification that this didn't mean that whoever works for the Lord full time should have an additional job to support themselves. Verse 9 states his position: "We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate."

C. "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat" (vv. 10-12)

One thing is clear, when someone cannot work because they have some physical disability, or because there isn't any work available, the Bible is clear that we must support the poor and needy: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17). But this wasn't the case here. These people didn't want to work, and Paul says that therefore they shouldn't eat. Some Thessalonian brethren had adopted this attitude as a way of life, benefiting lazily from the work of others. Where were they getting their food from? Were they expecting others to feed them, or worse still, were they stealing food?

In verse 11, we come across the word 'disruptive' again. It seems that they weren't just not working, waiting quietly for the Second Coming, they were stirring things up, causing a disturbance. "We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies." (v.11). The Message translation puts these verses like this: "And now we're getting reports that a bunch of lazy good-for-nothings are taking advantage of you. This must not be tolerated. We command them to get to work immediately—no excuses, no arguments—and earn their own keep. Friends, don't slack off in doing your duty."

In verse 6, Paul commands them in the name of Jesus to not have anything to do with these lazy disruptive people, and in verse 12, he commands them in the name of Jesus to go back to work. In both cases, he's making strong arguments.

Questions:

- What was the problem among the Thessalonians?
- What were the members to do with those who were idle and disruptive?
- What example of work ethics had Paul and his colleagues shown them?

III. Applying what has been learned (2 Thessalonians 3:13-15)

A. Laziness is not an option

The case that the apostle Paul dealt with in this lessons could also manifest itself in our context. Paul was admonishing people in the church who had the conditions and opportunity to work, but chose not to, possibly misinterpreting the imminent coming of the Lord.

Today, there are people who let their spouses do all the work, or go to work just to hang about and do as little as possible. Even in the church setting, there are leaders and even pastors who receive their salaries for doing as little as possible. Laziness is a sin. The author of the book of Proverbs tells us: *“Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise!... How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? ... poverty will come on you like a thief and scarcity like an armed man”* (Proverbs 6:6-11)..

B. Falling into dependency

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul warned them about the need to be independent: *“...make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.”* Being dependent in itself is not improper. We are all susceptible to having moments when we depend on others or are responsible for members of our families. What's wrong is to make it a way of life..

C. “Never tire of doing what is good” (v.13)

God designed work as the main way we support ourselves. Work also develops our character by demanding effort, intelligence and experience in inter-relationships. The Creator didn't establish different categories of work. All work is decent as long as it's not opposed to God's commandments. He has also given us diverse capabilities to develop ourselves at work. Some Bible characters like Joseph and Daniel were promoted to important positions in pagan kingdoms.

Our responsibility is to work as if it were for Christ (Colossians 3:23-24). We should work hard, selflessly, diligently and wisely, without underestimating necessary rest (Finance and the Bible: Crown Financial Concepts, 2006, pp.59-62). We need to teach our children about the value of work. We can learn to manage our finances

better. One organization that gives good advice is “Crown Financial Ministries (<https://www.crown.org/about/>).

D. Final admonition (vv.14-15).

Once more Paul warns them: *“Take special note of anyone who doesn't obey our instruction in this letter. Don't associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed”* (v.14). Here we come back to the issue of discipline. Paul uses strong language. The purpose of discipline is to warn them in love and help them change their ways. They are to be treated as fellow Christians, not enemies (v.15).

Questions:

- How do you interpret Paul's encouragement not to tire of doing good? (2 Thessalonians 3:13).
- What should be our attitude towards those who are lazy and disruptive? (2 Thessalonians 3:15).

Conclusion

God designed work for the blessing of mankind. From this, we obtain our livelihoods with dignity, and after work comes joyful rest. The Lord has given us qualities to develop so that we can produce more and better. Through working we get our daily bread, and we can share it with those who are truly in need. The Father rejects laziness and appreciates responsibility. In doing so, we honor Him, doing what he likes. Let's be examples of good, industrious, honest workers!



Ministerial Training

Elvin Heredia (Puerto Rico)

Study passages: I Timothy 1:3-20, 2:1-8

Memory Verse: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” I Timothy 1:12.

Lesson aim: To understand that to be faithful to God, we need strong and sound doctrine and training to make us capable and skilled for ministry.

Introduction

On one occasion, I was chatting with the coach of a minor league team. He told me that his three pillars for the training of his team consisted of teaching them the rules of the game, to be very careful defensively, and strive daily to improve their offensive tactics. These were instructions which this trainer constantly insisted upon. The apostle Paul did exactly the same with his son in the ministry - Timothy. As a good coach, Paul tried to train Timothy thoroughly and constantly for effective ministry. This was very important. The nascent Christianity of the first century faced paganism, and even Judaism, as its fiercest rivals.

Recognizing that historical reality of the moment, Paul urgently wanted to develop intense training sessions with his collaborators in the ministry, particularly with Timothy, so they could face the historical challenges before them. I & 2 Timothy and Titus are called the “Pastoral Epistles” because they contain “Training regulations” for those who would eventually assume the ministry to the Gentiles.

The biblical passage selected for this lesson contains precisely what seem to be three important instructions, from the apostle to Timothy, to help him to be successful in his ministerial performance.

I. Observe and apply Biblical principles (I Timothy 1:5-11)

Just as the team’s coach considered teaching his players the rules of the game, Paul made sure Timothy knew the Scriptures. In fact, one of the most particular instructions of the apostle Paul to his son Timothy was to use well the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Using Scripture correctly was what would provide the unquestionable theoretical framework for the teaching of sound doctrine. For Paul, any other doctrine was anathema of the gospel (Galatians 1:8-9). Paul, then, gave the following instructions to Timothy regarding observing and applying the principles of the Word of God.

A. The legitimacy of the law in grace

During Paul and Timothy’s time, the Bible didn’t exist as we know it today. Therefore, it was necessary to discover and contextualize the teachings of the law in light of the fulfillment of the prophecies. The apostle redirected those prophetic truths from the law to the figure of Christ, making a masterful summary detailed in Acts 13:13-43. This should be the case, both for Christians of the first century as well as for us now: The Scriptures must be the foundation of sound doctrine.

The legitimacy of the law is confirmed in compliance with the prophesies of the Messiah in the figure of Jesus Christ. He came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17), that is, to show in flesh and bone the appearance of the Messiah promised throughout all of the Old Testament. Therefore, the law is subject to the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Likewise, grace is established as a legitimate truth before the law. Denying grace would be denying what the law itself said about grace and the Messiah. Thus, the gospel of Jesus Christ remained equally legitimized with the law. Paul revealed the combination between law and grace in relation to the gospel of Christ.

We must bear in mind that the Apostle Paul always interwove God’s law with His grace. For Paul, law and grace could not be divorced. The first has as its basic principle the common benefit and prosperity of all (Deuteronomy 10:13). Paul reiterated this truth in Romans 7:12 when he said that truth and commandments were holy, just and good. The apostle John also affirmed this truth when he pointed out that God’s commandments “are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3). Law and grace have always worked together.

On the other hand, the law points to sin, while grace provides the means in Christ to remove the punishment for the sin and to be reconciled to God. The law tells us how we are sinners, but through grace, Christ’s sacrifice redeems

us from sin and pays our debt of death. Paul, then, pointed out that the transgression to the law is sin, but he said that whoever accepted the grace of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ would be justified, and the sins indicated in the law would be legally removed.

B. Practical principles of law enforcement in grace

Since the law is legitimate in Christ, grace becomes sound doctrine. Paul referred to this truth in 2 Corinthians 3 as the New Covenant through which we have been made “*competent as ministers*” (2 Corinthians 3:1-6). Jesus himself referred to his gospel as the New Covenant of his blood (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). The writer of Hebrews confirmed this when he said: “*By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear*” (Hebrews 8:13).

For Paul, this meant that anyone who doesn't submit to Christ and rejects His grace resists gospel and doesn't submit to the law. So, the very principles of sin and transgression of the law are also contemplated in the grace of the gospel. The apostle Paul was emphatic in the fact that the law wasn't given for the righteous or for those who obey; but for all those “*lawbreakers and rebels*” (1 Timothy 1:9).

All this indicates that the correct and legitimate application of the law in the New Covenant with Christ is based on the grace of the gospel. For Paul, the law was good; it was the foundation of God's covenant with humanity. So, the law is not ruled out as long as it's used for the purpose for which God Himself gave it to human beings, as Paul suggested to Timothy.

The law established the standard of conduct pleasing to God, which believers must also observe even today. The apostle closed his argument about the relationship of the law with the gospel of grace, as “*Sound doctrine*” (v.10). This being the case, the apostle pointed out that that sound doctrine, which started with the law, now “*conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God...*” (v.11).

Questions:

- What are the three basic fundamentals of ministerial training that were detailed in the lesson?
- What were the instructions that Paul gave Timothy regarding observing and applying the principles of the Word of God?

II. Being thankful for and honoring ministry (1 Timothy 1:12-20)

After establishing the Scriptures as the “regulation” for ministerial and Christian life in general, the apostle Paul aimed his training at strengthening the line of defense for Timothy's ministry. Let's notice that first of all, Paul thanked God for having been called by God to the ministry. For this

servant of God, it was an enormous distinction to have been made part of His team by God. Recognizing that God had found him to be faithful was a recognition of the “talent” for the ministry that the Father, as his “coach”, had identified in him.

However, Paul also recognized that success in his ministerial performance had come because God had given him strength. Christ Jesus was the one who strengthened him in his ministry. This strength that he had been given constituted that safe line of defense which enabled him to face and win the challenges the ministry would pose for him.

In this letter, now acting as Timothy's “coach,” Paul reminded him of the ministerial instruction which Timothy had received that was part of the same experience as his. The apostle exhorted the young pastor to take great care and give attention to defending his ministry. For this, Paul recalled the events of his past, remembering his weaknesses and mistakes. He did it to highlight God's grace and mercy in his life. This apostle did that with several intentions:

A. Recognize that Jesus Christ changes weaknesses into strengths

When finishing recounting his past weaknesses, Paul adjudicated the change in his life, and the strength received for ministry to grace, faith, and Christ's love (v.14). This being the case, Paul recognized that the salvation that he had in Christ came precisely because, being an inveterate sinner, he had been received with mercy and grace (v.15).

Paul didn't hold on to privileges and concessions which the law had provided for him at some point. In Philippians 3:4-6, the apostle recounted the many things for which he could boast, and for which he could even take advantage of for his ministry. Rather, he preferred to discard them all as if they were garbage because the grace of the gospel was more complete. Paul clearly stated in Philippians 3:7: “*But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*”

From that point of view, the teaching that Paul gave to Timothy wasn't to proudly trust in his knowledge or his ability, much less, in any authority in ministry which might have emanated from his familiarity and closeness to himself. Instead, he insisted in this passage that the strength that allowed him to be fit for ministry came from God, and Timothy needed to learn this too for his own life and ministry.

Let's bear in mind, then, that our success in ministry doesn't depend on how much we know, or on our strengths or abilities. Success depends on the grace of God, who gave us the talents and abilities, and who developed them with His power, in order that we might magnify His name and His Kingdom.

B. Emphasize that our ministry must be an example to others

Paul pointed out that all that grace, mercy and love of God he had received, despite his weakness, which had strengthened him in faith and ministry was to be "... *an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life*" (v.16). This is a serious issue. If both Paul and Timothy were to be examples for others, then they had a responsibility to get it right.

Later, Paul emphasized this instruction to Timothy when He exhorted him saying: "... *be an example of the believers in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith and purity*" (1 Timothy 4:12).

Caring for the ministry involves jealously making sure that our testimony and the good name of the church is upheld. We must display with holy pride the colors of our uniform. We are part of a winning team. Our attitude must show jealous care of what we are and do. That's what Paul did with Timothy, and God, our "coach," does with us.

C. Show the destructive effects of a weak defense of ministry

In contrast, Paul highlighted the examples of Hymenaeus and Alexander as evidence of neglect in faith and lack of a good strategy for defending the gospel and ministry. Hymenaeus and Alexander didn't stay in the faith or have a good conscience of how they had used the gift of God that had been given to them. They both neglected the truth of the scriptures, and they were so weak in their strategy that they suffered "*shipwreck with regard to the faith*" (v.19).

Paul highlighted gratitude and honor as two important elements to consider in the exercise of our ministry. Both have the effect to hold ourselves accountable and to keep ourselves faithful through the grace of God that has been given to us.

Questions:

- Based on the lesson, what were Paul's intentions in highlighting God's grace and mercy in his ministerial life?
- What do the examples of Hymenaeus and Alexander represent in relation to the ministry?

III. Instructions about prayer and intercession (1 Timothy 2:1-8)

No ministry is effective if it doesn't serve others. Rather, Christian life needs to be constantly reinforced with a more intimate relationship with God. In both cases, prayer and intercession are practical exercises to maintain and improve our support points in faith. Service to God and neighbor through prayer and intercession are our offensive mechanisms in faith and ministry.

Paul claimed, and also instructed Timothy, that he was constituted a preacher, apostle and teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth (v.7). The *raison d'être* of his ministry was to take the gospel to all people through the message of salvation, by prayer and intercession for all of them. Paul exhorted Timothy "... *that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people*" (v.1). No one should be excluded from our ministerial exercise. All human beings must be covered by the holy overwhelming gospel in the world.

The particular mention of intercession "*for kings and all those in authority*" (v.2) doesn't refer to a special elitist distinction but of the church's collaborative ministry to governments. It was to redound in stillness, repose, piety, honesty and peace between people in a relational environment where there is harmony, consideration and respect. Everyone wins. Therefore, prayer and intercession of the church in their social context have a decisive influence on the order and happiness of the people. That's an important part of the offensive element of this ministerial training.

The church must pray and intercede for all equally, and it must take care of everyone without distinction of people. This is undoubtedly a triumphant and victorious offensive.

Questions:

- How can we apply 1 Timothy 2:1-2 in our context?
- What effect does it have on the community when we pray and intercede effectively?

Conclusion

Our ministerial duty and effective action consists in knowing and correctly applying the principles of the Word of God, being thankful for the honor of being partakers of His work on earth, caring for and honoring the ministry put in our hands, moving away from influences and positions that pervert sound doctrine, maintain a good witness among our own, and live a life of prayer and constant intercession, being pastors and ministers of His Kingdom. So, we must be properly trained in ministry so we can also train others.



Qualifications for Overseers and Deacons

Alicia Sardiello (Argentina)

Study Passage: I Timothy 3:1-13

Memory Verse: “Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task” I Timothy 3:1.

Lesson aim: To understand the biblical requirements for exercising church leadership as pastors and deacons.

Introduction

We live in a relativistic age where values and morals are adjusted to the particular needs and personal characteristics of each person. The standards of spiritual leadership in the church must follow the guidelines of Scripture and counteract this relativism. Therefore, it's of the utmost importance to consider the specific teachings of the Word of God with regard to the responsibilities of a leader of a congregation.

Each community of faith (local church) has a leader that guides them in their walk with the Lord and their growth in grace. The leadership team at the same time, establishes administration and operational guidelines. Scripturally, there are two offices in the New Testament church that qualify for these functions: overseers and deacons. Every church needs both ministries: people who oversee spiritual needs (pastors); and those who serve in practical matters (deacons). Both of these roles efficiently cover the issues related to the leadership and administration of the church.

In our passage, Paul teaches Timothy about what qualities that overseers and deacons must have if they are to be appointed to such positions. Paul took care to carefully list the moral standards and character requirements that should be observed in the lives of believers who aspire to serve as pastors or deacons in the church of Christ.

I. Qualities of an overseer (I Timothy 3:1-7)

Paul wrote: “Here is a trustworthy saying: ‘Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task’” (v.1). This infers that by the time this letter was written to Timothy, there were people who were aspiring to leadership positions. The overseer (pastor) is the official in charge

of all spiritual matters pertaining to the congregation or a group of churches. In the Bible, pastors are also called “elders” (I Timothy 5:19) and “shepherds” (Eph. 4:11).

The Word of God teaches that being a pastor is a task that involves great responsibility for which they will have to be accountable to God and to the church.

We can see in the Bible that there are at least five duties and obligations of a overseers (pastors or elders):

1. They help resolve disputes in the church (Acts 15:1-2).
2. They pray for the sick (James 5:14).
3. They should care for the church in humility (I Peter 5:1-4).
4. They must protect the spiritual life of the congregation (Hebrews 13:17).
5. They should spend time in prayer and teaching the Word (Acts 6:2-4).

Simply put, elders should be peacemakers, people of prayer, teachers, exemplary leaders, and people who make wise decisions. They are the leaders, preachers, and teachers of the church. The role of the overseer or elder as leader of the people of God in the contemporary church can be compared to that of pastor (Ephesians 4:11).

The New Testament refers to those who were called to care for the church (I Timothy 3:5), rule and lead the Lord's flock spiritually (I Timothy 5:17), and intercede for them before God through prayer (James 5:14). Leading a congregation is an honorable position that denotes a set of requirements with a high degree of growth in character and spirit, as Paul describes in I Timothy 3:1-7.

The apostle, interested in guiding Timothy about the profile of those who wish to be overseers, established a series of requirements that a person must have to occupy such a position. The candidate must be a leader with a high degree of growth in Christian discipleship, service, character and spirit, as evidenced in I Timothy 3:2-7. Let's look at it in detail. In each case, the verse is presented in two different versions of the Bible to clarify each point:

1. *"Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach"* (NIV). *"A leader must be well-thought-of, committed to his wife, cool and collected, accessible, and hospitable, He must know what he's talking about"* (The Message) (v.2).

2. *"Not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money"* (NIV). *"Not be over fond of wine, not pushy but gentle, not thin-skinned, not money-hungry."* (The Message) (v.3).

3. *"He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect"* (NIV). *"He must handle his own affairs well, attentive to his own children and having their respect"* (The Message) (v.4).

4. *"If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?"* (NIV). *"For he who does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?"* (The Message) (v.5).

5. *"He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil"* (NIV) *"He must not be a new believer, lest the position go to his head and the Devil trip him up"* (The Message) (v.6).

6. *"He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap"* (NIV). *"Outsiders must think well of him, or else the Devil will figure out a way to lure him into his trap"* (The Message) (v.7).

(Please note that while the pronouns used in these passages are for men, women are also called to be overseers and thus these passage apply to them as well,)

Paul was concerned that those who were leaders in the churches not be ambitious for place or power or a position of privilege. They were called to serve and show the desire and responsibility to cultivate and develop the qualities of character that every leader of God's people must show in their daily life. The overseers must be blameless as to their character before their churches and families. They needed to be leaders who had been

Christians for a reasonable period of time. They needed to be people who were well regarded in the community.

One of the important functions of the overseers, to which they need to pay close attention, is that they must be apt to teach (v.2), that is, prepared to be able train the congregation for its growth in God's grace. They must be an example of men and women whose lives reflect their obedience to God's Word. Remember that the overseer is a position to aspire to, but it shouldn't be taken lightly. The Bible warns: *"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly"* (James 3:1).

The servants of God must be people who are prepared to carry the message of salvation to everyone, with a clear and precise message, so that those who hear will understand them. God calls pastors to serve the church. It's not wrong for someone to want to become a pastor, especially if their motivation is correct.

Questions:

- Define with your own words what it means to be an overseer.
- Paul clearly established the character requirements and duties of overseers. After reading I Timothy 3:2-7, find a definition for each of the qualities:
 - Irreprehensible
 - Husband of one wife (or wife of one husband)
 - Sober
 - Prudent
 - Decorous
 - Host
 - Fit to teach
 - Not given to wine
 - Not greedy of dishonest profit
 - Nice
 - Peaceful
 - Not greedy
 - Governs their house well
 - Not a neophyte
 - Has a good testimony

II. Qualities of deacons in ministry (I Timothy 3:8-13)

Many of the same qualities need to be present in deacons (v.8). Deacons are called to serve the church and watch over the material affairs of church. Therefore, this ministry must be put into the hands of disciples that show growth and maturity in grace displaying the following qualities:

Verses 8-10 describe the qualifications of the deacons: *“In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.”* (NIV) *“The same goes for those who want to be servants in the church: serious, not deceitful, not too free with the bottle, not in it for what they can get out of it. They must be reverent before the mystery of the faith, not using their position to try to run things. Let them prove themselves first. If they show they can do it, take them on”* (The Message).

The deacons too must know, teach, and live with a clear conscience because they are living in obedience to God's Word. Those who yearn for this ministry must be observed by the church authorities and prove that they're worthy of such service. Verse 14 states that the deacons too have to be faithful spouses: *“A deacon must be faithful to his wife and must manage his children and his household well.”*

It's interesting to note that Paul, after talking about the requirements, for deacons, paused to describe how women should behave. As this description comes after the qualifications for overseers and deacons we can presume that he was referring to women who were ministering in the church. Verse 11 says: *“In the same way, the women are to be worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything”* (NIV). *“No exceptions are to be made for women—same qualifications: serious, dependable, not sharp-tongued, not over fond of wine”* (The Message).

Regarding the specific functions of deacons, each church is free to determine the scope of the responsibility delegated to those who are designated for this position, according to the particular needs and context. The following represent an example of some of the duties and responsibilities of the deacons:

1. Care and management of church property and all its facilities.
2. Actively collaborate with the Compassionate Ministry, similar to what happened in Acts 6:1-7 with the daily distribution to widows. Deacons could participate in the administration of the resources for those in need.
3. Deacons could be vigilant in assisting in emergencies within their community.

Summarizing the above, the local church is an organization that needs to serve its community. Deacons must qualify with the requirements that Paul told Timothy to watch out for (1 Timothy 3:8-10). In short, the deacon must be a spiritually mature person of good character and conduct.

God's standards for his leaders are high. He's looking for Godly righteous people to lead His church. Over the years, different denominations have developed their own leadership styles. The Church of the Nazarene has developed a system of District Superintendents, who are responsible for a groups of churches, and Pastors who are responsible for local communities of faith. We accept women as District Superintendents and pastors when God calls them. Many of the jobs done by Deacons are carried out by members of the church boards. Other denominations have other systems. What continues to be relevant are the qualities required of our ministers based on Paul's wise teaching to Timothy.

Questions:

- Define in your own words the term “deacon.”
- List and explain four characteristics of deacons.

Conclusion

In this letter, both ministries of overseers and deacons are important in the church and must be carried out by mature men and women who are examples of Christians who are closely following God in obedience, have exemplary character, lead their own house in a biblical way, and are subject to their authorities. In short, they live what they preach.



The portrait of a pastor

Carmen Gómez Orellana (Ecuador)

Study passages: Timothy 4:1-16, 5:1-25, 6:3-19

Memory Verse: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” 1 Timothy 4:12.

Lesson aim: To learn what it means to be called to ministry from Paul’s counsel to Timothy

Introduction

“Timothy joined the Apostle to be his helper and never separated from him, except when he was sent on a special mission. And his affection, fidelity and zeal raised him up both in the concept of all disciples, acquiring such authority over them that Paul includes his name at the head of several of his letters to the churches to show that their doctrine was identical” (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible. USA: CNP, 1980, p.541).

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy near the end of his life. The hectic and difficult years of ministry were behind them, years marked by being stoned, beaten, put in jail, riots and more (Acts 14:19). Timothy was a young man who occupied Paul’s highest esteem. At first, Timothy was Paul’s disciple, and as a new half-Jewish Christian (his mother was a Jewish believer while his father was from a Greek), Paul encouraged him to be circumcised according to the Jewish tradition. Acts 16:2 says about Timothy: “*The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.*” Timothy joined Paul in his ministry during his second missionary journey (Acts 16:2-3).

I. Some believers abandon their faith! (1 Timothy 4:1-5)

In this letter, knowing the adverse situations and false doctrines that were being taught, Paul decided to give some instructions to Timothy. The apostle was aware of the dimension of the work that Timothy was to do. Why did Paul take such trouble to be sure that Timothy understood all the issues he would have to face? Well, they had shared two mission trips, and the apostle knew of this young man’s quality and commitment. Without a doubt, Timothy knew how to listen to instructions. He was attentive, learning from Paul’s example, and had

joined the team of disciples who were taking the vision that God had given them seriously (Acts 17:14, 18:5, 19:22, 20:4).

Timothy was humble, dedicated, and versed in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:15-16). Paul felt that God’s Spirit was warning that some would “*abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits*” (1 Timothy 4:1b). Timothy was going to have to instruct the new believers in the truth and face the false teachers, whose teachings came “*through hypocritical liars*” (v.2). In essence, these teachers were forbidding marriage and certain foods (v.3). Possibly they were Christians influenced by Plato’s ideas that all material things are bad. Paul told Timothy that “*everything God created is good*” (v.4, see too Genesis 1:29-31) and should be received with grateful and prayerful hearts.

What do today’s false teachers encourage us to do? Some people are told to fast for a month in order to pass an exam (but if they haven’t studied, this is hardly going to work). Fasting is good and necessary for Christian exercise, but it shouldn’t become an amulet to acquire a favor. Some teach that if we pay our tithes, we’ll be rich because we’re investing our money in God. But God is not a bank. We should give our tithes and offerings out of generous hearts. Some people even think they can receive miracles just by putting a “like” or an “amen” on a social network site. Our gracious God doesn’t work like this. We cannot “twist His arm” to get what we want.

Questions:

- What was Paul warning Timothy to watch out for? (v.1)
- What is the best way to deal with false teaching?

II. How to be a good minister of Jesus Christ (I Timothy 4:6-16)

Paul shared how to deal with the false leaders, and then gave Timothy some advice about how to serve the Lord faithfully

A. How to deal with false teaching (6-10)

The best way of dealing with false teaching is to emphasize what is true. So, Paul encouraged Timothy to keep on sharing with the brothers and sisters the fundamentals of sound doctrine. Paul called for this false teaching of “*godless myths and old wives’ tales*” to be utterly rejected (v.7). Using the metaphor of athletic training, Paul encouraged Timothy to do some “*spiritual workouts*” to become more godly (v.8). The reason for all the hard work that God’s minister must engage in is because “*we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe*” (v.10).

B. Paul gives some practical advice to Timothy (11-16)

Let us look at the seven bits of advice that Paul shared with Timothy:

1. Teach with authority (v.11).
2. Make sure that everyone respects you even though you’re younger than many others (v.12).
3. “Set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (v.13).
4. Spend time reading the scriptures, preaching and teaching (v.14).
5. Paul reminded him to use his spiritual gift, which was given him when he started his ministry (v.15).
6. Be wholehearted and diligent so that “everyone would see your progress” (v.16).
7. Finally, be careful about doctrine and persevere as the path to being blessed and the way to bring salvation to his hearers (v.16).

What the church needs most of all today are spiritual leaders who will persevere in practicing godliness and proclaiming sound doctrine. “This passage is the portrait of a pastor with a heart for God’s Word, a passion for God’s world and a commitment to God’s grace, all wrapped in a love for the Savior who lived the life you could never live and who died an atoning death for your sins” (Michael Milton 30.08.09, <https://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership>).

Questions:

- What are the characteristics of a good minister of Jesus Christ? (v.5).
- How was Timothy to be an example to the believers? (v.12).

III. Ministry within the church (I Tim. 5:1-25)

This chapter is dedicated to practical and administrative duties that the church had to attend to, as well as the distribution of resources according to the needs of the groups.

A. Various age groups in the church (vv. 1-2).

Paul encouraged Timothy to treat the different members of the congregation as parts of his family: “*Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity.*”

B. Widows (vv.3-16).

When women were left without their husband to care for them, they often became very needy. However, as this chapter shows us, there were three different categories of widows.

1. Widows in need (vv. 3-8)

“*The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help*” (v.5). If the widow had no means of support, the church should help after making sure that there was no relative who could take on the responsibility.

2. Widows as Christian workers (vv.9-10)

There was a list of widows over sixty who worked in compassionate ministries “*such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord’s people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds*” (v.10).

3. Younger widows (vv. 11-16)

The younger widows were not put on the list and they were encouraged to marry again. Paul saw this group as problematic: “*Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to*” (v.13).

C. The church officials (vv. 17-20).

The elders deserve to have remuneration for the work they have been called to do (vv.17-18). These leaders also needed to be protected against unjust accusations. Paul told Timothy: *“Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses”* (v.19). They needed protection from malicious comments, but those elders who were sinning had to be reproved *“before everyone, so that the others may take warning”* (v.20)

D. How to choose leaders fairly (vv. 21-25)

As a leader, Timothy would have to choose people for different ministry tasks. It would be possible to choose unworthy people who later on would let the Lord down, or there could be some good candidates who were not in the limelight and might get overlooked. Paul exhorted Timothy to be both unprejudiced and impartial, not relying on his own bias (v.21). Timothy was to be careful about laying hands on people to set them apart for a specific service when they possibly weren't ready for the proposed mission (v.23a). Paul charged him to *“not take part in the sins of others”* and to keep himself pure (v.23b). The passage ends on a very personal note.

Questions:

- What was his advice for widows in the church?
- How was Timothy to treat the church elders or leaders?

IV. Paul encouraged Timothy to take care of his Call (6:3-19)

A. More about false teachers (vv.3-5)

Paul returned in Chapter 6 to the topic of the teachers. The Message translation puts the situation of those false teachers up on the screen: *“If you have leaders there who teach otherwise, who refuse the solid words of our Master Jesus and this godly instruction, tag them for what they are: ignorant windbags who infect the air with germs of envy, controversy, bad-mouthing, suspicious rumors. Eventually there's an epidemic of backstabbing, and truth is but a distant memory. They think religion is a way to make a fast buck.”*

B. The perils of riches (vv.6-10)

Since many false teachers were using religion for personal gain, Paul used the opportunity to talk about true contentment (vv.7-8). He warned about the dangers

that come when people, including those false teachers, who love money too much. *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs”* (v.10).

C. “Fight the good fight of faith” (v.12)

In contrast to the false teachers who were leading people away from God often with mercenary motives, Paul called Timothy a *“man of God”* (v.11a). Instead of seeking personal gain, he must *“pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness”* (V.11) He needed to go into battle against wrong doing and the evil one, sure of his salvation, being a good example, living in the presence of God, and awaiting the coming again of Jesus (vv.12-13). Paul ended with a wonderful doxology: *“God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen”* (vv.15-16).

Questions:

- What is Paul's teaching about money?
- How can we fight the good fight?

Conclusion

These three chapters are full of wise advice to Timothy about pastoral issues such as: how to deal with false teachers, how to care for different groups in the church (the elderly, the youth and different groups of widows), and protecting and if necessary disciplining church leaders. The chapter is full of some very practical personal advice for Timothy, who as a *“man of God”* should guide his people by his example and teaching.



The implications of being a pastor

Macedonio Daza (Bolivia)

Study passages: 2 Timothy 1:3-18, 2:1-26, 3:1-9

Memory Verse: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" 2 Timothy 2:15.

Lesson aim: To understand from Paul's instructions to Timothy, what it means to be a Pastor.

Introduction

The Second Epistle to Timothy is a personal letter, written by the apostle Paul to his disciple. It contains instructions from a servant of God with vast ministerial experience to another pastor of a younger generation, who along with others, was called to continue the task of the Great Commission because Paul was nearing the end of his ministry.

Who was Timothy? On his second missionary journey, Paul, together with Silas, arrived in Lystra where they found a young disciple of good testimony, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father. The apostle took him under his wing and circumcised him out of respect for the Jews and to give him a Jewish identity (Acts 16:1-5). Since those first days, at least a quarter of a century had passed in which there had been a very close relationship between the teacher and his disciple. Paul calls him his beloved son.

The occasion on which the letter was written is significant because it was the last letter the apostle Paul would write. It was written from prison, and Paul shared his vision of eternity and the recognition that his good fight and career were ending (2 Timothy 4:7-8). "It is a mixture of personal feelings and administrative rules, reminiscences and instructions, sadness and trust. Timothy is one of his most trustworthy assistants, and although no one ever could take the place of Paul, it seems that he had tried to make Timothy his successor" (Ralph, Earle. Exploring the New Testament. USA: CNP, 1978, p.353).

I. What Timothy Should Do: not be ashamed of God or the gospel (2 Timothy 1:3-18)

Paul trusted in Timothy's "sincere faith" (v.5). This was an authentic and genuine faith, without hypocrisy or pretense, inherited from his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. Think about how this faith had been

transmitted across three generations, grandmother, daughter, and grandson. Paul was underscoring the important value of education in the home because Timothy had received a godly education from childhood (2 Timothy 3:15). No doubt it came from his predecessors (Proverb 22:6).

What Timothy had to do was "*fan into flame the gift of God*" (v.6). The metaphor Paul used here was that of a fire that was weak, about to be gradually extinguished, which needed to be reignited. "This is an ongoing need of all believers, particularly church leaders. We are constantly in danger of reducing our flame and slowing down our pace. Periodically we need to renew our consecration and reaffirm our loyalty" (Howard et al. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 9. USA: CNP, 1985, p.667).

A. Do not be ashamed to bear witness to the Lord (v.7-10)

Witnessing requires a courageous spirit, especially, when combatting apostasy when people's faith is weakening and in a context where the freedom to preach the gospel is impeded. Through God's grace, Timothy had not been given a spirit of cowardice, but a gift of power as a fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8. This is the dynamic action of an almighty God who empowers His servants through his Holy Spirit who gives "*power, love and self-discipline*" (2 Timothy 1:7). As a result, through verbal and non-verbal testimony, the Good News about Jesus reaches into different spheres of society.

God's minister must share the gospel. Paul shared with Timothy the implications of carrying out the task, though suffering often accompanies a faithful testimony of the gospel. Hardships and evangelism often go together, but Paul knew in whom he had believed and was convinced that God's powerful hand would help him until the end (v.12).

The apostle's counsel to Timothy wasn't to look at his present weakness, but if he trusted in God for help and strength, he would be able to fulfill what God wanted him to do.

Paul also emphasized the call that he had received, which was divine (v.9), and because of this holy calling, Paul had been constituted "a herald and an apostle and a teacher" (v.11). God's plan of salvation comes to us by grace, and has nothing to do with our works. God's call was specific and planned for in advance before the beginning of time. It was also revealed through the incarnation of Christ (v. 10; cf. Hebrews 1:1-2).

B. Timothy must follow Paul's example despite trials and tribulations (vv.12-18)

Paul encouraged Timothy to follow his example and teaching: "What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching..." (v.13a). Because he knew on whom it depended, "with faith and love in Christ Jesus" (v.13b), Timothy was to guard "the good deposit that was entrusted to him—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us" (v.14).

Asia was the Roman province where Ephesus was located. There the churches had deteriorated doctrinally and some had abandoned the apostle, retreating towards legalism. Paul mentioned two people, Hymenaeus and Philetus, as responsible (v.15). "The opposite is true of Onesiphorus. This brother comforted the apostle many times by not being ashamed of his chains in Rome and by offering him help in Ephesus" (Merrill, F. Unger. Unger's New Bible Manual. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1966, p.565).

Questions:

- Evangelization is a very important task for every minister and child of God. Can you mention what is essential in doing this?
- How are you sharing the gospel with others today?

II. What Timothy should be: a faithful worker for God (2 Timothy 2:1-26)

A. Must be a good teacher

Timothy had to train other leaders: "...The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others" (v.2). Paul exhorted Timothy to deliver what he had received. This is the work of a good disciple, to receive and deliver. Committed and responsible discipleship is the key to exponential development of the church.

The apostle emphasized that Timothy needed to

correctly handle the Word of truth (v.15b); "... And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach..." (v.24). With these indications, we can realize that teaching is vital for the development of the church, so every pastor must know how to teach.

B. Must be like a soldier

The figure of being a soldier (vv.3-4) implies discipline, obedience, submission and a complete dedication to the mission and strategy that is required of a military man. The "... military analogy was Saint Paul's favorite, not so much because he leaned towards the military, but because the soldiers of the Roman Empire were seen everywhere, and especially because the soldier's life represented a magnificent analogy of the Christian life" (Howard et al. Commentary Biblical Beacon, volume 9. USA: CNP, 1985, p.677).

C. Must be like an athlete

The figure of the athlete (v.5) implies perseverance, commitment and submission to the rules of the game. Paul also used the same figure in his epistle to the Corinthians: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24). In 2 Timothy 4:7, he said: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

D. Must be like a farmer

Paul used the figure of the farmer (v.6) who patiently waits for the harvest time to enjoy later the fruit of his labor. In the first century, the farmers' work involved great sacrifice because they had to get up at dawn to work, do their daily work in the open air, exposed to the elements, and work with callused hands on the plow. Also, the apostle Paul used the figure of the farmer to defend the rights of the minister of God in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk?" (1 Corinthians 9:7).

E. Must be a sacrificial worker

Paul said to Timothy: "Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this" (2 Timothy 2:7). Paul added: "This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal..." (v.9). This suffering had been only for the love of the ministry of reconciliation so that people would obtain salvation in Christ Jesus.

Timothy, then, was to be an approved worker: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved,

a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (v.15). He was to be a busy worker, not a lazy one, in God's vineyard so that there could be fruit. Likewise, Paul recommended that Timothy work diligently to not be ashamed before God. He should always speak respectfully. Paul told this young leader that in his interpersonal relationships, he shouldn't use idle verbiage like Hymenaeus and Philetus (v.17), "who, through foolish arguments, had been led to erroneous beliefs, as to the resurrection" (Ralph, Earle. Exploring the New Testament. USA: CNP, 1978, p.449).

Timothy, as a worker for God, was to be like holy utensil in the service of the Lord. Paul illustrated this by talking about different household articles, some which are more valuable than others, because some are for honorable uses, and others for common purposes (vv.20-21). The servant of the Lord must be clean and pure in heart, sanctified, and ready for every good work. This teaching will help a young pastor like Timothy to flee from the intense and burning desires or passions of youth (vv. 20-23).

F. Must be meek to correct those who oppose the gospel

The Lord's servant must not be carried away by their natural impulses, but must show kindness, long-suffering and patience in the face of evil. In addition, they must correct and instruct with meekness those who don't share their opinion. Only in this way will they be able to have victory (vv.24-26).

Questions:

- List some characteristics that a worker for God should have.
- Do you consider that you have the characteristics mentioned? Why or why not?

III. What he needed to know: The character of mankind in the end time (2 Tim 3:1-9)

A. Dangerous times are coming

In chapter three, Paul warned about the last days. This was something Timothy needed to pay special attention to, as was mentioned in his first epistle (1 Timothy 4:1). Some identify this warning with the end times. Glenn Gould wrote: "The expression 'the last days' generally refers to the final period of the present age that will precede the return of Christ, even when he wasn't alive to witness it. The period that Saint Paul describes could well be the immediate times to Timothy. And he classifies them as dangerous" (Howard and others. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 9. USA: CNP, 1985, p.689).

First century Christians were sure that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent. Therefore, the apostle warned Timothy that he would probably be living in the end times. This young pastor must also have known about the conduct of the false teachers. Paul told him that: "People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— having a form of godliness but denying its power" (vv.2-5a). They can be identified as self-centered and wicked sinners. Paul's purpose was to expose the false prophets so that Timothy could have his eyes wide open, ready to identify them.

B. Keep away from false Christians

By pointing out to Timothy these evils that were present, he was exhorting Timothy to avoid them. Paul warned Timothy about: "...the kind who worm their way into homes and gain control over gullible women, who are loaded down with sins and are swayed by all kinds of evil desires" (v.6). The expression "loaded down with sin" implies that these women didn't have clear consciences. That's why they were prey, quickly being carried away by the will of others.

C. The example of Jannes and Jambres against Moses

Timothy, as God's minister, shouldn't be surprised if he had opposition, because even Moses had opposition (vv.8-9). The Apostle encouraged Timothy to continue with the sure hope of victory. Opponents will be embarrassed, because they'll go from bad to worse. Let's stay under the shadow of the Almighty (Psalm 91:7).

Questions:

- Who is an apostate? What is the behavior of false Christians like?
- How can we avoid them?

Conclusion

Good ministers of God need to be sure of their holy calling, obedient, hard-working, patient, committed, and meek. They need to be aware of their context, the times in which they live, the people around them, and know how to detect lurking evils. Their task involves evangelism, reaching out with the good news to every possible person, whether they're compatriots or not. This responsibility can only be accomplished when they receive God's power through his Holy Spirit, giving them vigor and strength.



Paul's Final Charge to Timothy

Déborá Acuña (Chile)

Study passages: 2 Timothy 3:10-17, 4:1-5

Memory Verses: “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry” 2 Timothy 4:5

Lesson aim: To learn from Paul's farewell message to Timothy what it means to be a wholehearted Christian.

Introduction

Each of us was created to worship God. We are the work of his hands; and He is our Lord. Besides that, He has specific purposes for each one of us. He has special plans for you and for me. It must be the desire of our heart to fulfill the ministry that the Lord entrusts to us.

This lesson covers some good advice that Paul gave to Timothy which we can apply to our lives today. Paul is in prison and knows that he's going to be put to death. This is the last letter that he wrote before being killed in the persecution in Rome in the time of the Emperor Nero. So since these are Paul's last words to his disciple Timothy, we need to listen to his counsel with care.

God's Word is alive and effective, and provides us with wise counsel that comes directly from the Holy throne of our heavenly Father. Let's learn with open hearts and minds and positive attitudes, willing to learn what God wants to teach us. We want His teachings to help us make changes in our lives.

I. Some historical perspectives (2 Tim. 3:10-13)

Paul and Timothy had been working together for more than twenty years. Paul knows that this will be the last time he can give advice to Timothy. He had just warned Timothy about dangerous times when people would seek their own interest, without measure, but recognized that Timothy was different. Timothy would have to face difficult times. Imperial persecution was a new threat to the gospel.

To encourage Timothy, Paul reminded him of victories gained along the way. He shared nine

different features: “You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them” (vv.10-11). The last phrase is the point; the Lord who rescued Paul would also be close to Timothy and other church leaders after Paul had gone to be with Jesus.

Paul continued in verse 12: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Jesus warned his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

We are called to stand up for what is right and to expose what is wrong, to tell the truth, to be scrupulously honest, to love our neighbors, and live honorably in Christian holiness. If we don't receive some opposition from those around us, could that be a sign that in fact that we are lukewarm or worldly Christians?

Christians will be persecuted while “evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (v.13). Ask your students to share who are the “evil doers and impostors” in the World today, and especially in your context.

Questions:

- What did Timothy learn from working with Paul?
- Why should Christians expect opposition?

II. Timothy must continue firm in what he had learned (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

“But against such a background of such militant error, the Christian leader must stand firm on what he knows of the truth, like a rock resisting the increasing fury of the waves” D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, London, Tyndale press, 1973, p. 162). The foundation is based on what he has received from his teachers (especially from Paul, but also his mother and grandmother), and from the Holy Scriptures (vv14-15).

A. Timothy received the Scriptures when he was young (v.15)

Timothy had received a lot of instruction from his Jewish family, specifically his mother and grandmother. This had given him an essential background for when he became a Christian. Let's not underestimate the teaching that is given to children, adolescents, and young people. We may think that they aren't mature enough to understand the Word of God. Jesus said that we have to be like children if we want to be in His kingdom (Matt. 18:3). Children can work for the Lord, and they represent the future of the church.

B. The Word of God is useful (v.16)

The phrase “*All Scripture is God-breathed*” (v.16a) implies that it has been inspired by God and so becomes God's Word for us. We must always remember that God's Word is not just a simple ancient book. It contains the message that comes out of the mouth of God. It's still relevant today, is the unchanging truth, the true source of life. His Word has power to change us. It's useful for “*teaching*” (positive quality) and “*rebuking*” (negative aspect); for “*correction*” (negative action) and “*training in righteousness*” (positive element). Reading, studying, and listening to His Word can mold our character. We need to listen obediently when the Spirit corrects and convicts us, and take heed of the things we need to obey.

C. The Word of God perfects us (v.17)

This verse reflects the purpose for which we should follow the counsel of God's Word “...so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (v.17).

The Bible will help us to be thoroughly prepared

for our task. Ask your students if they know how to spend a daily time in Bible study and prayer? Ask them if they have read through the Bible? Do they have a time when they read the Bible with their spouse and children? Although it's very important to go to church and hear the message the pastor preaches, just reading and listening to Scriptures once a week is not enough if we want to be “*thoroughly equipped for every good work.*”

Questions:

- According to 2 Timothy 3:16, why can we trust the Bible?
- How can the Bible help us to be mature Christians?

III. Fulfill the ministry (2 Timothy 4:1-5)

If we knew that today was our last day on earth, what advice would we give to our children and friends? In verse 1, Paul declared: “*In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge.*” “The solemnity of the present charge is doubly impressive as the parting advice of the aged warrior to his younger and rather timid lieutenant” (D. Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles*, London, Tyndale press, 1973, p. 165).

A. Five imperatives for a successful ministry

The apostle Paul earnestly shared five exhortations with Timothy, which continue to be relevant today. “*Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction*” (v.2).

1. “*Preach the word.*” There's something very important that we must keep in mind. The message must be centered on Christ. We must not forget that the good news is the salvation that Jesus brought through his life, death and resurrection.
2. “*Be prepared in season and out of season.*” A pastor is always on duty, taking every opportunity to serve.
3. “*Correct.*” A pastor will be able to point out errors and how to put them right. This could imply helping people repent of something they have done.
4. “*Rebuke*” implies censure

5. “Encourage” implies building up people’s confidence

These five imperative each needs to be carried out “with great patience and careful instruction” (v.2).

B. Beware of false teachers

Paul comes back to the false teachers: “For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (vv.3-4). During the long history of the church, there have been some very sketchy leaders propounding strange ideas. We have today a series of sects which claim to be Christian, but teach strange ideas. This passage is very descriptive, a crowd of followers with itchy ears to hear what they want to hear – easy stuff that comes from myths which don’t help them stand firm on the solid ground of the gospel. Timothy, as well as the church today, had to be wary of populist religion, full of “froth and bubbles” and very little discipleship.

C. Discharge all the duties of your ministry (2 Timothy 4:5)

In verse 5, we hear Paul exhort Timothy: “But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.”

This was one of the last messages Paul had for Timothy. He foresaw difficult times ahead for this young pastor, so he would need to stay calm in all situations. Paul encouraged him to endure hardships in times of persecution and possible suffering. Finally, he reminded Timothy to continue sharing the wonderful news about Jesus.

Questions:

- Make a list of some of Paul’s advice to Timothy

Conclusion

In this sad portion of Scripture, we see the veteran Paul giving his disciple Timothy his final advice. Paul was going to be put to death and he wanted to be sure that Timothy knew what to do with false teachers. He encouraged Timothy to be strong in face of persecution and stand firm in what he believed based on the Scriptures. He encouraged him to fulfill his ministry with faith and courage in the love of the Lord.



Building a blameless church

Daniel Neuna Esono Mifumu (Equatorial Guinea)

Study passages: Titus 1:1-16, 2:1-15, 3:1-11

Memory Verse: “In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us” Titus 2:7-8.

Lesson aim: To learn from Paul’s counsel to Titus that the church must have an irreproachable testimony.

Introduction

Equatorial Guinea is a small country in size and in number of inhabitants. In our country, people used to take great care of their good name, according to what my father told me. In other words, good behavior or good reputation were a valuable commodity. But it’s been diminished lately since the emergence of large multinational companies that came to the country thanks to the discovery of black gold, and the consequent evolution and socio-economic development of the country. As a result, people have radically changed their behavior. We see many negative issues daily, mainly related to misconduct and widespread corruption.

I think that this can be a true illustration of what’s happening in many places around the world. Human conduct in general, and also in particular of many who believe themselves to be Christians, has changed and continues to change radically for the worse. This is producing a negative witness in our communities. The apostle Paul knew that those of us who are in Christ need to know and take care of our norms of behavior as believers in our communities, in order to produce the true result that is expected of God’s people.

Although this letter to Titus is considered to be a Pastoral Epistle, it’s distinguished from the others by its clear exposition about how believers should conduct themselves worthy of the faith they profess. I think that in my country, as well as in other places, people who call themselves Christian are leaving much to be desired in regarding to their conduct in their respective communities.

The panorama of our societies clearly shows that sin is on the rise. They have to build more and more safe prisons and places of rehabilitation for delinquent

adolescents and youth. More dance houses and sites promoting obscenities are opened every week. Early pregnancies and marriages that end in divorces are a reality that cannot be hidden. Amidst this moral and social chaos, the church is called to be light and salt. Our Lord Jesus said so (Matthew 5:13- 14). Believers are committed and obliged to show everyone around us that it’s possible to live otherwise in Christ Jesus, just as the Scriptures tell us (2 Corinthians 5:17)

I. The conduct of overseers and elders (Titus 1:5-16)

We don’t know how or when the gospel came to Crete for the first time. But in light of what the apostle Paul said in this verse: “*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you*” (Titus 1:5), this makes us think that this is the possible reason why the apostle wrote this letter. This shows evidence that Paul had firsthand information about some disorders that disturbed the Christian community of Crete. Based on this fact, Paul sent Titus to go and put some important matters in order. One of them is mentioned in the verse quoted: establish elders in the cities and correct what is deficient in their doctrine (v.5).

We don’t have information about why Paul was unable to continue his missionary to work on the island of Crete. But, we do know that he commissioned Titus, his true son in the faith, to do the work. As previously stated, his main task was to correct the deficient doctrine and establish elders; in other words, name and ordain elders in churches.

The Apostle Paul, to avoid confusion and degrading testimonies in the communities of believers in the island of Crete, suggested to Titus a description of various qualities required for the people who were going to be candidates for appointment and ordination to the ministry. Titus 1:6-8 says: *“An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and aren’t open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.”* Here we have approximately the same requirements mentioned to Timothy in the list of qualities that everyone who desires to be an overseer must possess (1 Timothy 3:1-7). We must not forget that terms such as bishops, priests, elders, pastors, prophets, evangelists, etc., are descriptions in the Bible of different gifts of service in the Lord’s flock. They refer to spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit bestows on believers for their edification and for the propagation of the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12).

According to the Apostle Paul, the candidates who assume these places of services in local churches on the island of Crete had to be first, blameless people, that is, people of unquestionable integrity, people that aren’t propagators of false teachings or of an irregular moral life. The Christian minister should avoid evil, and even, the appearance of evil, to protect the witness of the ministry in the towns or cities.

Paul also mentioned another important quality which is that they needed to be the husband of one wife. This indication can be understood as a non-practitioner of polygamy, or that they didn’t own concubines or have lovers in secret. As ministers, we should be aware that our responsibility is to protect our marriage, and in this way, be an example of purity for our flock.

Paul also stated that anyone designated as an elder should have instructed his children in the ways of the Lord. (v.6). Obviously, it’s understood that our children will take the decision to follow the Lord or not when they reach a responsible age, but we must also know that nothing else affirms or validates the devotion of a servant of God like having believing children.

Verse 8 says that the candidates should be *“self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.”* Self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22- 23.

Although the Holy Spirit develops in us this ability, we as ministers of the gospel must discipline ourselves regarding the maintenance of our carnal appetites. Church elders and leaders are expected to be people of irreproachable conduct.

Questions:

- Considering what we have read in this passage, what should be the behavior of Christian leaders?

II. Christian conduct (Titus 2:1- 15, 3:1-2)

Titus 2:11-12 says, *“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.”* The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn’t have to be an abstract or intangible message. The apostle Paul’s statements in this passage explicitly speak of the true visible results that come with the true gospel or sound doctrine ... transformed lives. God’s grace, his undeserved gift to us, is available for everyone. Our responsibility is to respond to this offer of salvation. In fact, there are many who reject this grace and therefore, they are turning away the Savior of their souls. Those of us who have already accepted this salvation, through the merits of the atoning death of our Lord Jesus on the cross, must know that some ethical demands have been imposed on us, and we are expected to fulfill them.

As Titus 2:12 sums up, we must, as disciples of Christ, renounce all kinds of ungodliness and worldly practices. We should understand this as something that we can’t do in our own strength. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. It’s through the grace and the power of God that our deliverance becomes effective.

Consequently, we must live lives full of good judgment, righteousness, and devotion to God in this sinful and polluted world around us. The same grace that saves us is the same grace that prompts us to live a holy lives. This ethical vision is relevant for Christians of all levels and social strata. Regarding Christian ethics, Paul, in this passage, included leaders, slaves, masters, widows, youth, civil authorities, and civic obligations, etc. More than preaching the gospel with words, we need to preach God’s truths with our way of life in our community. Our churches should be salt and light in each context.

Questions:

- Do you accept that believing people should also live a Christian life of good witness, as should their leaders? Why?

III. Behavior Transformed by Grace (Titus 3:3-7)

We see in Titus 3:3-7 Paul's confirmation that we have been saved to do good works, just as long ago he had said: "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*" (Ephesians 2:10). There should be a well-marked difference between what we were before meeting the Lord, and what we are expected to be after meeting him. In the Epistle to Titus, we read: "*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another... so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life*" (vv.3,7).

Through the forgiveness of our sins in Christ Jesus, God declared us righteous by grace. There is no reason to let anyone boast: "*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Humility and a life of gratitude to God should characterize us, because today we are called children of God, and we have the privilege of calling Him Father.

None of these things have happened because of us, but because of the divine mercies and his unconditional love for each one of us. The best way to thank our heavenly Father is living a holy or blameless life before Him and those around us: "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*" (Matthew 5:48).

Questions:

- How can the Christian church display behavior, that has been transformed, to a sinful world like ours today? Base your answer on the biblical text.

IV. Consequences of negative behavior (Titus 3:8-11)

After all the excellent doctrinal and Christian procedural instructions that the Apostle Paul offered Titus to establish the elders in the local churches of the island of Crete, in these verses, the apostle took the opportunity to point out the disastrous result of deliberately choosing otherwise: "*Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them. You may be sure that such people are warped and sinful; they are self-condemned*" (Titus 3:10-11).

Titus had to insist on the teachings that we find in verses 1 through 7 of this passage. He expected that the believers would express their actions in good works. All Christian teaching is expected to have a personal and practical application. This must be evident in believers as the practical working out of faith that they profess. If not, they would deny the faith they were supposedly professing.

Healthy teaching that results in practical lives is more than helpful for our Christian life. The works here in this context don't have the connotation of being the means that leads us to eternal life, but rather the result of a life transformed by the true gospel: "*As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead*" (James 2:26).

The apostle Paul had to remind Titus of the complicated problem that had undermined the gospel in the churches of the island of Crete: the heresies. Therefore, the apostle said, "*But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless*" (Titus 3:9). I remember a similar incident that happened to us in the Church of the Nazarene in the city of Bata, where we are currently pastoring. One day, we saw an invitation poster on the wall that had surely been pasted there intentionally. The caption read, "Why should you tithe?" Well, I told the gentleman that this topic wasn't of interest to us because here in our congregation, we knew why we tithed. He replied: "Come and discuss with the texts in hand." Those would have been vain discussions that would not add anything to our mission as a church. It's not wise to get into such controversies with people who are trying to introduce new beliefs or practices. Some church leaders have fallen into the sin of pride, leading to inappropriate behavior.

Questions:

- What are two examples of possible consequences of inappropriate behavior as a believer?

Conclusion

We're currently living in a context where heresies are increasingly plaguing the church of Christ. We're ministering in contexts where the leader's bad testimony, and many times of the people of God in general, are causing ill effects. We must preach the Bible and live and teach sound doctrine because this is the only way we'll be a blessing, and our Father who is in heaven will be glorified.

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