

BOOK 14

The
Path
of Truth

Bible Lessons for Youth and Adults

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Contents

Presentation		5
Recommendations		6
FIRST QUARTER - A special treatment of his people: Jeremiah		8
Lesson 1	Jeremiah and the Context of His Ministry	9
Lesson 2	Jeremiah's Call	12
Lesson 3	Jeremiah calls the people to return to God	15
Lesson 4	Steps that Bring Blessing	19
Lesson 5	The devastating effects of Judah's sin	23
Lesson 6	God warns Jeremiah to be a faithful spokesman	26
Lesson 7	The parables of the Potter and the Figs	29
Lesson 8	Redeeming, Transforming, and Reconciling Love	32
Lesson 9	The Marvelous Intervention of God	35
Lesson 10	The Principle of Obedience	38
Lesson 11	Jeremiah, a True Prophet	41
Lesson 12	The Inescapable Judgment of God	44
Lesson 13	Judgment and Restoration	48
SECOND QUARTER - Taking care of our emotions		51
Lesson 14	Taking Care of Our Emotions	52
Lesson 15	Think on This	55
Lesson 16	Holistic Health: Both Mind and Body	58
Lesson 17	How to Avoid Addictions	61
Lesson 18	Prevention of Mental Illness	64
Lesson 19	A Shared Responsibility	67
Lesson 20	God is the Model for our Relationships	70
Lesson 21	Mutual Respect	73
Lesson 22	Finding Delight in Others	76
Lesson 23	Managing Anger	79
Lesson 24	How to Resolve Conflicts	82
Lesson 25	Sadness Management Clinic	85
Lesson 26	Goodbye, Anxiety!	88

THIRD QUARTER - Useful Recommendations for Believers: James, 1 & 2 Peter

91

Lesson 27	Blessing in Trials and Temptations	97
Lesson 28	Faith and Good Works	95
Lesson 29	The Tongue	98
Lesson 30	In Search of Sophia	101
Lesson 31	Practical Advice for Christian Living	104
Lesson 32	A Profitable Wait	107
Lesson 33	A Call to Holiness	110
Lesson 34	The People of God and Their Purpose	113
Lesson 35	Behaving in a way that pleases God	116
Lesson 36	Partakers of Christ's Sufferings	119
Lesson 37	Useful Exhortations	122
Lesson 38	Beware of False Prophets	125
Lesson 39	Getting Ready for His Coming	128

FOURTH QUARTER - The Ten Commandments

131

Lesson 40	The First Commandment	132
Lesson 41	No graven images	135
Lesson 42	His name is worthy of honor	139
Lesson 43	What a good rest!	142
Lesson 44	Honor your father and mother	145
Lesson 45	You shall not kill	148
Lesson 46	Meaning and consequences of adultery	151
Lesson 47	Do not steal	154
Lesson 48	Always speak the truth	157
Lesson 49	You shall not covet!!	160
Lesson 50	The great commandment: God is one	163
Lesson 51	Loving God with all our being	166
Lesson 52	Love your neighbor	169

Presentation

In the Bible, we find stories of romance, judgment, action, abandonment, destruction, restoration, war, and love, but above all things, we find the voice of God speaking to our lives. If we read it carefully every day and meditate on it, we'll find words of encouragement, challenge, consolation, hope and exhortation.

This year, young people and adults will continue studying challenging books and topics that will help them know more about the biblical context, and these lessons will also teach you how to make that Word clear and practical to them today.

Everything that's taught to a person throughout life becomes more important with each passing day. With The Path of Truth, we try to cover different books of the Bible and biblical teachings on different topics, making them increasingly attractive and easy to apply to daily life.

The Bible is an old and new book at the same time. In it, we find that ancient situations are repeated today and speak to our lives. This year, we'll see in the first quarter "A special treatment of his people: Jeremiah." Through this prophet, we'll get to know the heart of God in depth and his dealings with his people. We'll continue with the study of "Caring for our emotions," where we'll see topics that are part of our daily lives and will help us prevent situations that damage our lives. We'll continue with "Useful recommendations for believers: James, 1 and 2 Peter," in which we'll see practical teachings for the church today. Finally, we'll conclude the year with a deep and practical study of "The Ten Commandments" for our lives.

I encourage you to prepare and begin this worthy work of teaching and investing principles into people's lives that will guide their daily walk.

Patricia Picavea
Editor - Ministries Publications

Recommendations

When we share biblical teachings with different groups of people, we give and receive insights that enrich us and help us grow in our life of faith. There are different kinds of groups, and we must apply the teachings according to the basic needs of the group in general, and of each member in particular.

Working with young people or adults means always being alert, seeing the different circumstances and situations that people experience. Some situations are as a result of bad decisions in their youth, or a product of a lack of guidance or ignorance. In their daily lives, people are confronted by different circumstances and decision-making for which they must be prepared. For this reason, it's important that all Bible study leads to reflection and contextualization of biblical principles and teachings.

Take this challenge, entrust yourself to the Lord, and prepare yourself in the best way to teach and share what God has prepared for each person. Be surprised by what God wants to do in their lives through your ministry and the Word of God.

Lesson Preparation & Presentation:

1. Begin by praying for wisdom and discernment to understand the Bible study passages and to be able to apply them first to your own life. Also, pray that the class will be receptive to the teaching of God's Word.
2. When preparing the lesson, find a place without distractions to study the topic. It's important to have some supplies such as paper, pens, pencils, erasers, etc.
3. To the best of your ability, in addition to the book *The Path of Truth*, have on hand a dictionary, a Bible dictionary, and some good Bible commentaries.
4. Read the lesson from *The Path of Truth* as many times as necessary at the beginning of the week. This will help you prepare the materials you may need for class, keep an eye on news and other information that you could include in the lesson you are preparing, etc.
5. Search the Bible and read each indicated passage.
6. Read the lesson objective to know where to focus.
7. Write on a piece of paper the title of the lesson, and what points will be developed. Then, write the subtitle of the first point, and develop your own summary as you study the lesson. Write and highlight the Bible quotes that will be read during class.
8. Write down the meaning of words you don't know so that you can better understand the lesson and explain it to those who may ask you.
9. If you do research on the Internet, be careful to get information from reliable pages that support the information. Remember that the Internet is an open space where all people can upload the information they want. Unfortunately, not all the information found there's true and reliable.
10. Prepare the lesson to be as dynamic and participatory as possible. Use the questions provided and add more of your own. This is a very special time where sharing experiences will help and enrich the learning process. By doing this, people will be more interested in the class and will remember more of what they participated in or did together; and they will appreciate being heard and participating.
11. On the day of class, arrive early. It's important that you're already there when the first person arrives.
12. Change the position of the chairs (semicircle, circle, groups, etc.). This will help the group feel more comfortable participating.

13. Before starting the lesson, welcome everyone. This will help you to create a pleasant study environment. Be interested in people, and you can pray for those who have needs.
14. Begin class with a prayer, asking the Lord to enable everyone to understand His Word and give them the willingness to obey it.
15. Write the title of the lesson and the verse to memorize on the board.
16. Maintain order in the development of the topic. Write the subtitle for point I, and start explaining it. Use the whiteboard as a teaching resource to write down key words, answers to questions, etc. When you finish point I, write the subtitle for point II, and so on.
17. As you explain each point, you can guide the group in answering the questions. Allow them to provide answers and raise questions.
18. You can form work groups to respond to some of the questions. This will allow everyone to participate. Don't force anyone to participate, but make sure everyone knows that you want and appreciate everyone's input. On the other hand, don't let one person dominate the session. In a friendly way, lead the class to listen to other people's opinions.
19. Take a few minutes to discuss how you'll apply Bible truths to your lives.
20. Read the conclusion, and encourage your students to study the biblical texts of the lesson at home during the following week. Invite them to attend the next meeting, and encourage them to invite other people. End class with a prayer.

Other practical suggestions when giving the lesson

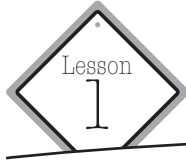
1. Know when to have a substitute. A teacher with a winning attitude knows the symptoms of burnout. And most successful teachers recognize burnout since dedication, extra care and commitment decrease. Take time out when you become too negative or critical about your students.
2. Consider your normal teaching methods. Are you generally in an active role and the group you lead in a passive role? If so, use a method that emphasizes interaction and dialogue.
3. Do you push harder to get a correct answer than to get a correct thought? Don't worry about finishing a lesson if your class is drawing its own conclusion. It's always better to let people find the bottom line for themselves (even if the process is slow), rather than have teachers move too quickly to the "right answer."
4. Emphasize an appropriate relationship; Be humble and show them your own desire to learn. This will motivate them and reinforce the fact that we learn best when we learn together.
5. Note that most of the questions provided don't have suggested answers. This is to help you facilitate the discussion. This will allow you and your group to think of your own answers and will encourage more participation.
6. Remember that these sessions are designed to be interactive. Avoid the temptation to simply read most of the material printed in your book to your students.

A special treatment of his people: Jeremiah



First Quarter

Jeremiah and the Context of His Ministry
Jeremiah's Call
Jeremiah calls the people to return to God
Steps that Bring Blessing
The devastating effects of Judah's sin
God warns Jeremiah to be a faithful spokesman
The parables of the Potter and the Figs
Redeeming, Transforming, and Reconciling Love
The Marvelous Intervention of God
The Principle of Obedience
Jeremiah, a True Prophet
The Inescapable Judgment of God
Judgment and Restoration



Jeremiah and the Context of His Ministry

Jonathan Melgarejo (USA)

Bible Study passages: 1 Kings 2:26; Jeremiah 1:1,4-10, 8:18-21, 9:1, 11:18-23, 15:10, 18:18-23, 20:7-18, 25:3

Memory Verse: "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the background of the life of the prophet Jeremiah and apply it to the current context.

Introduction

Jeremiah is considered one of the great prophets of the Old Testament. According to the book bearing his name, he was born in Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1), a place located northeast of Jerusalem, in the territory of Benjamin. He was the son of Hilkiah. It's estimated that he might have been born between 650 and 645 BC, during the final days of Manasseh's reign (697-642 BC). He received his ministry call in the year 626 BC, during the reign of Josiah, with whom he was a contemporary (Gray, Paul. *Beacon Bible Commentary: Isaiah to Daniel*, Volume 4. USA: CNP, 1982, p. 308).

The book of Jeremiah, one of the most extensive collections of prophetic writings, is basically divided into two parts, although not in chronological order. The first 25 chapters, distinguished by their poetic genre, consist of prophecies against Judah and correspond to Jeremiah's preaching during his first two decades of prophetic activity. In this first part, the emphasis of his message is to denounce the sin of God's people for their unfaithfulness and ingratitude. The second part (chapters 26 to 52), written in prose, contains various historical narratives. This section includes some details related to Jeremiah's life, particularly the moments of difficulty, but also the moments of resilience and commitment to remain steadfast in his calling.

I. Jeremiah's Life Story (Jeremiah 1:4-10, 8:18,21, 9:1, 15:10, 20:7-18, 25:3)

The context in which Jeremiah was called to minister was very challenging, with many changes that affected the lives of God's people. At first glance, it may have seemed that the magnitude of the prophetic ministry to which Jeremiah was called didn't match his personal profile. However, God never makes mistakes; He called him to be "prophet to the nations" (1:5) because He was certain that Jeremiah was the right person for the task.

A. His Call to ministry (1:4-10, 25:3)

His journey of ministry began with the divine call. In God's call to Jeremiah, we find several elements that constitute a negotiating process, which can also be seen in other biblical leaders like Moses, Gideon, or Isaiah. These sequential and progressive elements are as follows:

- **The calling originates in God's heart (v.5).** Jeremiah had been called from his mother's womb; he had been set apart for a holy purpose, and he had been assigned a task that involved the nations.
- **The denial of the person who has been called.** In verse 6, Jeremiah answered God: "Alas, Sovereign Lord...I do not know how to speak; I am too young." Jeremiah was between 24 to 29 years old when he was called, so he wasn't really a child (25:3). Typically, the rejection to God's call is accompanied by a valid human excuse, attempting to convince God of one's incapacity and to escape from one's vocation.
- **The divine insistence (vv.7-8).** God doesn't give up on His purpose in a person's life. There's no valid excuse that can dissuade Him from His call, and the argument He always uses in this divine persistence is the promise of His presence.
- **The acceptance of the call.** What argument of refusal can stand against the assurance of God's companionship? After the excuse and the promise of God's presence, the next step is the acceptance of the divine call and complete surrender.

B. His Personality (8:18-21, 9:1, 15:10, 20:7-18)

Jeremiah has often been known as "the weeping prophet," and some passages in his book provide evidence of this distinctive characteristic of his personality, such as Jeremiah 9:1. What did this characteristic, evidencing extreme sensitivity, mean?

Was he a capricious prophet who got angry with God in rebellion against the task entrusted to him, or because his requests hadn't been granted? Paul Gray, in his commentary on this prophetic book, expressed the confusion surrounding the prophet's character in the following words: "No prophet of the Old Testament has been so misunderstood as Jeremiah. For centuries he has been known as the man with a long face and tearful eyes. He has been regarded as a neurotic individual, temperamental, out of sync with his time, a killjoy preacher who should have taken a better psychological approach to the problems of his day" (Gray, Paul. *Beacon Bible Commentary. Isaiah to Daniel*, Volume 4. USA: CNP, 1982, p.305).

However, the reality is that Jeremiah suffered and wept over the people's rebellion in accepting the warning of divine judgment and witnessing the downfall of his people (8:18-21). His lament was linked to his profound sensitivity. "Although Jeremiah was a Spirit inspired prophet, he was also intensely human. The frequent autobiographical notes in his book reveal a personality highly sensitive to the attitudes of those around him" (Earle, Ralph. *Meet the Major Prophets*. USA: CNP, 1985, p.42).

His sensitive personality probably struggled with the nature of his calling, especially when denouncing sin and facing the people's rejection. This tension that accompanied him throughout his ministry is revealed in several passages in the book, known as the "confessions of Jeremiah" (11:18-23, 12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23, 20:7-18).

We don't know how Jeremiah's life ended. After the fall of Jerusalem, he was compelled, by the remnant of the Jews, to go to Egypt; and according to Gray, "he was stoned to death in Egypt by those same Jews for preaching against their idolatrous practices" (Gray, Paul. *Beacon Bible Commentary. Isaiah to Daniel*, Volume 4. USA: CNP, 1982, p.312).

Questions:

- What characteristics of Jeremiah's life as a prophet stand out to you the most? Why?
- In your own life, can you identify any parallels with Jeremiah's life and ministry?

II. Historical Context of Jeremiah's Ministry (Jeremiah 1:1, 25:3, 27:6-8, 44)

Jeremiah had a long ministry that lasted 40 years. Old Testament scholars agree that the prophet received his call in the year 627 BC and concluded his ministry in 586 BC, after the fall of Jerusalem (Schökel, Alonso, and Sicre, J. L. *Isaiah and Jeremiah*, Volume I. Spain: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1980, p.392). Over these four decades, many events occurred that significantly shaped the context in which Jeremiah ministered, and it's essential to understand these events to grasp the content of his message throughout the book.

A. International Setting in the Near East

During his life, Jeremiah faced severe political changes in the Near East. Initially, flourishing Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was destroyed, leading to the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. Subsequently, the Egyptians attempted to take advantage of this situation by forming an alliance with the surviving Assyrians, but they failed to dominate the region. Finally, the nations of the known world at that time fell under the control of the Babylonians under the dreaded King Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC, in the famous battle at Carchemish.

Naturally, this international situation had an impact on Judah, where Jeremiah carried out his prophetic ministry. In this small kingdom, there was also internal division between those who accepted Babylonian rule and those who vehemently opposed it. This political situation influenced Jeremiah's prophetic ministry, since he was forced to take a position that was severely challenged by the opposition of the Jewish people (27:6-8).

B. National Setting in Judah

During Jeremiah's life and ministry in Judah, several kings ruled, some for longer periods than others, and some were more infamous than others. When the prophet was born, the reigning king was the wicked king Manasseh who ruled for a lengthy period of 55 years. He would be remembered for his disastrous decisions to introduce pagan and idolatrous cults to the people of God, including sacred prostitution, which was a direct assault on God's holiness. At the time Jeremiah received his calling, the king was Josiah, who sought to restore worship of the Lord and was aware of the need for national reform, leading the nation to turn back to God.

However, Jeremiah questioned the sincerity of the people's acceptance of Josiah's reforms (11:1-8). Unfortunately, Josiah was killed by the Pharaoh of Egypt, and his sons succeeded him on the throne: Jehoahaz and then Jehoiakim (Schökel, Alonso, and Sicre, L. J. *Isaiah and Jeremiah*, Volume I. Spain: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1980, pp.389-391).

On the international stage, the Babylonian power emerged, and apparently, Jehoiakim was killed by the Babylonians. Subsequently, two of Jehoiakim's sons succeeded him as leaders of the people: Jehoiachin, for only three months, who surrendered Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar and was taken captive to Babylon, and his brother Zedekiah, who ruled for 11 years. In 587-586 BC, the city of Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by the Babylonians. Gedaliah was appointed as governor, but he was quickly assassinated, and the remnant of the Jewish people fled to Egypt (Gray, Paul. *Beacon Bible Commentary. Isaiah through Daniel*, Volume 4. USA: CNP, 1982, pp.310-312).

Questions:

- How did the international and national context impact the development of Jeremiah's ministry?
- What aspects of our own contexts present challenges for living out our faith today and fulfilling our ministries?

III. Lessons for Today in Light of the Life and Ministry of Jeremiah

A. The Prophetic Calling for Today's Church

The message of the prophets, as heralds of God, had essentially two dimensions: the denunciation of the people's sin (mainly manifested by idolatry), but also the announcement of divine judgment combined with the hope of mercy and restoration if they were willing to turn back to God. This dynamic is reflected in the book of Jeremiah: denunciation, warning of judgment, and hope.

How does Jeremiah's prophetic ministry translate for the church of our days? One clear lesson that Jeremiah gives to the church is the need to remember that we're spokespeople for God within our own context. The message we preach originates from the very heart of God. He knows our reality and has something to say to us today. As His church, our task is to be those heralds who faithfully and courageously announce this message amid the particular circumstances we face.

B. The Cost of the Church's Prophetic Announcement

One of the temptations of the contemporary church is to soften the message of the gospel, to try to satisfy the interests and expectations of today's audiences. There's a fear that a message that confronts sin and disobedience might sound too strong, and therefore not be well-received. However, we need to remember that in the days we live in, God has a clear message that straightforwardly points out what offends Him, but at the same time, is an invitation to reconciliation.

Jeremiah leaves us with the lesson of the cost of fidelity to the message. It's not easy to be faithful and popular. The pursuit of people's acceptance tempts us to minimize God's message. Obedience to God's calling often leads us to unpopularity and pain, but that's the demand for the church today.

C. The Humanity of the Prophet and His Leadership

This prophet is one of the biblical leaders who allows us to see his struggles, doubts, internal tensions, and even his frustrations and questioning. His calling and ministry, in terms of human success, could be considered a failure because when he proclaimed God's message, he wasn't listened to. However, despite his internal struggles, he faithfully fulfilled his calling and remained steadfast in his obedience.

Often, we have thought that leadership is exempt from difficult situations and inner conflicts, and even if they exist, we should hide them to not reveal our weaknesses and innermost thoughts. For some, pain and brokenness may sound like fragility and lack of character, but Jeremiah shows us another path: vulnerability as evidence of our humanity. He didn't conceal his questions, complaints, and frustrations, and he didn't give up because he was honest with his own heart, which directed him to continue fulfilling what had been entrusted to him. Christian leaders are allowed to weep over their frustrations in ministry and when they face rebellion and rejection of those who should respond. However, that should never be an excuse to abandon our commitment and calling.

Jeremiah was one of the major prophets who had a significant impact on the life of God's people in the Old Testament. The days he lived and ministered were turbulent and marked by significant political changes. Misunderstood by his own people, Jeremiah unjustly suffered the consequences of rejection, indifference, and even physical mistreatment. However, despite opposition and ridicule, Jeremiah remained faithful to his calling until the end of his days. The development of the book reflects these tensions and heartaches caused by the people's rebellion, along with the prophecies he received from God for the kingdom of Judah.

Questions:

- In light of the Scriptures, do you believe that God has something to say to us today?
- How do we feel when we experience rejection in response to God's calling? Are we willing to be vulnerable and open about the pressures, frustrations, and doubts we face?

Conclusion

The life of this prophet teaches us the value of resilience and obedience to the calling, even when things don't go as expected or as we would like. Jeremiah's humanity offers us valuable lessons of kindness, sensitivity, and transparency in the face of painful situations we encounter in life and ministry.



Jeremiah's Call

Eudo Prado (Colombia)

Biblical passage for study: Jeremiah 1:4-19

Memory Verse: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah 1:5.

Lesson Purpose: To understand how to discover and respond to God's call to ministry from Jeremiah's example.

Introduction

Although all Christians are called to fulfill the Great Commission, and in fact, we all are to participate in some form of ministry, we know that God calls some to be primarily engaged in His work as a vocation. Such was the case with Peter and other disciples, who "...at once left their nets and followed him" (Matthew 4:20). Since there are significant similarities between the reality in which Jeremiah was called and the current context, this lesson will provide us with valuable teachings to help us to respond to the call to ministry today.

I. The Calling Comes from God (Jeremiah 1:4-5)

Sometimes, we think that the call to ministry depends exclusively on the church and its organizations. Other times, we see it as a sort of family legacy, and therefore, there's an attempt to "forcefully" pass it on to a descendant. However, in this first part of the lesson, we'll learn that it's God who calls to ministry, and we'll try to understand how He does this.

A. The Particulars of the Call (v.4)

Jeremiah had a strong religious family background that undoubtedly had a powerful influence on his vocation. He was raised in the small town of Anathoth, located "about 3 miles (5 km) northwest of Jerusalem, in the land of Benjamin (1:1)" (Willmington, Harold L. The Bible Handbook. USA: Editorial Portavoz, n.d., p.223). Mostly priestly families resided in this town, and Jeremiah was the son of a priest (Jeremiah 1:1). It was perhaps within the sphere of his family's spirituality that Jeremiah deeply reflected on God's will for His people.

Another important aspect to consider is that the call to minister is unique to each person, so we cannot establish a uniform pattern. However, there's always communication from God, either through His Word as we read it, hear it preached, or through dreams, visions, or other means.

The one who is called can unmistakably recognize when God's voice comes to them, making known the sacred commission.

In the case of Jeremiah, as well as that of "the prophets of the 8th and 7th centuries, it seems that their call took place through a completely personal and immediate address from God, and these words of God created a completely new situation for the people affected by them" (Von Rad, Gerhard. The Theology of the Old Testament, vol. II. The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions. Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, 2000, p.80). Once we receive God's calling, our lives change completely, and we're never the same person again.

B. The Purpose of the Call (v.5)

When God calls someone to ministry, He has a special purpose for them and directs them to serve in a specific reality. The term "ministry" is translated from the Greek "diakonía," which means "service." Jeremiah's call was "closely connected, in a very meaningful way, with the events that happened in the political scene, with the calamity that threatened Palestine from the north (Jer. 1, 13 s.)" (Von Rad, Gerhard. The Theology of the Old Testament, vol. II, The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions. Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, 2000, p.239).

Each call also comes with a specific assignment from God. Some are called to preach, others to serve, others to teach, etc. Jeremiah was called to be a "prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). In fulfilling his ministry, he proclaimed the Word during the reign of various kings and prophesied against nine nations (Jeremiah 46-51). It's also possible that understanding the call, what God is asking us to do, may not be entirely clear at the beginning but becomes evident after some time.

For example, God spoke to Paul shortly after his conversion through a message from the Holy Spirit in the temple, and then He confirmed it after several years (Acts 13:1-3, 22:17-21).

Questions:

- What role does the Word of God play in a call to minister?
- How does God call us?

II. Jeremiah makes excuses (Jeremiah 1:6-7)

In the Bible, often those who were called by God were people who considered their own weaknesses as a limitation to fulfilling the enormous task entrusted to them. Such was the case with Jeremiah.

A. The Overwhelming Weight of the Calling (v.6)

We see how God's call to Jeremiah caused him great fear and distress when he considered this immense responsibility. He felt overwhelmed by the prospect of having to proclaim God's judgment upon His apostate people. This initial reluctance to the call observed in Jeremiah and other characters in the Old Testament demonstrates the conscious evaluation they made. "The hesitation frequently shown by inspired ministers of God (Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30; Jonah 1:3) when accepting the call demonstrates that they didn't assume the ministry under the influence of deceptive fanaticism, as false prophets often did" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown. Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible. Volume I: The Old Testament. USA: Baptist Publications, 2003, p.659).

B. Why God Never Accepts Excuses? (v.7)

God never makes mistakes. His perfect knowledge and wisdom should provide us with the greatest assurance regarding the call to ministry. As our Creator, He knows us perfectly, preparing and ordaining us in advance for His purpose, as He did with Jeremiah (Psalm 139:13; Jeremiah 1:5). Moreover, as our Lord and Redeemer, He can use us as He sees fit (Romans 14:7; 2 Corinthians 5:15). Jeremiah used his youth as an excuse to reject God's call, but God responded by promising His presence and power to help him overcome his weaknesses. Even with our human deficiencies and limitations, we can be fully confident in our call because it's not about ourselves but about God's power acting in our lives (1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

Questions:

- What caused the initial fear Jeremiah had about responding to God's call?
- Why doesn't God accept excuses for those He calls to ministry?

III. God's Support of the One He Calls (Jeremiah 1:8-19)

When God calls someone, He also equips them. Along with the calling, He provides the gifts, talents, and resources necessary to fulfill it. In this part of the lesson, we'll consider how God's grace flows over our human weaknesses, giving us the strength necessary to obey His command. To do this, we'll study some important resources through which God demonstrated His support to Jeremiah in the difficult task assigned to him, and which He has also promised to everyone called to ministry.

A. His Presence: "...For I'm with you and will rescue you" (v.8)

Ministry is a shared task between God and us. He accompanies us as we navigate the difficult journey of His mission. This is a great encouragement because His call doesn't exempt us from difficult circumstances; on the contrary, it sometimes leads us directly to them. In Jeremiah's case, persecution from the rebellious people would be fierce and unyielding (Jeremiah 11:19, 20:1-2, 37, 38). However, Jeremiah always experienced the God's presence amidst his sufferings.

In the New Testament, we see how Jesus made His disciples aware of the high personal cost they assumed by obeying His call, but at the same time, He promised them His care and protection (Matthew 10:16-42). Paul, for his part, accounted for his numerous sufferings in ministry but rejoiced in gratitude to God, recognizing himself as part of the "triumphant army in Christ" (2 Corinthians 2:14, 4:7-18, 11:16-33).

We should always have the assurance that, in the face of adversity, "we're more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Romans 8:37).

Jeremiah "has left us the most impressive personal confessions in all biblical tradition" (Keil, Carl Friedrich. Commentary on the Hebrew Text of the Old Testament, Jeremiah and Lamentations. Spain: CLIE, 2017, p. xi). He is a faithful testimony that, despite many sufferings, God never abandons those He called to His holy ministry.

B. His Word: "I have put My words in your mouth" (v.9)

A call to minister demands steadfastness of character and full willingness to obey, understanding that it involves many challenges. One of these great challenges is undoubtedly the proclamation of the entire counsel of God (Acts 20:26-28). During Jeremiah's time, false prophets only said what the people and the kings wanted to hear.

The great challenge for Jeremiah was to announce God's judgment when other preachers proclaimed prosperity (Jeremiah 23:9-40).

Jeremiah 1:9 shows Jeremiah's empowerment by God to be a faithful messenger: "Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me: 'Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.'" A symbolic act in a supernatural vision that indicated God would grant him ease of expression despite his inability to speak (v.6). Isaiah's lips were also touched with a burning coal (Isaiah 6:7; see also Ezekiel 2:8, 9, 10; Daniel 10:16)" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown. *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible. Volume I: The Old Testament. USA: Baptist Publications, 2003, p.659*). But this verse (Jeremiah 1:9) also highlights the nature of the message the prophet would communicate. It wasn't his own word but the incorruptible and powerful Word of God to humanity.

Those called by God need to remember Paul's solemn charge to Timothy: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). We hope that everyone called to ministry can say, like Paul, "Therefore, I declare to you today that I'm innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

C. His Authority: "I have put you... over nations" (v.10)

Obedience to God's call also involves receiving spiritual authority delegated by God. God's call is vested with authority by the Holy Spirit. But authority isn't always exercised with pleasure, especially when it involves denouncing sin and proclaiming God's judgment. Notice the difficult task given to the prophet: "Jeremiah was called to a sublime and dreadful task. First, he had to punish and predict destruction and ruin; only then could he comfort, offer hope, build, and plant" (Heschel, Abraham J. *The Prophets, Man and His Calling. Argentina: Paidós Editorial, n.d., p.227*). Obviously, the prophet took on this work with immense courage, setting a great example for us.

D. His Certainty: "What do you see?" (vv.11-16)

The call to ministry also provides profound certainty about God's will. This assurance comes from intimacy with God, where clarity about the mission is given to us. In this section, we see how God gave Jeremiah certainty about the fulfillment of His Word through two supernatural visions (vv.11-15). The first vision involved an almond branch, a tree that blooms earlier than others, signifying the imminent fulfillment of His Word. The second vision depicted a boiling pot tilted from the north, symbolizing the impending Babylonian invasion.

E. His Power: "I have made you like a fortified city" (vv.17-19)

The call also includes the promise of sufficient grace. God didn't promise to exempt Jeremiah from suffering but to strengthen him to endure it. The phrase "Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you" (v.17) signifies God's explicit command to Jeremiah to boldly carry out his mission. This command was accompanied by the promise to fortify him against opposition, comparing him to a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall (v.18).

Throughout his ministry, Jeremiah often felt weak in the face of adversities, but God always strengthened him (Jeremiah 15:15-21, 20:7-18). The beautiful promise that concludes the passage, "They will fight against you but won't overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you, declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 1:19), applies to anyone who receives the sublime task of Christian ministry (see an example in Acts 26:16-17).

Questions:

- Where does the certainty of receiving a calling from God come from?
- How does God support those who are called to the ministry?

Conclusion

The call to minister is one of the most noble tasks a person can receive. Usually, the recipient may not fully understand it at the beginning, but the Holy Spirit will guide and reveal it over time. The call also entails a high personal cost, including suffering. However, we can be fully confident in obeying it because God promised to support us always with His presence and power.



Jeremiah calls the people to return to God

Marco Velasco (Costa Rica)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 2:4-8, 11-13, 28

Memory Verse: “Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they aren’t gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols” Jeremiah 2:11.

Lesson Purpose: To recognize that unfaithfulness to God’s will bring problems in both the present and the future, so we need to decide to follow Jesus faithfully.

Introduction

Many people have decided to live sinfully, according to their own principles, believing that the results will bring benefit and joy to their lives. In the end, however, they discover the dreadful truth: sin leads to death and destruction (Rice, W. *Unforgettable Illustrations*. USA: Editorial Vida, 2010, pp. 45-46). Jeremiah chapter 2 contains God’s demand against Israel for their unfaithfulness. We find the heart of this matter in verses 4 to 13. What the Old Covenant at Sinai was to them, the New Covenant in Jesus Christ, through His sacrifice on the cross, is to us.

There are two dimensions of Israel’s unfaithfulness: a religious dimension and a political one, which included adopting other gods and forming alliances with other nations. The marital relationship best represents the different forms of the chosen people’s infidelity. The children of Israel had sinned, violating God’s covenant, disobeying Him, and worshiping other gods (v. 28).

When we look at the history of the Christian church, we have to admit that we too have behaved like Israel. The chosen people refused to recognize their unfaithfulness. Speaking on behalf of the Lord, Jeremiah told them: “How can you say, ‘I’m not defiled; I haven’t run after the Baals’?” (v. 23a). Their sin was as evident as the sun rises every morning, yet they didn’t accept it. As Bonhoeffer acknowledged: “It’s not the presence of sin in the congregation that’s worthy of condemnation, but rather the attempt to hide their sin” (Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Spiritual Care*. USA: FP, 1985, p. 9). The real problem of sin in the church isn’t about big or small sins; it’s about our refusal to recognize that it exists.

I. Forgetting God’s Goodness (Jeremiah 2:4-8)

The Bible says: “The word of the Lord came to me... Hear the word of the Lord...” (vv. 1, 4). Both expressions are linked. The Word of God first came through the prophet Jeremiah with authority. The call to hear the Word implied the people of Israel had to hear and obey God’s message. Every sin begins with forgetfulness. However, forgetting the goodness of God isn’t a problem of memory; it’s a problem of the heart. Why did Israel forget their Lord? Can we imagine how we would feel if we had to appear in court under a criminal charge? And moreover, where the plaintiff is God Himself? In verses 4-13, the plaintiff, in this case God, is bringing a case or complaint against the defendant, Israel. It was an accusatory claim originating from God Himself. The reason for the claim: the breach of the covenant.

This claim was directed to the “descendants of Jacob, all you clans of Israel” (v. 4b). “Smile, God loves you” is just one side of the coin of our relationship with God. Jesus is our friend, that’s true; He said it Himself (John 15:15). But He remains the Lord! Even in the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews reminds us that “...the Lord disciplines the one he loves...” (Hebrews 12:5-6). God is a loving Father, His hand is gentle, but He knows how to discipline His children. Jeremiah recounted God’s powerful deeds (Jeremiah 2:6-7). The question in verse 5 is very important; it’s a rhetorical question that expects only one answer; and we can understand this question as follows: What reason did you have to leave me, house of Israel? Because there isn’t any!

The Lord asks each Christian today the same question: What reason do we have to leave Him? In times of pandemic, some found a reason.

But, contrary to what we might think, suffering or pain most frequently doesn't lead us away from the Lord. So, Israel's departure from God was a foolish act; they left a just God. Israel strayed and went after worthless things. The worthless things they followed were idols (Baal). Baal was the main rival of faith to the God in Israel. Shrines, called "high places," were erected all over Israel to this deity (Jeremiah 19:5). Just like in Jeremiah's time, there are also gods nowadays that rival our faith in Jesus Christ. They're the new Baals of today's society. In our postmodern society, the society of consumerism and its consumerist spirit, hedonism, and its spirit of seeking pleasure for pleasure's sake, captivate the lives of our generation. Believers in Jesus aren't exempt from this idolatrous seduction.

The hedonistic spirit entered our churches subtly. For example, we perverted the biblical concept of "blessing" (berakah). For most contemporary Christian believers, the term "blessing" has been redefined as "I feel good," "I like it," or "I enjoy it." This means that if the special Sunday song or the Sunday sermon didn't appeal to me or wasn't emotional, then the time of worship or personal devotion didn't bless me. In this sense, Baal hasn't died. Jeremiah 2:5 is the inverse image of verse 2, which says that Israel followed after God in the desert. The phrase "to follow or go after" describes a covenant with a deity (Miller, P. D. The Book of Jeremiah. L. E. Keck (ed.). The New Interpreter's Bible, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p. 598). The generations that passed turned away from God and went after gods they believed were productive and useful, but in the end, brought no positive results (v. 8). They exchanged God for things that weren't profitable, without any result. They failed to recognize that God, whom they worshiped, was the true source of life and well-being.

The expression Jeremiah used: "you went after" (v. 2) refers us to Jesus' demand (Luke 9:23). So, the recognition of the Lord as the source of life is what Jesus invites us to consider. Believing in Jesus gives eternal life (John 3:16, 36, 4:14). The acknowledgment of Jesus, who is eternal life, should become a genuine experience for every believer (John 6:68). Israel's faithfulness was decided in their faithfulness in worshiping God. Worship isn't mere entertainment, nor is it meant as a means for God to please and indulge us. Worship is primarily focused on God. It's not about us, but about God. We worship Him for who He is and what He has done. The recognition of God as the source of life is the same invitation that Jesus Christ extends to us. Believing in Jesus brings eternal life (John 3:16, 36, 4:14). The acknowledgment of Jesus, who

is eternal life, should become a genuine experience for every believer (John 6:68).

Israel's future was determined by their faithfulness in worshiping God. Worship isn't mere entertainment, nor is its purpose to please and indulge us. Worship's primary focus is on God. It's not about us but about God. We worship Him for who He is and what He has done, especially through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. Like ancient Israel, the Christian church also defines its identity and faithfulness to God through worship, which is its task and greatest delight (Psalm 136:1).

"There's a wordplay between the Hebrew terms 'yaal' (profit) and 'baal.' Two out of the three Hebrew consonants are the same and in the same order" (Miller, P. D. The Book of Jeremiah. L. E. Keck (ed.). The New Interpreter's Bible, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p.599). Jeremiah 2:8b says: "...The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols.' The result of this wordplay is that the ultimate end of Baal, the Canaanite god, is vanity, with no profit or gain. This gives us a counterpoint of what's truly beneficial or brings gain. "Prosperity, success, and gain have a single source: the way of the Lord" (Miller, P. D. The Book of Jeremiah. L. E. Keck (ed.). The New Interpreter's Bible, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p.599). Certainly, in terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ, gain isn't merely limited to economic prosperity, but includes a life of peace that's impossible without Jesus, a peace that the world cannot give.

Jeremiah continued this prophetic tradition and summarized it in verse 8 with this expression: "they went after" or "followed." While Israel followed after The Lord in their youth (v.2), they had now inexplicably changed and gone after other gods from whom they gained nothing (v.8, 19). The use of the phrase 'go after' or 'follow' is a form of discipleship required by the Lord so that Israel needed to continue to follow Him in obedience to His covenant. Surprised? Jeremiah reminds the Christians of the 21st century to return to faithful and exclusive discipleship of following the Lord. He now requires this through Jesus Christ.

The Lord reminded Israel of all the good things He had done for them in the past. He brought them out and liberated them from the slavery of Egypt, led them and cared for them in the desert, and gave them the promised land in which they dwelt (v.7a). Jeremiah listed God's powerful acts which had brought salvation and benefit to Israel. And this is what's incomprehensible.

Their response wasn't one of gratitude but ingratitude and forgetfulness (v.7b). Even the religious leaders of Israel sinned: the priests, those who had the law, the shepherds, and the prophets (v.8).

Jeremiah 2:8 is eloquent in describing the breadth of Israel's disobedience, especially among its leadership. No part was exempt from responsibility, for the whole people knew of God's saving deeds in the past. The scribe, responsible for teaching God's law, didn't know the Lord. 'The lack of knowledge is associated with unrighteousness. These scribes don't really teach the law; therefore, they don't call for justice, compassion, and correct worship of the Lord within the people of God' (Miller, P. D. *The Book of Jeremiah*. L. E. Keck (ed.). *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p.600). The kings of Israel also failed in their role. Jeremiah 22:15-16 illustrates this well. The prophets were induced to turn to Baal; they prophesied in the name of a god who isn't the Lord. They all 'followed after what was of no benefit' (Jeremiah 2:8).

Disobedience isn't an individual problem only. Disobedience, since Genesis, has a social dimension. Adam and Eve were equally responsible. The whole people, the kings, the prophets, and the scribes had a responsibility in Israel's disobedience before the Lord. As the people of God, Israel failed in its obedience to God."

Questions:

- Do you see comparable things to Jeremiah's message in the life of the current church? Share.
- What do you think God would demand from the contemporary church?

II. Not Recognizing their Disobedience (Jeremiah 2:11-13)

When we study the Bible, in this case, the Old Testament, we must look at ourselves as if we were looking into a mirror, where the image we see is ourselves, as the church and as believers. Through the prophet, The Lord pleads with His people: "...And I will bring charges against your children's children" (v.9b). The prophet Amos used similar language when he said to Israel: "...prepare to meet your God, O Israel" (Amos 4:12). Can we forget that God takes sin seriously? God's love isn't an indulgence or permission to sin. The Lord doesn't remain passive in the face of His people's rebellion. Israel had a more serious problem than the sin of idolatry and oppression they had committed (Jeremiah 2:11a). Israel said: "I'm innocent; surely His anger has turned from me." Behold, I will plead with you, because you say, 'I haven't

sinned"' (v. 35). What made Israel's sin more serious was their hardness in recognizing that they had sinned. God asked them: "How can you say, I am not defiled; I have not run after the Baals"'? (v. 23). God called the heavens to be witnesses (v. 12). What Israel had done by abandoning God for useless gods was horrifying and scandalous. Sin cannot be trivialized. It was God's people who had gone after foreign gods, thus breaking the covenant they had made with God.

In the New Testament, Paul told the church in Corinth that, while the knowledge of Christ spreads everywhere, to those who are perishing, the gospel was "an aroma of death ..." (2 Corinthians 2:16). The phrase "an aroma of death " indicates that disobedience and rejection of Christ have a chain effect that worsens the condition of the person who disobeys. We cannot repent of what we don't recognize or accept. Repentance becomes necessary. It's the attempt to hide one's sin that makes it truly grave. Israel didn't want to repent! God asked if there's any precedent like that of Israel, of a nation that has changed its gods (v. 11a). Jeremiah presented an enigma or riddle (v. 13). Its sense is the immense difference between the things they have done in pursuit of other gods and what they have in the Lord. "The theme is the difference between continuous, fresh, and vital water, symbolizing the Lord, and stagnant water that gradually disappears from broken cisterns, symbolizing the other gods" (Miller, P. D. *The Book of Jeremiah*. L. E. Keck (ed.). *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p. 600). Jesus also said: "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:38).

The 20th-century Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his work "The Cost of Discipleship," reminded the German people and the Christian church of the 20th century that God's grace is free, but not cheap. Isn't that something the 21st-century church should also remember? Cheap grace is the "grace" that "forgives" sin but doesn't justify or transform the sinner. Here, there's no genuine encounter with God because we enter the church the same way we leave. As we begin a time of prayer, we end it the same way. The phrase "wipe the slate clean" can be very deceptive for the Christian faith. God's grace always demands a response from human beings. God expects it to be a propitious response that brings favorable changes in our relationship with Him and our neighbor.

Questions:

- What is your opinion of this statement: "It's not the presence of sin in the congregation that's worthy of condemnation, but rather the attempt to conceal their sin" (Bonhoeffer)?
- What leads to the rejection of God's provision and grace?

III. Incomprehensible Disobedience (Jeremiah 2:27-28)

Jeremiah 2:31 says, "You of this generation, consider the word of the Lord." In the face of Israel's incomprehensible disobedience, God called them and tried to make them reflect (v.28). The prophet Jeremiah wanted Israel to reconsider by seeing the ineffectiveness of their idols, especially in times of affliction. Verse 15 says, "Lions have roared; they have growled at him. They have laid waste his land; his towns are burned and deserted." The useless and unprofitable outcome of their search for other gods and powers is emphasized in these verses. They can do nothing. "The impotence of the gods differ from the

powerful message from God. Here is Jeremiah's voice in that strong chorus of prophetic taunts" (Miller, P. D. The book of Jeremiah. L. E. Keck (ed.). The New Interpreter's Bible, vol.6. USA: Abingdon Press, 1994-2004, p.602). Before any other calamity happens, it's time to seek the Lord, as Jeremiah reminds, "Where is the Lord?" Instead of seeking other sources of help, we can and must say, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

Questions:

- What is your initial reaction in times of affliction? Why do you react that way?
- Who are the current gods?

Conclusion

The call of Jeremiah in its positive form is the same call made in the New Testament and known as the cost of discipleship. We are called to be a faithful community to Jesus Christ, men and women called and redeemed by His grace.



Steps that Bring Blessing

Osmel Pozo Serrano (Cuba)

Biblical passage for study: Jeremiah 3:12-19

Memory Verse: “Return, faithless Israel,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I’m faithful,’ declares the Lord, ‘I won’t be angry forever”” Jeremiah 3:12.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the steps of repentance and the benefits they bring to believers.

Introduction

Jeremiah's prophecy to Israel took place during the reign of King Josiah (2 Kings 22:1-23:30; 2 Chronicles 34:1-35:27). Josiah “was the son and successor of Amon, the king of Judah. He ascended to the throne at the age of eight, around 638 B.C. In the eighth year of his reign, he purposed to act in accordance with God's laws and, as he willed, reform the life of the court, thus beginning to eradicate idolatry and everything contrary to God's Law (2 Kings 22:1, 2; 2 Chronicles 34:1-7, 33)” (Vila, Samuel, and Escuaín, James. Nuevo Diccionario Bíblico Ilustrado. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1985, p.617).

This king seemingly brought about a spiritual renewal in the nation of Judah. We find the following data about him as narrated in 2 Chronicles 34:1-35:19:

- At the age of 8, he started seeking God (34:3).
- At the age of 12, he began to cleanse the high places and idols in Jerusalem (34:3-7).
- At the age of 18, he initiated the restoration of the temple (34:8).
- At the age of 18, he led a spiritual renewal centered around the Book of the Law found in the temple during its reconstruction (34:14-31).
- In that same year, he compelled all the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Benjamin to follow the law of Moses (34:32).
- In that same year, he restored the celebration of the Passover, appointed priests, and confirmed their ministry in the house of the Lord (35:1-2).

- He distributed animals from his own herds to the people so that they could celebrate the Passover (35:7).
- He destroyed the altar that Jeroboam had erected in Bethel and also demolished the Asherah pole that had been made (2 Kings 23:14-15).

When one reads all of this, one would think that the kingdom of Judah had turned wholeheartedly to God. However, certain texts in the book of the prophet Jeremiah reveal otherwise (Jeremiah 3:8-10). Despite everything, the transformations in Judah were merely superficial (Jeremiah 3:10). The text in Jeremiah 3:6-19 refers to Israel, the nation in the North, but it implicitly serves as a lesson for the nation of Judah. The theme of this passage is the call to repentance, the steps involved in this repentance, and the benefits it would bring to the nation if they responded to God's call

I. Turning back to God (Jeremiah 3:12)

The first step we find in the text is “to turn back,” and this act of turning back implies repentance. According to the Vine Expository Dictionary, the Hebrew word *hapak* means to turn, change, transform. Another similar term with the same meaning is “*Najam*,” from which the word “repent” comes. It means “a change of heart or disposition, of mind, of purpose...” (Vine Expository Dictionary. Colombia: Editorial Caribe, 1999, pp.24-25, 367-368). It emphasizes a change in behavior. If we observe Jeremiah 3:12, we'll see that God was calling “rebellious Israel” to turn away from their attitude.

Both “turning back” and “repentance” are closely related; it involves a change of attitude, changing the direction of one’s life.

In those times as well as now, repentance is a call for a change of attitude. God had a message for Israel, so He called the prophet Jeremiah to direct his message to the rebellious in the north. Verse 12 begins with a call to Israel to turn away from their sinful and rebellious ways. Only then could they avoid God’s wrath upon them: “I won’t be angry forever.”

God’s call to repentance for the people of Israel was founded on His mercy and goodness: “‘I’m faithful,’ declares the Lord; ‘I won’t be angry forever’” (Jeremiah 3:12). Many times, God showed His people mercy through forgiveness. Psalms 103:8 and 111:4 refer to God as a compassionate and merciful being. In Jeremiah 3:14, God revealed Himself to Israel as “merciful,” implying that mercy was one of His attributes. “The mercy of God is the divine goodness exercised to alleviate the misfortunes and afflictions of His creatures” (Pearlman, Myer. *Biblical and Systematic Theology*. USA: Editorial Vida, 1990, p.21). God wasn’t a being who delighted in the suffering of His people Israel. Despite their constant unfaithfulness, He never abandoned them (Lamentations 3:31-32). God will never cast us away; He only expects us to respond to His mercy.

If Israel was willing to change their attitude (turn back), God was ready to give them a new opportunity. They just needed to take the first step. Their rebellious attitude and blatant disobedience was shown in their open idolatry (Jeremiah 3:6). “High mountain... leafy tree... These refer to the high places where the Canaanites practiced the worship of Baal” (Pfeffer, Charles F. *Moody Bible Commentary, Old Testament*. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 1993, p.654).

Therefore, the first step of repentance involved turning away from idolatry and turning toward the worship of the true God; from rebellion to obedience; from sin to holiness. This means a change of course, a change of attitude for today’s Christian.

Questions:

- According to the point developed, what does it mean to turn back to God? (*Turning to God means to change one’s direction and attitude, leaving behind sinful and rebellious ways, and returning to*

a relationship of obedience and submission to God.)

- “God’s call to repentance was based on His mercy.” Explain this statement in your own words. (*God’s call to repentance is rooted in His compassionate and loving nature. Despite Israel’s rebellious behavior, God offers the opportunity to turn back to Him and receive His forgiveness and restoration, showing His mercy and willingness to forgive rather than holding onto His anger indefinitely.*)

II. Acknowledging their wickedness (Jeremiah 3:13)

The second step was to acknowledge their wickedness, condition, or sin. According to the *Vine Expository Dictionary*, “acknowledge” comes from the Hebrew word “nakar,” which means “to recognize, discern, pay attention, know, distinguish, consider” (*Vine Expository Dictionary*. Colombia: Editorial Caribe, 1999, p.276). The call of the prophet Jeremiah regarding repentance was as follows: “Acknowledge... your wickedness” (Jeremiah 3:13). This was a call to discern their sinful state as a nation. In its initial stage, God expected Israel to acknowledge their condition and turn to Him in repentance, but they didn’t. If we observe verse 7, we find this expression: “And I thought, ‘After she has done all this, she will return to me.’ But she didn’t return...” God expected a response from Israel, but it didn’t happen; they didn’t acknowledge their condition. This resulted in Judah not repenting, despite the consequences this attitude brought upon the northern part (v.8), and following their ways, and to make matters worse, turning away from God (vv.7-10). This condition of Judah’s falsehood and failure to recognize their sin caused God to consider Israel more righteous than Judah (v.11). Verse 13 says: “... you have rebelled against the Lord your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods.” To sin is to rebel against God, and it would bring terrible consequences.

Jeroboam, the king of Israel, had enacted unjust laws against the laws God had established regarding idolatry (Exodus 20:1-5; 1 Kings 12:25-33). Jeroboam had made two calves, placing one in Bethel and the other in Dan (1 Kings 12:28-29); he built houses on high places (places of worship) (1 Kings 12:31a);

he appointed priests from among the people for the new religion, not from the Levite family as prescribed in God's law (Numbers 18:6-7; 1 Kings 12:31b); and he instituted religious celebrations where the people could offer sacrifices to the idols (1 Kings 12:32-33). The king had legalized sin for the people, going against God's own laws. This made the people not fully aware of their sin, and therefore, they didn't recognize it as such, since it was legal according to the royal decree. This was called "prevarication." As Christian leaders, we must be very careful not to legalize sin.

The Word of God itself says that Israel was unfaithful to God, flirting with many nations or idols (Ezekiel 16:15-16). Many prophets, including Jeremiah, compared idolatry to adultery and saw the worship of false gods as the people's fornication against God. God's complaint to His people was as follows: "'Only acknowledge your guilt...and you haven't obeyed me,' declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 3:13). From this expression, we know that repentance includes recognizing our sinful condition. And this must be done even when governments legalize what's evil. Israel had a higher law that declared what was good and what wasn't. The church still has God's commandments today, and these are above all other laws.

Questions:

- Why is it important when we repent to recognize one's condition? (*Recognizing one's sinfulness is crucial in repentance because it leads to a genuine acknowledgment of wrongdoing and the need for forgiveness. Without recognizing the depth of one's sinful state, there can be no sincere repentance and turning away from sin.*)
- According to the meaning of "prevarication," how can its manifestation against God be seen in today's world? (*Prevarication, which refers to knowingly delivering an unjust decision or behaving dishonestly, can be seen in today's world through various forms of rebellion against God's laws and principles. It includes deliberate disobedience to God's commandments, rejecting His truth, and promoting sinful behaviors that contradict His divine standards.*)

III. Conversion (Jeremiah 3:14)

The third step is conversion. The Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah: "Return, faithless people" (v.14). "In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated as 'conversion' is 'shub,' which means 'to return, to turn back,' and it's a call to abandon idolatrous practices and return to God" (Nelson, Wilton M. Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, p.208). God was calling His children to return to their original state. Conversion involves returning. It's not enough to turn to the one who calls us or acknowledge our condition; we must change our attitude and show our repentance through our actions, that's conversion. God still called them his people (v.14), in spite of their rebellious attitude. God still considered them to be His children; He hadn't rejected them. Likewise, God continues to consider us His children despite our mistakes.

Jeremiah 3:14 adds: "...for I'm your husband..." Once again, God demonstrated His unconditional love for them. In verses 6 to 8, the prophet Jeremiah presented Israel as an adulterous wife whom God had divorced: "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce" (v.8b, emphasis added). The "certificate of divorce" was a document issued, according to the Law of Moses, when there was "something indecent" in the woman. The woman could remarry, but if she was divorced again or was widowed, the first husband couldn't take her back as his wife (Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Jeremiah 3:1). Despite their condition, God still considered them His wife. This is further proof of God's divine goodness towards us.

Questions:

- "Conversion is more than a feeling; it's a change of attitude." Based on what we studied in class, argue this statement.
- In verse 14, what are the two expressions that reveal God's unconditional love, and why?

IV. Obedience brings the Lord's Blessings (Jeremiah 3:14b-19)

Whenever the people turned back to God, repenting, it brought blessings upon the nation of Israel. God promised this to His people in the law (Leviticus 26:3-12).

Psalm 107, which begins the fifth book of Psalms, best summarizes this concept. When we say that repentance brought God's blessing upon His people, it's because the biblical text shows us this. What were these blessings?

A. God Himself would gather the faithful wherever they were and bring them to Zion (Jeremiah 3:14b).

According to the Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, "Zion was one of the hills on which the city of Jerusalem was built... There the ark was placed. From that time on, the mountain was considered holy (2 Samuel 6:10-12). After the reconstruction of the temple, this name came to designate the temple" (Nelson, Wilton M. Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary. USA: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, p.1096).

The text meant that they would return as a united nation under the reign of the house of David, worshiping God in Zion, the place of the holy temple. God would also gather the faithful of the church and bring them into heavenly Zion.

B. God would give them true leaders who would guide them with knowledge and wisdom (Jeremiah 3:15).

Since the rise of the northern kingdom, the leaders (shepherds) had led the people away from God and had sinned against Him (1 Kings 12:28-30, 15:25-26, 33-34, 16:18-19, 23, 25). God was promising Israel that if they repented, He would give them leaders after His own heart, who wouldn't be prevaricators. This was a clear allusion to King David, a shepherd by profession (1 Samuel 16:11-13), and according to God, a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). God continues to call pastors and leaders today to guide His people with love.

C. God would bring growth to the people, and Jerusalem would become the center of the nations (Jeremiah 3:16-18).

"In those days, when your numbers have increased greatly in the land..." (v.16). "At that time, they will call Jerusalem The Throne of the Lord, and all nations will gather in Jerusalem to honor the name of the Lord..." (Jeremiah 3:17). That small nation would become God's throne and a center for the nations. God continues to bring growth to His church today and makes us a light to the world.

D. God would bring unity between the two kingdoms so that they would become one again (Jeremiah 3:18-19).

Verse 18 clearly announces that the border divisions that had been created between the two kingdoms would disappear; for God, they would be one nation, and best of all, together they would possess the land that God had promised to the Hebrews (Exodus 3:8, 17; Deuteronomy 11:9). Jeremiah 3:19 says: "I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me." How could they be part of this blessing? In this rhetorical question that God Himself asked, the answer was included. Everything was within their reach; they only had to call Him "my Father," and above all, not turn away from their God. One day, this will also happen for the church; we'll be gathered from every tribe and nation, and we'll forever be one in worship Before Him.

Questions:

- List some of God's promised blessings to His people.
- How do we see the blessings of repentance in our lives today?

Conclusion

This passage in Jeremiah not only shows us the condition of God's people, but it also calls His holy people to repentance. It implicitly shows us the true steps of repentance and the blessings it would bring to God's people if they repented with all their hearts.



The devastating effects of Judah's sin

Josué Villatoro (Mexico)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 14:1-9,13-16,20-22

Memory Verse: "We acknowledge our wickedness, Lord, and the guilt of our ancestors; we have indeed sinned against you" Jeremiah 14:20.

Lesson Purpose: To get to know the sinful condition of the people of Judah during the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah and understand the consequences that this sin brought to the whole nation, and be aware of the danger for us today of living in sin.

Introduction

In Mexico, like in most Latin American countries, we have many popular sayings. One of the most famous is the one that says: "The pitcher goes so often to the water that it eventually breaks," expressing that when a person repeats a behavior over and over again, there will come a moment when the consequences inevitably catch up with them. Although it may seem strange, and even illogical, this saying is very true. Many people engage in harmful actions that not only hurt themselves, but also those around them. Despite hearing warnings, they continue with their actions until the consequences of their deeds appear, and they're almost always destructive. We can find cases that prove this saying not only in our neighbors, acquaintances, or even ourselves, but also by taking a look at the Bible and finding similar attitudes in the history of the people of God.

Israel, the chosen people of God, the object of His wonderful power and the closest witness to His faithfulness, was throughout their history a people that constantly despised God, turned their backs on Him, ignored His words, and consciously rejected His love. God Himself had pointed out that these people were stubborn, imprudent, rebellious, and stiff-necked (Exodus 32:9, 33:3; Deuteronomy 9:6; 2 Chronicles 30:8). A quick historical review helps us to understand the spiritual state of the people at one of the most critical moments in their history. It was shortly before the tragic year 586 B.C. when the city of Jerusalem, along with the kingdom of Judah (southern kingdom), fell into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and a painful and humiliating time of captivity began for the people loved by God.

By taking a glance at history, we can see that after Josiah, the kings who did evil in the sight of God came to power. This was the case with Jehoahaz, who ruled for three months (2 Kings 23:31-32); Jehoiakim, who ruled for eleven years (2 Kings 23:36-37); Jehoiachin, who ruled for three months (2 Kings 24:8-9); and Zedekiah, who ruled for eleven years (2 Kings 24:18-19). The same thing is said about all these kings: they did what was displeasing to the Lord. As representatives of the people, their decisions and actions were also those of the entire nation. Thus, these were years of constant and repetitive disobedience to God, worshiping false gods, and engaging in shameful acts (2 Kings 24:3-4). In short, this was a time when the people of God lived in a sinful condition, and sin has consequences.

I. Physical Consequences (Jeremiah 14:1-6)

Chapter 14 of Jeremiah begins with a description of a desolate scene. The New International Version calls it "the drought" (v.14:1) to define the period of drought that afflicted Judah, which gives us the impression that it was an extremely dry time and would be remembered for a long time. Although there are no historical sources confirming this drought period, it's highly probable that it occurred during the reign of Jehoiakim (between 609 and 597 BC) and was indeed devastating for the economic activities of Jerusalem and its surroundings.

The first six verses of the chapter present a very sad picture. A drought is never good, and for the geographic area where this prophecy occurred, it was even worse since it was a hot desert, and a prolonged period without rain can bring about a catastrophe of epic proportions, as it did. The descriptions in the passage are so distressing.

Verse 5 mentions that the animals were abandoning their young. There was nothing for them to eat.

What caused this drought? It was a consequence of the people's constant sin and their disregard for the warnings that the Lord gave through the prophet Jeremiah. If we take a look at the previous chapters, we'll find many instances where God issued warnings to His people, foretelling the consequences of their wayward living (Jeremiah 2:11-13, 3:12-13, 4:5-12, 7:32-34, 11:11-13). We'll also find time and time again that the people turned their backs on God and turned a deaf ear to His divine reprimands (Jeremiah 2:30, 3:8-11, 5:7-11, 23-31, 7:18-20, 11:9-10).

Thus, a life far from God, in rebellion against His instructions and in constant sinful habits, brought disastrous consequences.

A first conclusion we can reach is that sin, whether personal or social, while being a spiritual state, also has physical consequences that become evident in the lives of those who live in a sinful condition. For Judah, the drought caused the death of animals, the loss of crops, the cracking of the land, the disappearance of ancient wells, and perhaps the illness and death of many people.

For us, we must be aware that sin not only separates us spiritually from God, but also brings physical and evident consequences to our lives, manifested here and now. According to Francis Schaeffer, sin causes different separations in our lives:

i) "First, we have the great separation, the separation between God and mankind. Mankind no longer has the communion he was meant to have with God."

ii) "The second great separation of man is man separated from himself. Man is afraid. He has psychological problems."

iii) "The third of the great separations is man separated from man. This is sociological separation."

iv) "The fourth separation is man's separation from nature and nature from itself" (Schaeffer, Francis. *Genesis in Space and Time*. Spain: Ediciones Evangélicas Europeas, 1974, pp.100-103).

Sin is, therefore, extremely harmful. The people of Judah suffered drought, hunger, death, and destruction because of their sin. Today, we may experience the rupture of our relationship with God, which is what gives meaning to our entire existence and allows us to

be at peace with ourselves, with others, and with our environment. Sin kills; the Bible reminds us that its consequence is death (Romans 6:23a). And this isn't just spiritual death or eternal death after our time on earth, but a death that begins here and now. Sin kills our relationship with God; it kills our relationships with the people we love; it kills our potential, our life, our future; it kills the perfect plan that God has designed for us; and it kills our ability to live in holiness, which is living to the fullest of our capacities.

Questions:

- Francis Schaeffer talks about the four separations caused by sin. Can you describe any of them with an example from your own life? Share.
- Have you ever experienced any physical consequences of sin in your past? Describe it.

II. False Confidence (Jeremiah 14:13-15)

A second consequence of sin is the false confidence that people can build, either by placing their hopes on objects or by listening to other voices instead of God's voice. In the case of Judah, both elements were present. In this regard, it's worth remembering that in the city of Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom of Judah (the southern kingdom), Solomon's temple still stood: a majestic work, carefully designed, supervised in every detail, and representing the greatness, power, and holiness of God. The fact that the Lord's temple was in the midst of their city and was the architectural feature of Jerusalem made its inhabitants feel secure, calm, and confident that God wouldn't harm them. He wouldn't allow the city in which His temple stood to be destroyed. Even the prophet Jeremiah recalled a phrase that the inhabitants of Jerusalem constantly repeated to encourage themselves: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord" (Jeremiah 7:4). However, God reminded His people that in the past, He had destroyed a city because of the wickedness of its inhabitants, despite it being dedicated to invoking His name (Jeremiah 7:12-15; see also 1 Samuel 4:1-11).

On the other hand, in the midst of the people, there were some "prophets" who proclaimed that everything would be fine, offering words of hope to the people, promising that they wouldn't face the sword or hunger, but that God would grant them lasting peace in that place (Jeremiah 14:13b).

The people enjoyed listening to these “prophets” rather than Jeremiah. The inhabitants of Jerusalem were pleased to hear what they wanted and not the true Word of God through His prophet. This is a dangerous characteristic of sin: it makes us blind to our own error. Despite receiving warnings, messages, and admonitions, we think that what we’re doing isn’t wrong because sin has hardened our hearts, making us think that our actions aren’t incorrect, and has blinded our eyes, making us incapable of seeing our wickedness.

These two dangers are present in us today as well. Firstly, many of us, living sinful lives, may think that there will be no negative consequences because our family is Christian, because Mom prays for me, because God is good, because I’m the son of so-and-so. But the Bible teaches us that this isn’t the case. Constant and repetitive sin brings consequences, regardless of who we are or who we belong to.

Secondly, there’s an abundance today of movements that claim to be Christian, but don’t proclaim the biblical message. Rather, they offer psychological motivation, and their leaders are more motivational speakers than preachers, telling their attendees what they want to hear and not what God wants them to know. They’re movements that invite people to discover that “you are a champion, you should fight for your dreams, you should dare to dream.” However, they never mention the demands of holiness, consecration, and renunciation required in the Christian life. Let’s be cautious of these movements; it would be very regrettable if we or our church were affected by them.

Questions:

- Just as the people trusted that they were safe because they had God’s temple in their midst, have you ever thought that God would protect you from sin because of someone else’s merits? Comment.
- Do you know any movement or sect that avoids talking about sin and only speaks about what people want to hear? What is your opinion about it?

III. The Last Resort (Jeremiah 14:7-9, 20-22)

The verses in Jeremiah 14:9-12 and 19-22 show a deep cry from the people to their God. The first cry came just after the description of the great drought, and the second one came after the Word of the Lord, mentioning the punishment awaiting His people for their sins. Both

passages are filled with pain, lament, explanations to God, pleading for mercy, and begging for a new opportunity. In both portions, we find phrases that appeal to God’s mercy: the people asked to be saved not for their sake but for the sake of His own name (vv. 7, 21); the people acknowledged their sins against God (vv. 7, 20); and they recognized God’s constant presence and covenant with them (vv. 9, 21).

It would be hopeful if the passage ended with God’s restoration, the forgiveness of the people’s sins, and a fresh start in life. It would even be nice if rain appeared. However, that wasn’t the case. In fact, chapter 15, which is part of the same literary unit as chapter 14, shows us a God truly angry with His people, who decided to punish them severely and wouldn’t listen to any defense, even if it came from people like Moses or Samuel (Jeremiah 15:1).

Does this mean that God is bad? No. But it does mean that He is just, and every sin has consequences. Although the passage shows how the people cried, poured out their souls, pleaded, and sought God’s forgiveness, there’s no evidence of true repentance, genuine transformation, or a real willingness to live in holiness. When we find ourselves submerged in sin, at the edge of the abyss, it’s only then that we remember God, cry out to Him, invoke His name, and ask for His mercy. However, unless there’s true repentance on our part, a genuine change of life, God won’t forgive us or show us compassion. The cry and the weeping must be accompanied by an effort to change and seek a holy life through Jesus Christ.

Questions:

- Do you remember a time when you cried out to God desperately? What was your condition at that moment?
- What is the difference between genuine repentance and one that’s only lip service?

Conclusion

Sin is harmful. Repetitive sin is devastating. The consequences of a life filled with sin are immense: they cause death, destruction, and desolation in every aspect of our life. Trusting in external factors, or pretending that there’s no sin in our lives when there is, will be of no avail. The only thing that can rescue us from sin is a complete surrender to God, a constant cry for divine mercy, accompanied by true repentance and genuine life change.



God warns Jeremiah to be a faithful spokesman

Daniel Pesado (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Jeremiah 15:19-21

Memory Verse: "... Therefore, this is what the Lord says: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me..." Jeremiah 15:19a.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the importance of faith and obedience if we want to receive God's promises.

Introduction

Jeremiah had a common but extremely difficult tasks among his peers: to admonish, warn, and call them once again to repent. If we add to this challenge that, although he was born into a religious family, he was young and introspective, we can understand why many misunderstood his attitude as a prophet (Gray, Paul. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. IV. USA: CNP, 1969, p.305). But this prophet, who ministered under some of the most idolatrous and cruel kings of Israel, managed to make his message transcend and become particularly relevant for us.

One of the reasons for its relevance is the social and political context in which we live. However, this lesson will focus on another aspect that reveals its relevance: the state of timidity and impotence that the church of our time is experiencing. Why is the message of that prophet, who was so misunderstood, despised, and persecuted, so relevant for the church today? If we can understand the basis on which Jeremiah prophesied, we'll grasp why Jeremiah's message continues to be relevant after 2,600 years, even in our tumultuous present.

I. Obeying God's Commandments

Jeremiah felt the urge to resist the spirit of his time and, more importantly, to denounce and warn that, due to the prevailing sin, God's judgment hung over the nation. He began by declaring to God, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight..." (Jeremiah 15:16). This delight in the Word of God was a habit cultivated by his home. It's likely that Jeremiah had learned to read and write with key verses from Jewish Scriptures. These verses assured him that there was a future of hope for a nation oppressed by

external enemies and the spiritual blindness and brutality of some of its leaders (he prophesied during the reign of Jehoiachin and Zedekiah). His parents must have helped him memorize key portions of Scripture, such as: "Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I'm about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you" (Deuteronomy 4:1). Jeremiah not only memorized but also understood the message contained in the decrees and laws of God's Word.

This understanding of God's message led the prophet to have intense spiritual struggles: several passages show deep distress and intense pain for the condition of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 8:21-9:1, 12:1-3, 15:10). This should encourage us to persevere in our learning and struggle as we remember the prophet's distress, as he observed how Israel despised the decrees and statutes given by God, wasn't only intense but also prolonged over time. What sustained the prophet while he was beaten (Jeremiah 20:1-4), imprisoned (Jeremiah 37:15), or thrown into a cistern (Jeremiah 38:6-13)? Having "eaten" the Word of God, discerned its content, and understood that it was essential that each Israelite and the whole nation return to God's law.

When we accept the Word of God as the rule for our lives, we receive wisdom and power to endure times of extreme difficulty. Does today's church know what the Bible teaches? Besides being able to memorize some prominent verses, how many of us understand the profound meaning of the Word? How much do we understand its implications for our daily life and for all God's people?

Let's not forget that if we want to be relevant and useful to God, the secret lies in returning to His law in the Word.

Questions:

- To what extent is knowledge of the Word necessary?
- How does understanding God's Word affect our Christian life and responsibility?
- How do you differentiate between reading and memorizing the Word of God, and truly comprehending it?

II. Blessings come with conditions

Another great lesson we can learn from Jeremiah is that God makes and fulfills promises. But each promise of God is preceded by a condition, sometimes very clear and explicit, other times veiled or implicit, but always present.

A. The Extreme Situation

Jeremiah felt overwhelmed by the harshness of the message for Israel and the fate that threatened this people who wouldn't listen to God. The prophet was weary, exhausted, he lacked attractiveness in his ministerial and personal life, and suffered social isolation due to his almost permanent and exclusive rejection by the people as a messenger of God (Jeremiah 20:7). A few verses before, Jeremiah addressed God in the form of a complaint: "Lord...remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors" (Jeremiah 15:15a). He referred to the treatment he received from God: "You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake" (Jeremiah 15:15b). And he asked God: "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" (Jeremiah 15:18a).

Undoubtedly, the prophet was deeply discouraged, he was both spiritually and probably physically exhausted, and could only see before him a prolonged period of hopelessness, and even worse, God seemed absent to him. The prophet Elijah experienced a similar situation. After defeating the prophets of Baal in an epic contest, he fled in fear and complained to God, "I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I'm the only one left, and now they're trying to kill me too" (1 Kings 19:10).

B. Apparent Contradictions

How many times do we feel like Jeremiah? Desperation often leads to marked contrasts within us: on one hand, we ask for relief, help, and deliverance like Jeremiah did, and at the same time, we complain. Because of this attitude, we begin to hold God responsible for our situation, for not attending to us and rescuing us when we believe the trial has lasted too long. Undoubtedly, our ambivalence of feelings, these marked contrasts in our inner being, are the result of our inability to understand the enormous dimension of what God is doing; for this reason, we cannot cooperate within His will.

C. The Promises Remain Valid

Jesus is the Word (John 1:1), and the Word is God. He speaks, and things happen. God sent His Son, the living Word, showing that He keeps His promises. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews said, "Let's hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful" (Hebrews 10:23). Those who have dedicated themselves to enumerating the promises in the Bible assure us that there are more than 3,500. Why did the writer of Hebrews use the singular when referring to "the hope" and "the promise"? Studying God's promises demonstrates that they all point to or are part of a great and inclusive promise. This great promise is presented by God in the Bible from different perspectives. For example:

- Not to destroy mortals again with a flood (Genesis 9:13-15)
- Blessing and giving innumerable offspring to Abraham (Genesis 15:5).
- Delivering Israel from slavery (Exodus 6:6-7).
- Raising a Savior for His people (Isaiah 9:1-7; Jeremiah 33:14-16).
- Forgiving sins upon confession (1 John 1:9).
- Sending the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17).
- Giving His peace (John 16:33), and many more.

But all of God's promises are in one way or another connected; they all come together to complete a great promise. Of all the promises, the one that perhaps encompasses all those made by God is the one in which He promises "the restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21), and this restoration is only possible through Jesus Christ (Revelation 22:1-5).

This is a promise in which God commits to completing His original purpose: a creation where human beings have full communion with Him and enjoy everything He offers us out of love. For this reason, we must know God and His Word.

D. The Indispensable Condition

When God makes covenants with human beings, He does so “in good faith”; that is, He offers the opportunity to enter into an agreement in which He Himself commits to fully fulfilling what’s established. But in the same way, God expects His people to fulfill their part. The Lord believes that we’ll do our part; He expects us to fulfill the condition of obedience to His counsel and instructions if we want to benefit from everything established in that agreement. The indispensable condition to see His promise come true demands full obedience that arises only from absolute faith in the One who makes the promise. It’s no longer simply about believing in God; it’s something more decisive: believing Him.

Questions:

- God’s blessing requires certain conditions on our part, how do you apply this to your life?
- How would you explain the difference between ‘believing in God’ and ‘believing God’?

III. The Fruit of Obedience

Fulfilling our part in the agreement is equivalent to meeting the requirements established by God. He sets His conditions and always fulfills His part of the agreement; we must fulfill ours.

A. “... If you repent, I will restore you...” (Jeremiah 15:19a)

The Lord was rebuking His prophet. The Message translation puts it this way: “Take back those words, and I’ll take you back. Then you’ll stand tall before me. Use words truly and well. Don’t stoop to cheap whining. Then, but only then, you’ll speak for me” (Jeremiah 15:19). The prophet was being rebuked for his lack of faith in what God was doing; therefore, he needed to return to placing absolute trust in God.

B. “... if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you’ll be my spokesman...” (Jeremiah 15:19)

A prophet is someone who speaks on behalf of another; they’re the mouthpiece of the one sending the message. Therefore, Jeremiah was being called to another fundamental aspect: his message had to be pure, exactly as

he had received it from God. The prophet’s complaints and pessimism were mixed with the message; The promise was of immense magnitude: he would be God’s spokesman.

C. “... let these people turn to you...” (Jeremiah 15:19)

This was probably one of the greatest challenges for Jeremiah, and remains so for Christians today. The prophet shouldn’t adapt to the situation surrounding him. He shouldn’t adjust the message to the demands of the society he lives in. God’s Word don’t admit changes; if we permit them, the message loses its prophetic effectiveness, its transforming denunciation. That’s why God warned Jeremiah not to adapt what he said; the people were the ones who had to listen to God’s message through him.

D. “... they will fight against you, but they shall not overcome you...” (Jeremiah 15:20)

This promise is recurrent in the Bible. Many have received this same word of security and protection from God. Through His Word, “I’m with you,” God assures us that no one can overcome us; that His message will be proclaimed, and although there will be those who resist, His plan will be fulfilled. Receiving false accusations, as Jeremiah did, is a sign of fidelity to a message that, although painful, needs to be proclaimed. That’s why the prophet, often misunderstood, needed to be admonished and corrected; but at the same time, consoled and strengthened. The task was just beginning. He had to announce to his people the terrible consequences of their disobedience, which were the result of their spiritual condition.

Questions:

- How can we apply the impact of these exhortations and promises to our Christian social responsibility today?
- What lesson do you take away from today’s lesson?

Conclusion

Although the fulfillment of the prophecies took time, God validated His message as well as His chosen prophet. There are no secrets, only decrees or responsibilities to assume. There’s no blessing if we don’t fulfill the condition of recognizing that every good gift comes from God. There will be no fulfilled promises without our faith and obedience to the One who makes those promises. God honored His Word, and today Jeremiah is an example of faith and obedience for us, even in times of extreme difficulty.



The parables of the Potter and the Figs

Joel Castro (Spain)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 18:1-6, 19:1,10-11, 24:1-10

Memory Verse: “Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand” Isaiah 64:8.

Lesson Purpose: To learn the meaning of the examples of the potter and the figs and apply it to our lives

Introduction

One of the teachings I received through the subject of Homiletics, which is the art of preparing biblical studies and sermons, is that if we want to make spiritual treasures understood during the exposition, we must always start with what's known, that is, from what the listeners know, and then move towards the unknown and spiritual. Many preachers in the Bible used this pedagogical dynamic. They used familiar objects to apply a teaching that, at first glance, was unknown. Jesus, in particular, used things that his listeners knew in his parables, in order to show them the spiritual teachings that weren't immediately apparent. Following our study passages, how do we make a religious nation understand its spiritual condition? Let's see the things that God used through his prophet Jeremiah to convey His message.

I. The Potter and the Clay (Jeremiah 18:1-6)

Pottery is one of the oldest crafts. The first biblical mention of clay vessels is found in the writings of Moses (Leviticus 6:28), and the Israelites probably learned it in Egypt. God used the workshop of a potter as a symbol to convey a message to the Jewish people. “The potter's house” (v.2) signifies the place where the potter's hand operates and works with wisdom. God's divine call to Jeremiah was like an order: “Go down to the potter's house.” Although the preferred place of the Jews was the temple, God didn't say, “Go to the temple.” Perhaps because the temple had already fallen into a spiritual decline of mere religiosity by that time. God told the prophet to go to the house of the potter. There, He would show him His spiritual art of internal transformation. The Jewish nation urgently needed

a special touch from God in the face of impending destruction due to their rebellion.

The divine Potter wants His children to dwell in His presence and be molded by His grace. Only true worship brings about spiritual transformation. In John 4, Jesus convinced the Samaritan woman to abandon her traditionalism, believing that the location or mountain where they were was the most important for transformative worship. According to verses 23 and 24 of that chapter, disciples are to worship Him “in spirit and in truth.” The place shouldn't be more important than the attitude, surrender, and submission. Religiosity is deceitful and vain before God.

A. Jeremiah 18:3 says, “But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands.”

This represents God's restorative grace with a heart contaminated by sin. The Jews couldn't expect to be free from Babylonian destruction if they continued with their sinful lives. It was better for them to be ruined in the hands of their Maker than in the hands of their enemies. This same love still beats in Jesus' heart for all sinners. In His hands, there's renewal and rehabilitation. The redeeming sacrifice of the cross is the greatest evidence of God's love (Romans 5:5-8).

B. “... so, the potter formed it into another pot...” (Jeremiah 18:4).

If you review the chapters before 18, you'll see the spiritual condition of the people of Judah. They had lost all spiritual sensitivity, living deluded by their religiosity. With these words, God invited them to surrender themselves to Him to become new vessels.

That is, to undergo a total change. Only God has the power to make something new. Paul believed in this power when he said that if we're in Christ, we're new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17).

C. "...shaping it as seemed best to him..." (Jeremiah 18:4).

Here we see the restoring power of the Potter working according to His will. The model of the pot is in the mind of the potter; thus, God does things according to His judgment. God is holy and wants the heart of His people to be holy (Leviticus 11:44). Religiosity had accommodated the Jewish nation into a ritualistic mechanism, devoid of sincerity and honesty. Therefore, they urgently needed the work of the Potter, who would make them according to His will.

Be careful not to settle into a Christianity based on dogmas and religious appearances: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Thanks to the promise of the Holy Spirit, today the Potter works in hearts, shaping them according to His holiness.

Jeremiah 18:6 says, "Can I not do with you as this potter does, declares the Lord?" We know that God is sovereign, but like any potter, He needs clay that's moldable for His purposes, that is, a heart sensitive and humble to His loving voice. Unfortunately, Jewish history teaches us that many didn't renounce their egos. They chose to walk according to their own will, and destruction came upon them. The Beacon Commentary adds, "Men are free to respond to God's dealings. If they respond positively to the touch of the supreme Potter, His purpose to form a vessel as He has planned is fulfilled. If they respond negatively, God's work is spoiled" (Gray, C. P. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IV. USA: CNP, 1991, p.389).

Questions:

- Today, how do you see religiosity distorting the true worship of the church?
- What was the latest experience you had for which God had to mold you?

II. The Broken Vessel (Jeremiah 19:1,10-11)

The nation of Judah had the opportunity to settle their accounts with God, but they wasted it and preferred to live in their sin and mere religiosity. In this

passage from Jeremiah, the prophet was commanded to buy a vessel from the potter (v.1a). A clay vessel has the peculiarity that once broken, it's useless; the pieces cannot be glued back together. Thus, a sad end awaited the Jewish nation. Jeremiah called the elders of the people (civil leaders) and the elders of the priests (religious leaders) (v.1b). He took them to the valley and delivered a prophetic message from God by breaking the clay vessel in front of them (vv.10-11). Sadly after a few years, this prophecy was fulfilled, and they were broken by the Babylonians; a different ending could have been possible if they had heeded God's advice. Rebellion, sooner or later, brings mortal and eternal consequences.

2 Timothy 2:20 reveals that every vessel can be used for noble purposes or for ignoble ones. As an instrument of Christ, what use are you making to honor Him? How are you using your gifts and talents? A vessel of Christ should be a repository of His power (2 Corinthians 4:7) and should glorify its Creator. Any vessel that's not serving the eternal Potter's purpose will one day, or rather, on the day of judgment, be entirely broken and not be restored anymore (Jeremiah 19:11b).

Questions:

- In your opinion, why was the vessel broken?
- How do you consider yourself to be a vessel for the honor of God?

III. The Good and Bad Figs (Jeremiah 24:1-10)

The sign of the figs was also a prophetic sign in the history of the Jewish nation. God showed His prophet two baskets of figs: one basket with good figs, but the other basket contained figs so bad that they couldn't be eaten (vv.1-3). It's striking that these two baskets of figs were placed in front of the temple of the Lord (v.1). The figs here represent the people who are before God as an offering. However, He who knows the intentions of every heart showed Jeremiah that some figs pleased Him while others didn't, and they were so bad that He couldn't bear them.

God gave the interpretation to His prophet regarding the two baskets of figs, referring to both the Jews who were transported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon and the Jews who remained in Jerusalem.

From verses 4 to 7, we find the interpretation of the good figs. Although they had been exiled to Babylon, they weren't taken there because they were wicked people, as the ones who remained in Jerusalem commented. Rather, God allowed them to be carried away to the "land of the Babylonians" (v.5).

Here we learn that, despite adversity, God is in control. He has the power to transform our sufferings into victories. Note how God shows His love and care for His children, speaking in the first person. "My eyes will watch over them for their good," "I will bring them back to this land," "I will build them up," "I won't tear them down," "I will give them a heart to know me," "they will be my people," and "I will be their God" (vv.6-7).

These expressions were of blessing and great spiritual richness for those exiled Jews. We see examples of these blessings in Ezekiel, Daniel, and his friends. It doesn't mean that they didn't go through trials, but even in the midst of torment, God was with them. Remember Daniel in the lion's den, or his friends in the fiery furnace. In these experiences, we see how God fulfills His promises of care and protection. Today in the Bible we can read hundreds of promises of eternal life for His church.

May God strengthen the faith of His church and remove all unbelief despite the misfortunes they may be going through on earth. As the Apostle Peter said: "If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed... but if anyone suffers as a Christian, don't be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name" (1 Peter 4:14, 16). Within the promises found in Jeremiah 24:7, God honored the humility of His people, affirming: "... for they will return to me with all their whole heart." He knows those with humble hearts and understands what are their innermost desires.

On the other hand, the basket with the bad figs represented the opposite; they were so bad that they couldn't be eaten. It seemed that those who remained in Jerusalem had been more blessed than those in Babylon because they weren't exiled, were still in Jerusalem, and had their temple nearby, which, for them, symbolized the presence of God. Even those who escaped to Egypt believed they were more protected; but all of this was just religious deception (v.8). Note what God said to those Jews, confident in

their religiosity: "I will make them abhorrent and an offense to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule, wherever I banish them." "I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they're destroyed..." (vv.9-10).

And that's what happened. After a few years, they witnessed their city and temple being burned, and they were taken as slaves to Babylon; even King Zedekiah experienced punishment for his rebellious heart: they took out his eyes, and he died in solitude (Jeremiah 52:11).

In the New Testament, there's a church that, due to its condition of being beneficiaries of earthly things, believed it was blessed. However, when Jesus confronted them, He said: "You say, 'I'm rich; I have acquired wealth and don't need a thing.' But you don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). Be careful not to misinterpret God's blessings; His blessings are eternal, while temporal blessings are just additions. As a church, let's be rich in His presence and not be part of the group of bad figs. The Beacon Commentary gives three characteristics of bad figs: "They are blind to eternal truths, they only see the present as important and are intensely preoccupied with worldly comforts, and they trust human wisdom rather than the Word of God" (Gray, C. P. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IV. USA: CNP, 1991, p.410).

Questions:

- What were God's promises for the good figs?
- Share if you have had any experiences in which God worked in your life with those promises.
- In the context of the church, how would you define good and bad figs?

Conclusion:

The three parables described in this study are ways in which God wants to deal with our lives. As the Potter, He wants to transform us spiritually; as a clay pot, He warns us that one day we may be destroyed if we don't honor Him with our lives; and through the figs, He demands that we trust Him fully and not be swayed by temporary material blessings. Let our prayer be like the verse we have learned: "Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand" Isaiah 64:8.



Redeeming, Transforming, and Reconciling Love

Zeida Lynch (USA)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 29:4-7,10-14, 30:10-11

Memory Verse: “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” Jeremiah 29:7.

Lesson Purpose: To recognize that God’s timing is perfect in every situation, and that God’s reconciling love seeks to restore and maintain an intimate relationship with His redeemed.

Introduction

The book of Jeremiah narrates the final years of the reign of the kings of Judah, as well as the time of the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon. Jeremiah was a priest who received the prophetic word from God during the reigns of the kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month (Jeremiah 1:2-3). Jeremiah had the specific calling from God to announce to the Jewish people the consequences they would suffer due to their constant breaking of the covenant made with God in the days of Moses, including the 70 years of exile (Jeremiah 25:11-12). However, he also proclaimed a message of hope for the Jews and all of humanity. The Jews would return to their land, and the future coming of the Messiah would bring blessings for all.

Jeremiah was a prophet who suffered greatly in the course of his ministry. The people, religious leaders, and authorities didn’t want to believe in his prophecies because they didn’t want to repent and change their ways. Despite the punishment and humiliation Jeremiah endured at the hands of his own countrymen, he remained faithful to God’s call to proclaim the received message.

It’s interesting to note that King Nebuchadnezzar himself ordered the captain of the Babylonian army to take care of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 39:11-12). Jeremiah was given the option to go to Babylon or stay in Jerusalem, and he chose to remain with the people. Later, the remnant that remained in Jerusalem compelled him to go with them to Egypt, despite Jeremiah’s warnings that it wasn’t God’s will (Jeremiah 43:1-7). Jeremiah continued to maintain a relationship with the people who were taken to Babylon and conveyed to them the message of hope from God. In this lesson, we’ll study the message he sent to the captives in Babylon: the elders, priests, and the general population (Jeremiah 29:1).

I. Live and Seek Peace (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

It’s not difficult to imagine how the Jews felt in the land of Babylon. They knew they were the chosen people of God; they had experienced miracles and blessings and were admired by neighboring nations. However, their pride had led them to break their covenant with God. Instead of remaining faithful to Him, they had adopted widespread idolatry. They had adopted pagan customs from neighboring peoples, even offering their children to the god Molek (Jeremiah 32:35). Repeatedly, they had rejected the prophets who called them to repentance.

Finally, the warning came true, and divine punishment arrived. They lost everything: their lands, homes, freedom; and now, they were captives in Babylon. Only a remnant remained in Jerusalem, along with King Zedekiah. Apparently, there was no hope, but God in His infinite mercy approached them through Jeremiah’s letter. The letter written by Jeremiah begins with “the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel...” (v.4a). Imagine the recipients’ surprise to know that God hadn’t forgotten them. Even in distant lands, God was approaching them with a message. Hebrews 12:6 tells us, “The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Even in the midst of punishment, God still loved His people and wanted to console them in their suffering. The Lord knew how they felt and wanted to help them during this difficult time; He wanted them to find comfort in their daily lives. The Lord commanded them to continue with their daily lives. Building a house takes time; planting, harvesting, and eating from the harvest require natural time; nature cannot be forced to produce quickly. Likewise, marriages and the birth of children all require natural time. With this message, God was reminding them that their captivity in Babylon wouldn’t end soon.

They should continue with their lives. They would surely miss what they had lost, but they had to keep living and trying to find joy in life itself. However, there was a request that went deeper into their hearts, and it was to “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you’ll find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

Seeking the peace of the city of their enemies wasn’t an easy request. God himself reminded them that it was He who had made them go to Babylon as punishment (v.4b). For many years, God had told them that they would be punished if they continued in idolatry, that He would use a nation to punish them. And now, they found themselves in the midst of an enemy nation in captivity. Seeking the peace of the city and praying for it had to be the result of transformed hearts. God reiterated that He had caused them to be carried away there. God wanted to help them recognize their guilt in receiving the punishment. The exile wasn’t because of a lack of God’s love for them, but rather a means to help them restore the lost relationship. By acknowledging their guilt, they should repent and return to God with all their hearts. That would keep their hope alive that, in God’s time, the punishment would end. These actions, which would have to come from transformed hearts, would result in praying for the enemy city, doing everything possible to live in peace and seek its peace. This would bring the Jewish people the peace they needed during their time of punishment.

As a church, we can also consider ourselves in exile if we recognize that we’re not citizens of this world and that we long for the heavenly homeland. Therefore, we can also take this mandate for ourselves. We must work and pray for peace wherever we find ourselves. If we recognize that Christ is the only one who can give that peace that surpasses all understanding, that His peace is the one that transforms lives, families, and communities, then our preaching through actions (testimony) and words must be genuine. We live in a world where there’s much confusion, selfishness, injustice; therefore, presenting Christ as Savior is the message of peace that our world needs. Because the peace of our city will also be our peace.

Questions:

- What actions were the captives supposed to take, according to verse 6?
- What are three actions that you can take to seek peace in the place where you live?

II. Promise of Return (Jeremiah 29:10-11)

God’s letter to the captives continued with a precious promise: they would return after seventy years (v.10). The previous verses mention false prophets deceiving the people. God had already indicated that the exile would last seventy years, and now He was reaffirming it. God’s timing is perfect, and the Jews probably needed a long time to genuinely renew their commitment to God. However, the punishment would come to an end. It wouldn’t be an eternal punishment. After the seventy years, God would visit them, awaken them, and bring them back to their land (v.10).

The Jews knew how God had liberated them from their slavery in Egypt, how He had sustained them during their time in the desert, including the time they were punished for their disobedience. They had to remember that it was God’s own hand that had delivered, sustained, and given them the promised land. I imagine the temptation to want to return to their land prematurely and by their own means was significant. God encouraged them to wait for Him: “... I will visit you...” (v.10). Learning to fully depend on God is something that comes through experience. We must acknowledge that we cannot control everything, but we must let Him guide us. It’s not easy, but it’s necessary for our growth in His grace.

This promise could affirm the Jews’ faith in the works that God had already done among them, and the hope that He would do them again. God Himself would bring them back; it wouldn’t be by their own works but by divine intervention. In verse 11, God affirms His goodness toward them and His good plans for their well-being. What a beautiful comfort for a people suffering the punishment of their disobedience, to know that God has thoughts of peace and good for them; thoughts that would be transformed into actions!

It’s a beautiful lesson for the church in how to approach a sinner or a fallen brother. God’s love for each person is such that “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). Even in facing the consequences of disobedience, God continues to love and offers a new day to those who repent. It also reminds us of the promise in Romans 8:28-29, which says: “...We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.”

In this passage, we can find that God's goodness for His children is such that He can use every situation to shape us into the likeness of Christ. It gives confidence that in the midst of situations we don't understand, that aren't pleasant at the moment, difficult situations, God is working His perfect will in our lives; He continues to love us and helps us grow to the measure of the fullness of Christ. The key is to love God.

Similarly, the Jews could look forward to the day they would return to their homeland with full confidence that during the waiting time, God would be with them, and His goodness toward them hadn't ended. The future would be good again, not because of them, but because of God's goodness.

Questions:

- What was God's promise to His people? How long did they have to wait?
- What is God's promise for His church today?

III. Promise of Reconciliation and Blessing (Jeremiah 29:12-14, 30:10-11)

What follows in the letter is a precious promise of reconciliation: "Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (vv.12-13). We can see this letter as if we were peeling an onion, removing the outer layers until we get to the heart itself. God starts by asking the Jews to continue with their lives during the exile and to find joy in daily living. Then, more profoundly, He asks them to intercede for the peace of the enemy cities where they're captives. This is the result of transformed hearts. Next in the letter He tells them that the punishment won't be eternal and that He only desires their good. Believing this truth in the midst of punishment isn't easy; it's something that goes deeper into the heart. It requires a deeper faith to believe and accept God's love when things aren't as we expect.

Now, He speaks of complete reconciliation, a biunivocal relationship: "You'll call on me, and you'll come and pray to me... you'll seek me..." (vv.12-13). These are intentional actions that arise from a repentant heart that recognizes that only God can help. Therefore, the restoration of the relationship with God is something that happens only deep in the heart. It cannot be imitated or pretended, nor based on rituals or good deeds; it must be something very intimate that comes from knowing, understanding, and experiencing God's love in the midst of sin, in the midst of punishment. It's there that one can truly appreciate what God did for us and renew a serious commitment to Him.

The blessing for the people was to return to their native land, the land promised to their ancestors. Not only the captives in Babylon would return, but also those who had been taken to other places. While that would happen, God asked them not to fear but to continue trusting in the salvation He would bring. God confirmed that the promise made to Jacob was still in effect. There would be destruction in neighboring nations, but not for them.

At the end of the letter, God reminded them again that their punishment was just. They had disobeyed with full knowledge. This is how sin entered the world. God had told Adam and Eve not to eat from the forbidden fruit, but they did. It wasn't an oversight or mistake; it was conscious disobedience (Genesis 3). The same had happened with the people of God: time and time again, they had been warned about their sin, but they chose to remain in sin, and the punishment came.

The same God who directed that letter to the Jews through Jeremiah is the same God who longs to have communion with each of us. A relationship that goes beyond religiosity, a relationship in response to the mercy received from Him. But for this, we must recognize that there's a separation between God and human beings, a separation caused by sin. We must also recognize that there's nothing we can do to "fix" that situation. Christ is the only way; He paid the price for our sin. After we recognize our part and God's offer, we must ask for forgiveness, accept His forgiveness, and start a new life with Him.

I encourage you to take the example of the Jewish people and evaluate your own life. How is your walk with God? Is it based on religiosity? God loves you, and His mercy is new every morning: "Because of the Lord's great love we're not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They're new every morning great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Questions:

- How would reconciliation between God and the people be manifested?
- What message should the church preach to those who have broken their relationship with God?

Conclusion

This is the message that the church must continue to preach: God's redeeming love is despite sin, God's transforming love wants to make us like Christ, and God's reconciling love seeks to restore and maintain an intimate relationship with His redeemed.



The Marvelous Intervention of God

Leticia Cano (Guatemala)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 33:3,6-9

Memory Verse: “Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it” Jeremiah 33:9.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that God is always present and active in the life of the believer, even in the midst of difficulties, and He is willing to restore the life of anyone who approaches Him.

Introduction

The context of the biblical passage is a critical environment of rebellion against God, both from the people and their rulers, who constantly challenged God's authority and holiness. Furthermore, the king of Babylon and his army had been oppressing them for a long time, and the city of Jerusalem was already in ruins. Instead of humbling themselves and repenting, they aggravated the situation by violently mistreating God's messenger, imprisoning him. This happened during the reign of the wicked king Zedekiah, the last king of Judah.

I. God Responds to His servant's Cry (Jer. 33:3)

A. Affliction

How would a righteous person feel when suffering mistreatment without having done anything wrong? At the beginning of this chapter, we find Jeremiah, the priest and prophet of God, imprisoned by the authorities of the kingdom of Judah. The prophet was in a deplorable condition, a victim of the wickedness of a rebellious people and a foolish, arrogant, and sinful king. Jeremiah endured mistreatment, humiliation, and contempt. The Word of God he preached didn't find an echo in his listeners. Moreover, when the scroll containing God's message was brought before the king, he tore it up and burned it (Jeremiah 36:20-25). What a great frustration for the prophet! His message wasn't popular, unlike the messages given by today's prophets who speak of prosperity but don't call for a life of commitment to God. Jeremiah's message wasn't accommodating to the influential groups; it was confrontational. This generated discontent among the country's leaders, leading to his imprisonment. How many questions must have swirled in his mind without finding an answer? Just as it can happen to us .

Why did no one listen and accept God's message? Why did God allow them to mistreat him? Why was he not miraculously released? Jeremiah's life reflects the lives of the Lord's ministers, which often tends to be lonely

and misunderstood when preaching against corruption, idolatry, immorality, and all kinds of sin.

B. Hope

But God isn't indifferent to the afflictions His children face. Like a loving Father, the Lord approached His servant, desiring communion in which He could provide comfort and strength needed to continue proclaiming His message. When negative circumstances make us think we're alone, God is present, in control, and acting with a purpose in our lives, even if we cannot understand it. If the wicked suffer, we may think they deserve it, but if a righteous and pious person suffers, it's harder to understand and accept it. However, God Himself approached Jeremiah to give him a word of hope. First, the Lord affirmed His authority and identity as God, Creator, and Sovereign to instill security in the prophet (Jeremiah 33:2). Then, the Lord invited him to cry out to Him. Crying out is asking for help with loud shouts. A person on the brink of despair, feeling helpless and unable to escape the difficulty they find themselves in, cries out. Crying out means screaming for assistance. Why does God want us to cry out to Him for help? It's not because He's unaware of our needs, but because we must humbly acknowledge that we need His help and come to Him of our own will. God loves us and longs for continuous encounters with His children, but not everyone wants to approach Him.

Often, blinded by our affliction, we can't see God, and we come to believe that He doesn't hear us or has abandoned us. Some people even dare to blame God for their misfortunes. He respects human free will and longs for us to cry out to Him for help in our afflictions. He desires to respond to our cry. Have we ever been distressed, feeling alone, unable to share what's happening to us with anyone else? Perhaps, our tears flow silently, leaving traces of powerlessness on our face.

Or maybe our eyes have dried up, tired of crying. However, there's still hope because we can turn to God for timely help, comfort, and hope. The ear of the eternal Father is always ready to listen to His children.

In response to the cry of His servant Jeremiah, the Lord promised to answer him. How valuable and comforting it is to receive some indication that we have been heard when we share the burden on our hearts! Besides offering hope, God empathically wanted to reveal very important matters to the prophet that he didn't know. His Word says, "The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them" (Psalm 25:14).

The invitation to cry out is also for us today, as is the promise of an answer. In this case, God's response will be according to His good will for us (Romans 12:2), not necessarily according to what we ask, since we may be mistaken in our requests.

Regarding revealing special things unknown to the prophet, this privilege is only for those who have an intimate communion with God, just as Jeremiah did. Just as we don't share our intimate secrets with just anyone but only with those with whom we have a close relationship, God reveals what He desires to His beloved children.

Christians are children of God and can cry out to Him as a Father with full confidence. Jeremiah's people faced a complex social upheaval and sought help from neighboring countries, despite God sending them a message not to do so. But God said that we should cry out to Him. Then we must prepare our hearts to receive the revelation of God's will for our lives. However, like Judah and Israel, many times people futilely seek help from others before seeking it from God.

Among the great and hidden things that God would show the prophet were the culmination of the invasion and conquest of the Babylonians, as well as the promise of restoration for the nation. The responsibility of receiving such a revelation required a strong and confident heart trusting in God.

Questions:

- Who does God want to hear crying out to Him?
- What responsibility comes with receiving the revelation of God's will today?

II. God Brings Healing and Peace to His People (Jeremiah 33:6)

Although the destruction of the nation of Judah was imminent, God still had plans for His people, which He revealed to Jeremiah.

A. Health is an invaluable blessing.

Without health, it's challenging to have peace. During that time for the nation of Judah, amidst the political,

economic, and social crisis, the loss of physical health (due to food shortages) and emotional health (due to the oppression of invaders) was common. Above all their troubles, their spiritual condition far from God was described by Isaiah: "From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there's no soundness, only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with olive oil" (Isaiah 1:6). God's discipline is always just and has the purpose of restoring us to a harmonious relationship with Him. So, after the judgment against Israel and Judah for their rebellion and lack of repentance, the Lord revealed His heartfelt desire to grant them healing in all aspects (spiritual, emotional, physical, social, political, and economic). God desires to give us healing, and as a result, enjoy peace with Him and with our neighbor.

B. Peace and Truth

Society cannot have peace on its own, for true peace comes from communion with God and obedience to His will. No person or nation can live in peace if they're rebellious or indifferent to God's will. The nation of Judah, after being severely shaken by Babylon's cruelty, would finally experience the blessing of genuine peace as a result of their return to the Lord. God promises (and His Word is trustworthy) to bless us with healing, peace, and truth when we approach Him with genuine repentance. Truth is defined as "The property of being in accord with fact or reality" (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth>). There are people whose lives aren't consistent with their speech. They claim to believe in God and expect His help, but they don't live in obedience to His revealed will. When there's genuine repentance, our lives are characterized by living in accordance with God's will as revealed in His Word, and His Word is truth. Otherwise, even if there's apparent calm and prosperity, people will live in complete deception. But God's perfect plan is for each person to live according to His Word. The Lord Jesus Christ affirmed, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..." (John 14:6).

Questions:

- What aspects of each person's life are necessary for God to restore?
- How can people experience true peace?

III. God Forgives and Restores Repentant People (Jeremiah 33:7-8)

These verses contain such wonderful promises: "I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me" (vv. 7-8). In this message, God encourages Jeremiah's hope by promising to restore His people.

A. Freedom is the ability of individuals to act according to their will.

This is a precious treasure that's not fully appreciated until it's lost. Israel and Judah were oppressed and enslaved by foreigners when they decided to turn away from God. Biblical history shows us time and again that human beings lose their freedom when they choose to live independently from God. However, God isn't pleased with the destruction of His people, and He promised to restore their freedom once the time of their just punishment had been fulfilled. Based on God's attitude toward His people, our denomination's Manual contemplates the application of discipline as restorative and not only punitive. Among the objectives of discipline for the one who has sinned are the following: "... to warn and correct the careless, to bring the guilty to salvation, to rehabilitate the guilty, to restore to effective service those who are rehabilitated, and to protect the reputation and resources of the church" (2017-2023, Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, point 600).

B. Purity and Forgiveness

The nation had become corrupt, they had ignored Jeremiah's preaching, and would have to face the consequences of their disobedience. However, expecting their repentance, God already had their redemption process planned. The Lord said, "I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me" (v.8). According to 2 Peter 3:9, God doesn't want anyone to perish as a sinner but wants all to come to repentance. Humanity is incapable of purifying itself, but God desires to perform that cleansing in our hearts because "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Another part of God's promise is to forgive our wickedness: perversity, injustice, oppression, inequality, corruption, etc. There are so many facets of the same problem: sin. However when we turn back to God with sincerely repentant hearts, the Lord promises to forgive all our wickedness and purify our hearts. Our lives can be cleansed of sin and guilt only by the blood of the Lamb of God. The Lord, with such love and great mercy, told Jeremiah His heartfelt desire: to bless His people with freedom, purity, and forgiveness. From the cry to God, a rain of blessings for their restoration would be unleashed. God's promise to Jeremiah was fulfilled when the Jews returned to their land under the leadership of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, who rebuilt the nation. The restoration promised by God wasn't forgotten.

Questions:

- What needs to happen for someone to be restored to a harmonious relationship with God?

- What does God do when His people return to Him in repentance?

IV. The Name of God Deserves to Be Exalted (Jeremiah 33:9)

Purity, healing, forgiveness, and freedom are expressions of God's grace that we don't deserve but are granted to us by His great love and mercy. This should cause an explosion of praise and gratitude in our hearts, as well as a life of total consecration. A life restored by God's power should be a reason for joy, praise, and glory to His name. Others will notice the changes in transformed lives, and it will also be an opportunity to tell them of God's wonderful deeds.

What changes did you experience in your life after being touched by God's saving grace? The people around us need to see how God's marvelous intervention transformed our lives. It's not just words, but a new way of life that convinces people of the authenticity of our faith and the one and powerful God who saved and restored us. But more than impressing, a restored life should inspire others to surrender their lives to God as well. As a Father for His children, the Lord expressed His desire for His people: "Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it" (v.9). The people of the nations should tremble when they see the restoration of the Jewish nation, just as they should be amazed when they see the transformation of our lives, and they should desire to experience the same in their own lives.

Questions:

- Upon experiencing the forgiving and restoring grace in their lives, what should each person do?
- What is the effect of a life transformed by God on the people around us?

Conclusion:

God is always interested in everything that happens in our lives and in the lives of His people. In difficult times, the Lord isn't indifferent. Jeremiah could experience the encouraging presence of God as his Father, giving him hope for restoration, not only for himself, but also for his nation. The final result of His wonderful intervention in our lives should be a reason for others to rejoice, praise, and glorify His holy name.



The Principle of Obedience

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 35:1-10,14-19

Memory Verse: "To obey is better than sacrifice..." I Samuel 15:22.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the blessing received when practicing the principle of obedience.

Introduction

The physical laws or natural laws are part of the revelation of God's great creative design. God instituted these physical laws and principles in such a way that whenever they're obeyed, what God designed consequent to that law automatically occurs. For example: whenever an object is thrown upward on this Earth, it will inevitably come back down. This is governed by a natural law.

It works similarly in the spiritual realm: God established spiritual laws (principles) that are simply fulfilled by obeying them, and automatically, one accesses the benefits of those principles. For example, when a person receives Christ into their heart, they become a new creature: justified, regenerated, and adopted. The mere act of receiving Him automatically applies spiritual benefits to the believer. And like this, there are many spiritual laws or principles that we can enjoy, including the principle of obedience. In the story we'll analyze, we'll notice how the Rechabites applied this principle and received God's blessing.

I. The Obedience of the Rechabites to their Forefather (Jeremiah 35:1-10)

God wanted to show the prophet Jeremiah and his people the high principle of obedience, and He used the Rechabite family to teach this impressive lesson. The words in this text from Jeremiah take us approximately to the year 605 BC when Jehoiakim was king of Judah (v.1). God's order to the prophet Jeremiah was clear: take the Rechabites to the temple and offer them wine to drink (v.2). The Rechabites were "a nomadic family that lived a simple life. The Rechabites had several mandates. They weren't allowed to drink wine, not allowed to build houses, or have vineyards or fields. The Rechabites lived in tents. They were a people who had to live by faith in obedience to the words that Jonadab had commanded them. They arrived in Jerusalem incidentally, seeking refuge to escape the attack of the Babylonian army" (Eufemio, Ricardo. Course on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Canada: s.e., 2011, p.46).

It's not yet clear whether the entire Rechabite family was composed of descendants of Jonadab. But the key point in the story was to demonstrate the obedience with which they had followed Jonadab's words for generations. Many years had passed since they were ordered not to drink wine, among other rules, and they obeyed them to the letter. God wanted Jeremiah to personally observe this obedience, and it would serve as a lesson to the people of Israel. Therefore, He told the prophet to take them to the temple. Everything was set up for the Rechabites to disobey Jonadab's law; a great feast was prepared with the leaders of the Rechabites and the leaders of the temple (vv.3-4). Wine was served in elegant cups, and the Rechabites were invited to drink (v.5). The entire atmosphere was conducive to seeing the Rechabites fall into disobedience by simply drinking a cup of wine. But they didn't give in; they remained steadfast in obedience to the laws of their community dictated and followed for many years (vv.6-10). The question wasn't whether the rule was good or bad; but rather, how much obedience there was to that law.

They didn't care about appearing wrong in front of everyone on that occasion; they preferred to remain obedient. Their words were clear, despite the entire unfavorable scenario. They wouldn't drink wine because their father Jonadab had commanded them not to (vv.5-6,10). When one holds a high principle of obedience, the firm conviction to the received teaching remains. Regardless of the circumstances or external factors, nothing can change the response of obedience to what one has believed.

It's very likely that many times in life, believers face situations similar to what the Rechabites experienced. Everything may be set up to tempt them into violating unquestionable principles of God that they have kept for weeks or years. The pressure from the group, from the scenarios, is strong, but one must choose whether to give in and spoil everything.

Or remain firm and obedient to God and to what His Word has instilled in them.

In today's society, believers are often invited to drink alcoholic beverages, engage in sexual relationships with someone they aren't married to, watch pornography, tell lies, etc. This is where their obedience is tested, whether they're capable of rejecting what goes against God because they simply love Him and don't want to displease Him. Obedience is inherently linked to character, and daily situations should strengthen the character of God's children. Many Christians and church members disobey God to please people, groups of friends, or coworkers. But that's not what God expects; He desires that our character and obedience be like that of the Rechabites.

(In this part of the lesson, the teacher can request testimonies that illustrate how the students have found themselves in tense situations that have tempted them to disobey God.)

Questions:

- What did the obedience of the Rechabites consist of?
- Share how you can be obedient to God in situations that tempt you to disobey.

II. Comparing the Obedience of the Rechabites with the Disobedience of God's People (Jeremiah 35:14-16)

It was difficult for the prophet Jeremiah to observe everything that God showed him. We can ask ourselves the following questions: How is it possible to see so much obedience from the Rechabites to the words of a man, and so much disobedience from God's people? How is it possible for the Rechabite family to faithfully follow a human law, while the people of God cannot fulfill God's divine laws and be obedient to the Lord?

God asked the prophet to speak to the nation of Judah about when they would learn to obey His words (v.14). How was it possible that the descendants of Jonadab obeyed the order not to drink wine, but the people of God didn't obey Him (v.14)? How was it that the people of God didn't obey despite all that He had done to foster their obedience, sending prophets to correct them from their wicked ways (v.15) and telling them not to worship other gods (v.15)? Nevertheless, the Rechabites obeyed their ancestor's law, while the people of Israel didn't heed God's words (v.16).

God's command to His people Israel to turn away from evil ways and idolatry was incessant, yet they repeatedly fell into complete disobedience. God continues to call

His people today (the church) and makes the same comparisons: How is it possible for a soldier to be more obedient to a superior than a Christian is to their Lord? It's possible for us to obey many of the laws imposed by men but we're incapable of obeying God. How many times does God have to repeat the same words? Until when will many believers keep committing the same sins over and over again, while God warns and speaks to them in various ways? We find members of the church who, for years, continue to disobey God. Obedience is a decision of the heart; we must be capable of steadfastly obeying the Lord.

Sometimes, we see believers doing everything in the church, trying to appear more spiritually superior than others, but harboring rebellion in their hearts, and rebellion is the opposite of obedience. They refuse to submit, don't want to hear the Word, and harbor pride in their hearts; and no matter how much they do for God, there are no divine results because "To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22).

Obedience is superior to any spiritual sacrifice one may present to God. In fact, it's worthless for a person to try to worship God if their heart isn't obedient. Pride is what goes against obedience. That was what caused chaos in this world. The devil had pride (he wanted to be like God), and that led to disobedience. The Rechabites gave us an excellent lesson: they didn't question the given law; they simply obeyed it. Many people constantly question God's laws, wondering whether they should follow them or not, when all we should do is simply obey them.

Questions:

- What did the prophet Jeremiah observe in the attitude of the Rechabites, and what was the attitude of the people of Judah towards God?
- What is the attitude of God's people today regarding obedience?

III. The Consequences of Disobedience (Jeremiah 35:17)

Disobedience brings punishment; it has harsh consequences. After God showed the prophet and the people of Judah the obedience of the Rechabites and the disobedience of the Jewish people to Him, God decided to bring upon Judah the calamity He had promised (v.17) for two main reasons:

1. He spoke to them, but they didn't listen (v.17).
2. He called them, but they didn't respond (v.17).

When God speaks, and they don't listen, and He calls, but they don't respond, when He tries to guide them on the right path, but they want to continue in the same sin, the only thing left is for them to suffer the consequences of disobedience.

In Israel's case, there were many consequences, including being besieged by foreign nations and being deported to them. This brought suffering, losses, worship crises, and a myriad of evils—all caused by disobedience. But it was also part of a divine process to restore the relationship between God and His people. The consequences of disobedience are as old as the world itself, dating back to the fall of Adam and Eve. Humanity has grown in disobedience throughout generations, even in our current societies, which are governed by postmodern principles filled with rebellion. Disobedience is the attitude of the devil, who was the first to not submit or obey.

The Bible is full of examples where disobedience led to consequences. One closely related to Jonadab was Jehu; both did great things for God, like killing all who worshiped the god Baal. As long as Jehu remained obedient to God, he enjoyed victory and blessings, and God promised him, "your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation" (2 Kings 10:30). But he stopped obeying, and God reduced his territory (2 Kings 10:32). We must understand that the blessing and victory end when we stop obeying. Decisions made in disobedience leave countless spiritual, physical and material consequences.

Questions:

- What were the reasons that led God to bring the calamity He had promised upon Judah?
- What consequences have you seen or experienced due to disobedience to God? Share.

IV. The Reward of Obedience (Jeremiah 35:18-19)

At the same time that we affirm the consequences of disobedience, we can also affirm that God rewards obedience. He blesses those who obey Him, and the story of the Rechabites is one of many examples found in the Bible. God told the Rechabites through the prophet Jeremiah that because they faithfully kept Jonadab's laws, there would always be a descendant from their family serving in His presence (vv.18-19).

The obedience of their descendants to Jonadab brought the blessing that their generations would serve God. Remaining faithful and obedient catapulted them to receive God's blessings. When children witness their parents' obedience to God, it aids in their spiritual growth, and God rewards the family. When the church is obedient

to God, it experiences the blessing of the Lord, and an atmosphere of prosperity, victory, healing, and fulfillment of eternal purpose prevails.

One of the rewards for an obedient believer is enjoying the presence of God and experiencing communion with the Holy Spirit. Walking under God's guidance, sovereignty, and grace brings the enjoyment of all His blessings, which He alone knows how and when to bestow. Jesus taught us through His own life to be obedient and witness the blessings it brings. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: "...being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that's above every name" (Philippians 2:8-9).

The Master showed us the way and demonstrated that greatness reaches its fullest expression when we're obedient. There's no glory without humility, and there's no divine blessing without obedience. But beyond obeying for the sake of a reward, Christ's disciples are called to embody it as a healthy lifestyle in the spirit and as a response to His immeasurable love.

Some advice on how to be an obedient Christian includes:

1. Allow God to transform you.
2. Pray to God about every area of your life.
3. Affirm your actions daily with the Word of God.
4. Be sensitive to hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit.
5. Always choose to do what's right, what the Bible teaches, even if it's difficult.
6. With God's help, eliminate all pride, arrogance, and thoughts that lead you to resist submission.
7. Enjoy doing the will of God. As the psalmist said, "I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart." (Psalm 40:8).

Questions:

- How did God reward the Rechabites' obedience?
- What does Jesus teach us about obedience?
- How can I be an obedient Christian?

Conclusion

The analyzed biblical texts have revealed the blessing experienced when applying the principle of obedience. Disobedience caused the destruction and curse of the world, but obedience will bring us blessings, the fullness of God's presence, and the enjoyment of His favor and mercy in our lives.



Jeremiah, a True Prophet

Efraín Muñoz (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Jeremiah 38:1-23

Memory Verse: “‘They won’t hand you over,’ Jeremiah replied. ‘Obey the Lord by doing what I tell you. Then it will go well with you, and your life will be spared’” Jeremiah 38:20.

Lesson Purpose: To believe that when God calls us to preach His Word, we’re not alone, for He promised to be with us always, even until the end of the world.

Introduction

The prophet Jeremiah lived in a very challenging time. The people of God were under siege by the Babylonians, facing tremendous famine, and on top of that, the people and palace leaders were in a state of moral and spiritual decay. They had broken God’s covenant, and as a consequence, the Lord’s judgment was upon them. Let’s learn the lessons every servant of God must face when called to ministry, so that we may remain faithful in fulfilling it until the end.

I. Proclaim the Word of God, No Matter the Cost (Jeremiah 38:1-6)

Jeremiah is known as the “weeping prophet.” This isn’t only because he experienced rejection from his own people countless times, but also because God had determined to punish the Jewish nation for forsaking the covenant with Him after inheriting the promised land. It wasn’t easy for Jeremiah to witness the people abandoning the covenant with God to indulge in idolatry (Jeremiah 7:16-18). Additionally, Jeremiah had to obey God not to pray for the people, as the decision had been made, and the nation would pay for their disobedience (Jeremiah 7:16,20).

The prophet was entrusted with proclaiming God’s Word to his fellow countrymen, even when this Word wasn’t good news, and even when his own life was in danger. As God’s spokesperson, it cost Jeremiah because he was a witness to the sin of the people, and this saddened him due to the consequences they would all face. Jeremiah 38:1 mentions the officials of the court, who would become the prophet’s staunchest enemies. They had heard Jeremiah’s words saying, “This is what the Lord says: ‘Whoever stays in this city will die by the sword, famine or plague, but whoever goes over to the Babylonians will live. They will escape with their lives; they will live’” (v.2).

These men lacked the slightest sensibility and spiritual insight. They didn’t give Jeremiah an opportunity to explain his prophecies, nor did they inquire about the source of this terrible news. To them, Jeremiah was a traitor to the nation, possibly conspiring against the Jewish nation in favor of the Chaldeans for personal gain. Hence, their unanimous decision was, “This man should be put to death” (v.4). Despite the impending invasion, they still held onto hope to resist and emerge victorious from the Babylonian siege. But when they heard the words that the prophet proclaimed from the courtyard of the prison, where some soldiers could hear him, and possibly towards the street where people could listen (Jeremiah 37:21), it infuriated them to the point of wanting to take Jeremiah’s life.

The palace officials went before King Zedekiah and pointed out at least two reasons why the prophet deserved to die:

i) “He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city...” (Jeremiah 38:4). In other words, they claimed he was demoralizing their army and the people instead of encouraging them for battle.

ii) “This man isn’t seeking the good of these people but their ruin” (v.4). They argued that if Jeremiah was a true prophet, he would be on their side, interceding for Jerusalem’s peace rather than prophesying their nation’s defeat and destruction.

Zedekiah had lost all divine perspective because his moral and spiritual character was in tatters. Fear had gripped his spirit, uncertainty grew about what awaited him and the people. The palace officials knew the king’s weak character and didn’t hesitate to take advantage of it. They requested that Jeremiah should be cast into a pit where there was no water but only mud.

Unfortunately, the king left Jeremiah in the hands of these wicked leaders, and the prophet ended up at the bottom of a pit, sinking slowly, with his death only a matter of time.

Questions:

- Do you believe that in recent years, preaching the truth of God's Word has become more difficult? Why?
- What are the topics that the world doesn't tolerate regarding the truth of the gospel? And what has been the reaction to preaching the truth?

II. He Suffers, but God Protects Him (Jeremiah 38:7-13)

Even before Jeremiah was born, God had sanctified and set him apart for the prophetic ministry (Jeremiah 1:5). Along with the call, God assured him that he wouldn't be alone, for His presence would be with him to deliver him from those he feared to face (Jeremiah 1:8). Therefore, from a "child" (Jeremiah 1:6b), Jeremiah had no doubt that God would fulfill His promise. God Himself extended His hand to touch Jeremiah's mouth, symbolically placing all the words of God on the lips of the new prophet (Jeremiah 1:9). This extraordinary and powerful experience was so significant for Jeremiah that he never doubted God's protection and companionship in his ministry, no matter the circumstances.

Once again, the prophet found himself in serious trouble, closer to death and far from the approval and applause of his listeners. But God used a man named Ebed-Melek, an Ethiopian eunuch and a servant of the king. It's interesting to note that this foreigner took up Jeremiah's cause with such determination that he was even willing to risk his own life. Ebed-Melek proved to be a wise, prudent, and brave servant. While the king was at one of the city gates called the "Benjamin Gate" (Jeremiah 38:7b), the Ethiopian came to plead on Jeremiah's behalf. In that time, city gates were gathering places for society, where elders and authorities would convene to legislate and judge community cases. It was where sentences were passed on those accused of crimes against others. It was in this place that Ebed-Melek sought out the monarch to seek justice for God's prophet.

The argument the eunuch presented to King Zedekiah in defense of the prophet was as follows: "... these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet..." (v.9). A foreigner had to step forward for the king to comprehend the extent of the wrong done to Jeremiah. Zedekiah had a wavering character

and was easily swayed by the bad advice of men who acted unjustly. He lacked moral and spiritual sensitivity to God's will, for he himself had broken the covenant with God (Jeremiah 34:8-11) and clearly operated based on his own carnal judgments.

On the other hand, the actions of the palace officials remind us of how Joseph's brothers tried to get rid of him by throwing him into a pit and then selling him. They didn't want to shed the innocent brother's blood (Genesis 37:24). Jeremiah's case was even worse; lowering him into the pit represented serious difficulties for the prophet due to the following reasons:

i) The pit had to be very deep, so that no one could hear cries for help.

ii) Bread was scarce because the city was under siege, and within the pit, Jeremiah would certainly die of hunger.

iii) The cistern was full of mud, and the prophet wouldn't be able to hold on for long before sinking completely and suffocating to death.

In this way, they intended to silence the prophet's voice and no longer hear the disturbing news that didn't come from him, but from God.

Upon hearing Ebed-Melek's words, the king reacted almost instinctively. He realized that he was also complicit in the mistreatment Jeremiah had suffered, so he ordered the eunuch to take charge of the prophet's rescue. He commanded him to take thirty men with him to ensure the operation, as Jeremiah's death was imminent (Jeremiah 38:10). Quickly, Ebed-Melek gathered thirty men who were part of the royal palace's service. The Ethiopian knew the palace and everything in it better than anyone else; he searched under the treasury for "He took some old rags and worn-out clothes from there and let them down with ropes to Jeremiah in the cistern" (v.11).

Thirty-one people participated in the rescue mission. This was probably to ensure the mission's success, as there was a possibility that the palace officials would find out about the operation and come to the pit to prevent Jeremiah's liberation. Another significant reason for the number of people was that removing a man from that pit in the condition Jeremiah was in wasn't an easy task; they could seriously injure him, so it required skill and great care. It must not have surprised Jeremiah that God was fulfilling His promise of care and protection by using people who weren't from his own people, like the Ethiopian. And they used things that many would consider worthless or even vile, such as old rags and torn, possibly filthy clothes. Then, the Word says: "...And Jeremiah remained in the courtyard of the guard" (v.13b).

More than relief, Jeremiah was experiencing God's salvation. He could finally breathe fresh air and understand that his prophetic ministry wasn't yet over. Was Jeremiah willing to continue his prophetic task despite the consequences?

Questions:

- In what ways is the local and global church suffering for proclaiming the Word of God?
- What are God's promises for servants who boldly preach His Word?

III. Fearlessly Warning of What Was to Come (Jeremiah 38:14-23)

Once freed from the pit, though not from prison, Zedekiah immediately summoned the prophet, bringing him to one of the temple gates (v.14b), likely an access reserved for the king. There, they could speak in absolute confidentiality without the risk of anyone overhearing. Face to face, the king issued a warning to Jeremiah: "... don't hide anything from me" (v.14b). Zedekiah simply knew that people, like the palace officials, had no problem lying to him, but he believed Jeremiah would tell the truth, even if it cost him his life. Tension hung in the air; Zedekiah had washed his hands of the officials' request to kill the prophet (v.5), and Jeremiah had just survived a terrible ordeal where he almost lost his life if not for Ebed-Melek's intervention.

Jeremiah didn't want to return to the pit, but he wasn't willing to lie or distort the message God had given him either. Zedekiah swore by the name of the Lord (v.16), the Creator and owner of his soul, that he wouldn't kill the prophet or hand him over to the evil men who sought his death. Jeremiah then delivered God's message to the king (vv.17-18):

i) If you surrender immediately to the Babylonians, you'll live, and your family and this city will be spared.

ii) If you resist and don't surrender, the city will be handed over to the Chaldeans and destroyed by fire, and you won't escape from their hands.

In response to God's sentence, Zedekiah said, "... I'm afraid of the Jews..." (v.19). Ah, fear was the determining factor in the king's decisions. That was the heart of the matter; in contrast to Jeremiah, who, despite facing death on several occasions for speaking the truth, didn't hesitate to continue speaking the truth and only the truth. Zedekiah feared the Jews more than the Babylonians. He believed that if he surrendered, his own brothers would accuse him of treason, torture him, and end his life without any compassion. This thought terrified him, and his heart failed at the idea of suffering such humiliation.

However, he didn't fear the words of God that came from the prophet's mouth at all. God, on the other hand, was showing mercy to Zedekiah, his household, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem if he obeyed His voice (v.20). There was time for repentance, but if he refused to obey (v.21), the consequences would come upon the king, his household, and the rest of the city's inhabitants (v.22). The obedience or disobedience of one man could bring consequences to an entire community, and this was the case with Zedekiah. Obedience would bring salvation, but here was Zedekiah, torn between two opinions.

Jeremiah made a final effort to convince the king to obey God's Word. He told him that if he didn't obey, his wives would be handed over to the Babylonian princes, and they themselves would sing in chorus: "They misled you and overcame you— those trusted friends of yours. Your feet are sunk in the mud; your friends have deserted you" (v.22), meaning that those who claimed to be his friends mocked him, took advantage of his lack of leadership character, incited him to fail, and then had the ability to put his feet in the mud, causing him to sink, and once there, they betrayed him and turned their backs on him. Jeremiah ended by telling the king that he wouldn't die at the hands of the Babylonians, but he would be captured and taken to Babylon as a trophy to exhibit. This would be the worst humiliation any person could endure, especially the king of Judah. Jeremiah remained imprisoned in the courtyard until the day the Babylonians captured the city and burned it to the ground (Jeremiah 52).

Questions:

- Do you testify to the truth of the gospel? Yes, no? What is the reason?
- Preaching the gospel of truth has become more dangerous in the midst of a relativistic world. How willing are you to endure the contempt and rejection of your community for being a faithful preacher of the Word?

Conclusion

If we had to use an adjective to define Jeremiah, we would have to say that he was a true prophet of God. True because he was legitimate; God had set him apart before he was even in his mother's womb. He always proclaimed God's truth rather than preaching what others wanted to hear. He was a true prophet because he was willing to suffer mistreatment and even death for his ministry and obedience to God.



The Inescapable Judgment of God

A. Denis Espinoza S. (Nicaragua)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 39:1-14, 16-18, 40:1-6, 9-16, 41:1-18

Memory Verse: "...The Lord your God decreed this disaster for this place. And now the Lord has brought it about; He has done just as he said he would. All this happened because you people sinned against the Lord and didn't obey him" Jeremiah 40:2b-3.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that when God sends His judgment upon humanity, He does so in accordance with His justice.

Introduction

When the people of Israel asked for a king, they rejected God, who was their true King (1 Samuel 8:7). The Lord allowed it and gave them Saul (1 Samuel 10:1), but Saul failed, and God raised up David (1 Samuel 16:10-13). After David's death, Solomon was made king (1 Kings 1:32-34), and during his reign, there was peace and progress, and the nation enjoyed glory. However, after Solomon's death and the ascension of his son to the throne, the kingdom was divided: the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah). Both turned away from the Lord, and their rebellion brought upon them divine judgment. Thus, Israel fell definitely in 722 B.C. under Assyria. In this lesson, we'll study the downfall of Judah.

I. Calamity for Some (Jeremiah 39:1-9)

A. The Lord's judgment (vv. 1-3)

The day came that Jeremiah had predicted long ago. The event proved that the warnings given by the prophet were true and confirmed him as a genuine prophet of God.

Regarding Jerusalem, the siege lasted 18 months, a period of agony and terror against the City. The people were confined, deprived of basic necessities to survive and resist, and without any possibility of help in their tragedy. The Book of Lamentations vividly describes the siege and destruction, stating: "Because of thirst the infant's tongue sticks to the roof of its mouth; the children beg for bread, but no one gives it to them. Those who once ate delicacies are destitute in the streets. Those brought up in royal purple now lie on ash heaps" (Lamentations

4:4-5). The collapse was evident because the people were hungry, thirsty, and there was pestilence, and death. There were deaths from hunger (Lamentations 4:9), and pious mothers cooked their own children (Lamentations 4:10). All of this was a fulfillment of God's Word and judgment (Lamentations 4:11).

The city walls that were considered impregnable, strong, high, and wide, the strongest of ancient times, were breached (Jeremiah 39:2), and the great structure crumbled. Through that opening, the Chaldean princes entered and positioned themselves at the Middle Gate, the main gate where justice was administered (v.3). The princes were there, but King Zedekiah was absent, demonstrating that the city had been conquered.

Against Zedekiah (vv.4-7). This was a very sad picture (v.4). The king fled like a coward. Upon seeing the Babylonian princes within the city, he was filled with fear and escaped with his entourage and sons. He thought he could escape the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar, and even God's judgment. This king, who didn't allow God to save him, who mistreated the prophet of God by throwing him into the dungeon, this same king who tried to silence the prophet so that his voice wouldn't be heard on the streets, in the temple, and especially not in the royal palace, he fled at night with his guards, the remaining troops, and his sons.

He couldn't escape (v.5). Apparently, Zedekiah and his entourage were going to be saved. When they left at night through a secret passage, they thought no one would see them; however, the vigilant Chaldean army discovered them, pursued, caught up with them, and arrested them.

One lesson we learn from this episode is that no one can escape God's judgment.

The harsh sentence (vv.6-7). Zedekiah and his companions were brought before the king of Babylon, and what a sentence it was! The last king of Judah, the representative of the theocracy, the descendant of David, was there in Nebuchadnezzar's headquarters. The sentence was cruel, but just, directly proportional to the sin, evil, and rebellion of the deposed king.

The sentence had four points:

1. The execution of Zedekiah's sons in his presence.
2. The execution of the nobles.
3. The blinding of Zedekiah (his eyes were gouged out).
4. Exile and imprisonment.

Zedekiah was bound with bronze fetters and taken captive to Babylon, where he was imprisoned and likely died.

B. The city burned (v.8)

The people of Judah didn't repent or turn to God, and as a result, their city was destroyed, along with all of its buildings. This disaster was caused by the rebellion of the king and his people. During the height of his power, Zedekiah believed that the destruction and failure of the city were impossible. He doubted God's Word, but it came to pass. The Bible says that the Chaldeans burned the king's house, the people's houses, and broke down the walls.

C. What can We Learn?

1. God fulfills His Word.
2. No person can escape God's judgment.
3. If a person doesn't repent of their sins, they will face horrible consequences.
4. It is urgent to listen to and obey God's warnings to avoid the severity of His judgment.
5. God is loving, merciful, and compassionate, but also just.

Questions:

- Since sin is the main cause of human calamity, what should humans do to avoid such calamity?
- What are the consequences for humans when they try to flee from the presence of God?

II. Protection and Blessing for Others (Jeremiah 39:10-18)

Here we have a wonderful testimony of God's grace. In the midst of so much confusion, darkness, and failure, the light and glory of God shone to demonstrate His favor to those who trusted and waited on Him. The apostle Paul wrote, "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20).

A. For whom did God act graciously?

This grace of the Lord was manifested in His care for the remnant. It's true that judgment came with all the severity the situation warranted, but we know that no sin or rebellion can deplete God's grace. There will always be divine favor for those in need.

1.The Poor (v.10) From the perspective of the Chaldeans' political-military strategy, it wasn't worth taking the poor to Babylon; they had little to contribute. Therefore, they were left in the land of Judah and given vineyards. Those poor individuals could have already perished by the sword, famine, thirst, or pestilence, but their lives were preserved. Although they had nothing material, they possessed the most precious gift that God has given to human beings: life. Having life was solely the result of God's protection and grace. They would live in a land that had been ravaged, without a city, without walls, without a king, but they still had life and "vineyards and fields" (v.10).

2.The Prophet of God (vv.11-14) The suffering man, the one who had been mistreated, tortured, and imprisoned by his own king, rejected by his people and their leaders, was now protected by a pagan king, the executor of God's judgment. Let's listen and understand it well. In an unusual way, Nebuchadnezzar gave explicit orders to his captain of the guard: "Take him (Jeremiah) and look after him; don't harm him but do for him whatever he asks" (v.12). Did Nebuchadnezzar suddenly have a good change of heart? Did he feel remorse or guilt? Certainly not. In this act, we can see God Himself acting in favor of His prophet, a manifestation of God's grace and sovereignty. We learn that the Lord was above Nebuchadnezzar and his empire, taking care of the prophet Jeremiah.

The Bible teaches that Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, obeyed Nebuchadnezzar's command, and they took Jeremiah from the courtyard of the prison and handed him over to Gedaliah, and he lived among the people (v.14).

3. The Eunuch (vv.16-18) Ebed-Melek had done a good deed by rescuing Jeremiah from the cistern (in chapter 38). He courageously opposed the decision of the nobles and appealed to the king (38:7-13). The Word says, "My lord the king, these men have acted wickedly in all they have done to Jeremiah the prophet. They have thrown him into a cistern, where he will starve to death when there's no longer any bread in the city" (38:9).

God told Jeremiah to speak to Ebed-Melek (39:15-16), telling him that the judgment on Judah was the work of God and that evil would certainly come. At the same time, God made a promise of life: "I will rescue you" (39:17). And He did. The divine reason was this: "Because of your trust in Me" (vv.17-18).

B. Reflections for Our Lives Today

1. God doesn't forget those who trust in Him, and He rewards their faithfulness.
2. We must be faithful to God and hold fast to His promises, even when the majority does not.
3. We are called to trust in God's grace in the midst of difficulty.
4. God's purpose will be fulfilled even using those who aren't part of His people.

Questions:

- What significance do the benevolent acts that God performs in the midst of tragedies hold for us?
- How do you interpret this Bible verse: "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20b)?

III. Total Chaos (Jeremiah 40:9-41)

After the fall of Jerusalem, Judah entered a state of profound violence, instability, and anarchy.

A. Vassal Government (Jeremiah 40:7-16)

With the conquest by Nebuchadnezzar, Judah became a province of the Babylonian Empire. The conqueror appointed Gedaliah as the governor of Judah. Gedaliah was a member of a prominent Jewish family and was

considered a devout man, a follower of the Lord, and someone who had identified with Jeremiah's noble cause (Gray, Paul. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume IV, Jeremiah. USA: CNP, n.d., p. 461). He was one of the few who believed Jeremiah's prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem and the prophet's proclamation that to survive the disaster, they should submit to the power of the conqueror. Gedaliah sided with Nebuchadnezzar during the siege.

Conciliatory Ruler (vv.7-12). The Bible mentions some defeated army commanders, leaders of guerrilla groups, who remained and sought refuge in the countryside. When they learned of Gedaliah's appointment as governor of Judah, they decided to seek him out. These were Ishmael, Johanan, Jonathan, Seraiah, the sons of Ephai, and Jaazaniah (vv.7-8). Gedaliah provided them with guarantees conditioned on their submission to the king of Babylon: "Do not be afraid to serve the Babylonians," he said. "Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you" (v.9b); "you are to harvest the wine, summer fruit and olive oil, and put them in your storage jars, and live in the towns you have taken over" (v.10b). The Jews that were scattered in Moab, Ammon, Edom, and all the surrounding lands also returned and accepted his jurisdiction. Having settled in their land, "... they harvested an abundance of wine and summer fruit" (v.12).

Threatened Ruler (vv.13-16). Not all guerrilla leaders were pleased with Gedaliah. One of them conspired to eliminate him. The conspirator was Ishmael, a descendant of the royal family. The information reached the governor, but he didn't believe it. Johanan, his informant, insisted and tried to persuade him, asking for permission to kill Ishmael. In doing so, he would be helping to prevent another tragedy for the people: "Why should he take your life and cause all the Jews who are gathered around you to be scattered and the remnant of Judah to perish?" (v.15). These expressions reflect Johanan's sincere concern. However, the ruler didn't allow it: "Don't do such a thing! What you are saying about Ishmael isn't true" (v.16b).

B. An Ambitious and Atrocious Leader (Jeremiah 41:1-7)

The conspiracy was true, and Ishmael, along with ten bloodthirsty men, killed the well-intentioned and trusting governor Gedaliah (v.2).

His hospitality and sincerity were betrayed. What reasons did Ishmael have for murdering him? Ishmael was of royal lineage, possibly loyal to the deposed Zedekiah. Most likely, out of envy and ambition, he ended Gedaliah's life while they were eating.

In addition to the atrocious murder of the governor, Ishmael killed the Jews and Chaldeans who were eating with Gedaliah and his guests (v.3). To this atrocity, he added the murder of pilgrims who were dressed in mourning and traveling to the destroyed temple area to offer sacrifices to God. Ishmael met them pretending to mourn and with deceit, he brought them to Mizpah and there killed them, casting their bodies into a cistern (vv.4-7). He also took the remaining people captive, intending to take them to the land of Ammon (v.10).

C. An Act of Justice (vv.11-18)

In response to Ishmael's wicked actions, both Johanan and the other military leaders decided to pursue him to free the captives and avenge Gedaliah's death. They caught up with him near the great pool of Gibeon (v.12). There they defeated him and rescued the captives (vv.13-14). However, Ishmael and eight of his men managed to escape and went to the land of Ammon (v.15).

D. Lessons for Our Days

Chaos can come into our lives, churches, or countries as a result of violence and disrespect for others. Rebuilding everything that has been destroyed is a titanic task that

requires God's help and the participation of all. We must listen to the voices of friends who warn us of imminent danger. Beware of disloyal and treacherous people who approach to harm us.

The judgment of God is executed in response to the sin of humanity. It's clear that God's actions, however harsh is clear to us that God's actions, no matter how harsh they may be, are in accordance with His justice. The disastrous fall of Jerusalem, the deaths by famine, thirst, pestilence, and sword, the capture of Zedekiah, the beheading of his sons and nobles in his presence, his blinding, exile, and imprisonment – all seen today as acts of cruelty – were actually acts of divine justice.

Questions:

- How does political and social violence affect our countries today?
- Explain the ways in which Christians can contribute to peace and justice in our countries.

Conclusion:

Amidst the severity of God's judgment, there was a demonstration of God's grace towards the poor, the prophet Jeremiah, and the eunuch Ebed-melek. We echo the words of the apostle Paul in this conclusion: "But where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Romans 5:20b).



Judgment and Restoration

Marcial Rubio (Peru)

Biblical passage for study: Jeremiah 46:27-28

Memory Verse: “Do not be afraid, Jacob my servant; don’t be dismayed, Israel. I will surely save you out of a distant place, your descendants from the land of their exile. Jacob will again have peace and security, and no one will make him afraid” (Jeremiah 46:27).

Lesson Purpose: To show that God isn’t indifferent to the wickedness of nations, He doesn’t desire the destruction of people, His just judgment is inexorable, and He will always honor His promises to His faithful people.

Introduction

The universal question in the face of growing human wickedness has always been, If there’s a just God, why doesn’t He bring justice and put an end to the evils that afflict the world? And as Christians, we ask ourselves: What role do we have to fulfill in the different social and political situations of our suffering nations? In this study, we’ll see God’s announcement of salvation to His people Israel, His promise of companionship beyond space and time, and His judgment on the nations and His chosen people.

I. Announcement of Salvation (Jer. 46:27)

A. The Seduction of Idols.

The Theological Dictionary defines ‘idol’ as follows: “...A statue or object that’s worshiped as if it were a god. Image or icon... idols always represented stumbling blocks for the chosen people... Even the bronze serpent, built under divine orders to appease the fury of the fiery serpents, eventually became an object of worship (2 Kings 18:4). The same thing happened with the Ark of the Covenant (Jeremiah 3:16)” (De Andrade, C. C. Theological Dictionary: With a Biographical Supplement of Great Theologians and Thinkers. USA: Patmos, 2002, p.190).

The moral and religious decline of the people of Judah had reached chilling levels as a result of the sin of imagery or idol worship. The Hispanic World Commentary refers to the fact that in these verses, the prophet alludes to “some of the images and titles that described the power of Egypt. Apis means strong, bull, and was an epithet for God (see Gen. 49:24; Isaiah 1:24) ... The traditional strength of the bull god couldn’t stand firm and was knocked down by God... vv. 20, 21. Heifer, fatted calves is an extension of the figure of the Apis bull, again related to Memphis. v. 22. Serpent [was the goddess of divination] ... (Lev. 19:26; Deut. 8:10). Diviners

were highly respected in Egypt (Gen. 44:5, 15) ... v. 25. Ammon god of Thebes... Initially, he was the local god of Thebes, where the powerful pharaohs of the XII dynasty (1991–1786 BC) emerged, but later he became the main god, or the “king of the gods”... [unlike idols] Jehovah is like Tabor and Carmel, with the same firmness as these mountains. God is solid, so His Word and promises can be trusted, unlike the different gods of empires that have fallen and will fall over time” (Cevallos, J. C. & Zorzoli, R. O. Hispanic World Commentary, volume 11: Jeremiah and Lamentations. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 2010, p.311).

Our Latin American nations were filled with idols by invaders who, in the name of God, took our lands by bloodshed and fire. They implanted a system of worship to dead gods, without personality and authority, which brought our people into corruption at all levels. And although many people today no longer worship idols and images as the Egyptians did, there are other forms of idolatry. For example: materialism, technology, worship of the body, egocentrism, personal self-fulfillment, etc. Anything that becomes so important as to displace God from the center of our lives is idolatry.

B. A Message of Judgment for the Nations

In chapter 46, Jeremiah vividly described the unstoppable advance of the Babylonian army, culminating in the final defeat of Egypt. This prophecy was fulfilled in 605 B.C. when Nebuchadnezzar conquered the kingdom of Judah and defeated the armies of Egypt in the Battle of Carchemish, establishing Babylon as the world’s political leader. Egypt represented a system of oppression, slavery, exploitation, and cruel mistreatment for the people of Israel. What was astonishing was that the Hebrews nostalgically remembered that way of life to which they longed to return.

Today, Egypt represents the systems of worldly wickedness from which the Lord has rescued us, but which seeks to seduce and draw Christians back into a life of sin.

C. Judgment and Restoration of Egypt (vv. 18-26)

God declared judgment upon Egypt in the strongest terms. Just as Mount Tabor and Mount Carmel stood out in comparison to neighboring territories, the Babylonian Empire, led by Nebuchadnezzar, would surpass and overshadow the kings of other nations, and Egypt would be subjected to its power and majesty. The pride of Egypt was compared to the beauty of a large and strong heifer, but its day of sacrifice was near (v.20). The Word of God describes the humiliating condition of the mighty southern empire, slipping away like one of its most revered deities, the serpent, before falling into the hands of the Babylonians (v.22). However, the biblical text suggests that this was punishment from God, but not destruction. Egypt would be inhabited again as in times past (v.26, Jeremiah 48:47, 49:6, 39). God's justice and mercy have always been present.

Questions:

- What did salvation imply for a nation given to idolatry?
- What is the responsibility of the church regarding the various forms of contemporary idolatry?

II. The Promise of His Presence (Jeremiah 46:27a, 28a)

A. Final Warning to a People Obsessed with Idolatry

Theological Dictionary defines 'idolatry' as follows: "... [From Greek eidolon, image + latria, worship] Worship intended for the adoration of idols ... excessive love for a person or object. Love that replaces the love that should be voluntarily devoted to the one and true God ... Any love that replaces the love owed to God is idolatry" (De Andrade, C. C. Theological Dictionary: With a Biographical Supplement of Great Theologians and Thinkers. USA: Patmos, 2002, p.190).

The Israelites had hardened hearts due to sin, and they had lost the fear of God. Jeremiah preached to them for forty years, yet there was no response of repentance. Like many nations today, Israel had replaced The Lord with fashionable idols. Despite God delivering them from the slavery of Egypt, showing His power and glory through abundant signs and wonders, the people returned to the old idolatrous practices they had learned there.

The same sin of idolatry, dressed up differently, now attracts, seduces, and captures the peoples of the world, including the Church. Examples include esoteric sects, the prosperity gospel, and many evangelical idols (where advertising campaigns exalt the image of the star preacher or trendy singer, and homocentric liturgy uses Christ as a pretext out of context), gaining more strength.

B. Discouragement and Comfort

Jeremiah fell into discouragement, the place where many believers and ministers stagnate when their best efforts result in frustration and unfruitfulness in fulfilling their mission. Emotionally drained and deeply dejected, he even doubted God (Jeremiah 15:18). But in the midst of loneliness, incomprehension, frustration, discouragement, and conflicts of faith, God sent him a word of encouragement: "do not fear," "I'm with you" (Jeremiah 46:27-28). Even though the kingdom of Judah would be invaded, Jerusalem and the temple destroyed, and its inhabitants taken into captivity, the nation wouldn't disappear; a remnant would be preserved.

What a relief to know that in the most unfortunate conditions, the presence of the God who called us is with us! Jeremiah received the most challenging mission for which he had no human attraction, but he couldn't escape it because in his heart, there wasn't only a burden for his people but also a consuming passion for God that burned in his heart (Jeremiah 20:9). He never gave up on his mission. He didn't have to preach a motivational message or satisfy intellectual curiosities. It was a message of judgment that no one wanted to hear, applaud, or say, "Amen." The prophet earned the contempt of his own people, which caused him great mental and emotional distress. The same happens today with our hedonistic and materialistic society. No one likes to hear about sin, holiness, or judgment. So many preachers and churches have chosen to "sell" a lightweight gospel, full of emotions and prosperity, without the cross and without the demands of discipleship.

This is indeed a popular "gospel"!

C. The Presence of God Transcends Space and Time

In verses 27a and 28b, Jeremiah was reminded of the promise given in 1:7-8 and 30:10-11: "that his success doesn't depend on him but on God who will constantly be by his side. God never sends a man unless He accompanies him" (Francisco, C. T. & Lacue, J. J. Introduction to the Old Testament. USA: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1999, p.202). Time and space define our physical limitations, but our God is above all that. His presence and power aren't subject to any limitations.

Therefore, no matter where we are or what circumstances and contingencies we face, our God is eternal. Just as in the past, God was with His people. He will also be with us and our children. We only need to walk in obedience to His laws. He is faithful to His covenant. His faithfulness and love endure forever.

Questions:

- What does God's presence mean in the lives of believers when going through moments of harsh trials?
- How do we understand God's presence in the life of our communities today?

III. The Justice of God (Jeremiah 46:28)

A. God is just (v.28b)

Along with the attributes of wisdom, goodness, holiness, mercy, and truth, justice is an essential part of God's moral character. Therefore, justice is a fundamental aspect of who our God is. De Andrade defines the "justice of God" as follows: "...A moral and essential attribute of God, manifested by the faithfulness with which the Supreme Being deals with His purposes and decrees... The justice of God comes into action every time His holiness is attacked. His justice and holiness are intimately related; one cannot be separated from the other without violating His ineffable nature" (De Andrade, C.C. Theological Dictionary: With a Biographical Supplement of Great Theologians and Thinkers. USA: Patmos, 2002, pp.205-206). God is love, but He is also just; He is the perfect paradigm of love. The ultimate proof of His love was sending His Son to take our place and die on the cross. He also demonstrates His unconditional love every day and in every moment through His providential care.

God is just, and His justice cannot be avoided when the sinner doesn't repent. This is evident in how He punished human wickedness with the universal flood, how He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and how He punished His chosen people, Israel, when they prostituted their faith with pagan idols. The same will happen at the end times, as revealed in the judgments announced in the book of Revelation to punish the wickedness of the present world.

B. The Destiny of Nations (v.28a)

Verses 25 and 26 announced God's judgment on Egypt. Pharaoh and his political-religious system would be defeated and subjected by Nebuchadnezzar, but they still had hope of restoration. Throughout history, in wars between nations, with conquests, spoils, and territorial possession, nothing has been perpetual. The day came when usurpers were overthrown and dispossessed by

others stronger than them; what they gained by force, they lost by force as well. The invasion of Egypt would come from the north, and the Chaldeans would be used as God's whip, but it would only be a disciplinary measure, not a destructive one. Our God, in His sovereignty, decides the fate of nations, but in His mercy, He grants new opportunities to individuals and peoples.

C. Correction, Not Destruction

God hadn't finished His work with His people, Israel. He announced that He would punish them, but not destroy them. The apostle Paul would address this in Romans 11:1, saying: "Did God reject his people? By no means! It was a disciplinary punishment to bring them back to repentance. No punishment from God is pleasant, but its results always have a corrective and purifying effect. After the devastating conquest of the people of Judah, God would raise His people again as if from the dead (Romans 11:15). Egypt, the great power in the south, which had never been under the yoke of submission, would suffer the invasion of the Chaldean armies as a whip of God's wrath, but all those punishments would only be corrective measures, not destructive ones. The same prophet Jeremiah would write: "Because of the Lord's great love we're not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).

The Egyptian Empire was facing the worst crisis in its history; its inhabitants were seeking a solution that seemed very remote. Today, our nations are also struggling amid a series of crises: political, economic, health-related, moral, and spiritual. God loves this decaying world and doesn't want anyone to perish. The Messiah was sent "to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1). The incarnate Christ declared that this was His mission for which He had come (Luke 4:18). And when He returned to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit, who "incarnated" in the nascent Church, continuing the mission of Jesus Christ.

Questions:

- How do we understand the theme of God's justice as punishment for nations and as a disciplinary act for His people?
- How do we harmoniously perceive the theme that God is love and, at the same time, just?

Conclusion

As the church of the Lord, we have a mission to fulfill in the midst of the crises and challenges of our time. No matter how difficult it may be, we have the promise of God's presence and His justice to support us. May God help us fulfill our mission and bring His love and truth to the world around us, even in these difficult times.

Taking care of our emotions

Second Quarter

Taking Care of Our Emotions
Think on This
Holistic Health: Both Mind and Body
How to Avoid Addictions
Prevention of Mental Illness
A Shared Responsibility
God is the Model for our Relationships
Mutual Respect
Finding Delight in Others
Managing Anger
How to Resolve Conflicts
Sadness Management Clinic
Goodbye, Anxiety!



Taking Care of Our Emotions

Monica Gramajo (Argentina)

Biblical passage for study: I Thessalonians 5:23

Memory Verse: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you’ll be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will...” Romans 12:2.

Lesson Purpose: Learn to identify our emotions, understand them, and regulate them with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Human beings are integral beings: they’re spirit, soul, and body. The spirit allows us to relate to God; the soul represents the seat of emotions, the mind, and the will; and the body is what we can see visibly about a person. These three aspects are always interconnected, as the way we think influences how we feel and act in certain life situations. Everything we do influences who we are, and who we are influences our behavior. Therefore, we need to develop the ability to distinguish between the emotional and the spiritual, and thereby take care of our emotions with God’s help.

I. How to Identify Our Emotions

The word “emotion” comes from the Latin *emotio* and means “movement, impulse, action” (<https://www.significados.com/emocion>). An emotion is an affective state that we experience as a subjective reaction resulting from physiological and/or psychological changes that influence thought and behavior. Emotions are inherent to human beings; God created us with emotions, and “... everything God created is good...” (I Timothy 4:4). We all experience the same emotions, but in different ways, depending on our own experiences, learning, and the situation we have to face. This means that each person’s response to a specific emotion and how they manage it will shape the different attitudes among individuals. For this reason, different people subjected to the same situations or circumstances don’t react in the same way.

This is one of the reasons why we often struggle to empathize, understand, or put ourselves in the shoes of others, and unintentionally, we prejudge or analyze things solely from our own perspective. When we have

the opportunity to help or advise someone, we say, “If I were in your place, I would do it this way.” And that’s precisely the problem: we’re not the ones in that position, but it’s another person with different thoughts and reactions. There are six basic categories of emotions, each with its derivatives (www.psicologia-online.com/las-6-emociones-basicas-segun-la-picolo-gia-4205.html):

- **Fear:** anticipation of a threat or danger (real or imaginary) that produces anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity.
- **Surprise:** startle, amazement, confusion.
- **Disgust:** dislike, we tend to move away from the object that causes aversion.
- **Anger:** rage, resentment, fury, irritability that arises when things don’t go as we want or when we feel threatened by something or someone.
- **Sadness:** sorrow, loneliness, pessimism in the face of the loss of something or someone important, or when we have been disappointed.
- **Joy:** a sense of well-being and security that we feel when we achieve a desire or see a dream fulfilled. Fun, euphoria, gratification.

We cannot avoid emotions. We can’t hide them; they’re part of our life. When we reflect on the general evangelical population, many Christians, due to erroneous teaching on this topic, have suppressed or hidden their emotions, thinking that in the church, it might be associated with sin, weakness, lack of faith, or some spiritual problem. Often in the face of emotions that cause discomfort such as anger, fear, or sadness, we try anything to stop feeling them.

But this is impossible; we cannot live without them. The issue is how to live better with them.

Many people believe that in the case of negative-tinted emotions like fear, for example, it's better to avoid them. In this case, fear serves a survival function in the face of a threatening environment. This means we become alert in the presence of a threat or danger that presents itself, which is expected. It wouldn't be healthy if we spent our lives "imprisoned" by fear, letting it dominate our actions negatively. But sometimes fear protects us.

Questions:

- Explain in your own words what we mean by emotions.
- Name and provide examples of different types of emotions.

II. How to Express Our Emotions in a Healthy Way

When an emotion is triggered, our focus shifts to the thoughts that sustain that emotion. If we continually dwell on those thoughts, we'll be strengthening that emotion. For instance, in certain situations, we might get angry, but we don't have to act impulsively in response to that anger, nor do we have to suppress it. There's the possibility of expressing it assertively. Let's remember what the Word of God says: "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). On the other hand, when we're hurt or disappointed, we can't avoid feeling sad. However, if that sadness persists over time, it can lead to anxiety, resentment, unforgiveness, and more. It's important that emotions don't control our lives. Being angry about something or feeling afraid is one thing, but living in a state of constant anger or deep sadness is something entirely different. God's Word tells us: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).

The way we manage our emotions can work for us or against us. The Bible encourages us to allow the Holy Spirit to fill our lives and control us. It goes even further saying: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). This means giving the Spirit the place and authority to work within us. When emotions dominate us, we lose the freedom to choose, and we become enslaved to various circumstances. We act impulsively and are guided by distorted and mistaken thoughts. This leads to conflict-ridden situations that cause problems in interpersonal

relationships. Recognizing our emotions enables self-awareness. Self-awareness is the ability to realize what's happening to us and what we're feeling, identifying our strengths, weaknesses, impulses, and emotions. It's about understanding how these things influence both us and others. If we hide our emotions, they'll turn toxic.

Eventually, those hidden emotions will surface unexpectedly at the least opportune moment, because concealed emotions aren't under control. To illustrate, think of cramming a bunch of clothes into a closet until, at a certain point, you open the door and everything spills out. Many people don't know how to explain what's happening to them. They experience emotional distress, but can't pinpoint the feeling. The Bible encourages us to examine ourselves in the light of God's Word and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "Each one should test their own actions..." (Galatians 6:4). It's very important to differentiate between the spiritual and the emotional.

Once, a person who had come from another denomination and joined our church expressed a deep sense of guilt, saying: "Pastor, I had a terrible week. I was spiritually very low. I had a lot of problems with my son and I didn't know how to solve them, I felt very weak." I responded, "I'm sorry to hear that, and I understand the situation. But tell me, what did you feel exactly? Did you stop wanting to attend church anymore? Or did you stop praying? Or did you stop reading the Bible? Or did you feel your faith dwindling? Or did you contemplate momentarily straying from the path of the Lord?" Interrupting me abruptly, she said, "No, Pastor. I didn't think any of those things at all; I would never turn away from God or the church." I explained to her that she hadn't been spiritually low at all; she had been emotionally affected due to the situation she was going through. I assured her that she shouldn't feel guilty about it. If her relationship with her son wasn't going well, there was no way she could feel differently.

In Jesus, we have a clear example. He didn't hide His emotions; He had no problem showing His mood and emotional distress. When our Lord went to pray on the Mount of Olives before His sentencing, the Bible states: "He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me'" (Matthew 26:37-38).

Here we clearly see that the Lord was deeply emotionally affected, yet, as we know, He committed no sin or mistakes. He was the God-Man. Sadness isn't a sign of weakness, nor does it necessarily indicate a spiritual problem. Jesus was never spiritually low.

There's a category of emotions mentioned in one of the earlier paragraphs – "anger." It's important not to confuse the idea of "freely expressing emotions" with anger. Special caution must be exercised when it comes to anger. It's not right to justify oneself by thinking, "I'm just a human being who lets their anger show." The Bible says, "In your anger do not sin" (Ephesians 4:26). When anger leads to violence, it becomes sin. The apostle Paul listed anger as a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:20, referring to excessive anger that unleashes violence. This type of anger isn't the healthy expression of emotions we've been discussing. Fear is another emotionally complex expression for some people within the Christian context. Many don't allow it to show, fearing it might be seen as a lack of faith or disbelief. Feeling fear isn't pleasant, but it's the reality of our humanity. God knows this, understands us, and doesn't condemn us. He helps us overcome it.

The case of the apostle Peter walking on water is a clear example that fear is a normal reaction we can experience. In Matthew 14:28-31, there's an account where Peter asked Jesus to allow him to walk on water, which he did. "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'" (Matthew 14:30-31). Notice that Jesus saved him directly, but didn't condemn him for feeling fear. The fear arose due to the strong wind, and Peter wasn't standing on solid ground; he was on the water. Jesus did address his lack of faith, but fear itself isn't something to feel guilty about. In conclusion, we can feel fear without feeling guilty, but we must not lose our faith.

Questions:

- How do emotions affect our daily lives?
- How do I know if I'm experiencing an emotional or spiritual issue?

III. How to Regulate Our Emotions

We've seen that we can't stop feeling emotions; they're a part of us. However, when they're negative, we shouldn't let them control us. They should be controlled

by the Holy Spirit. Emotions themselves can't be changed, but since emotion and thought are interconnected, changing our thoughts can help us regulate both our emotions and actions. Let's read what the Bible says: "...be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." (Romans 12:2). We have the ability to choose how to act in response to a particular event. This means we're responsible for choosing our responses, understanding that it's not situations that control us.

Sometimes, emotionally affected believers or those going through a state of depression, etc., express that they don't feel like attending church. How can we ensure that this emotional state doesn't dominate us? The answer lies in taking the responsibility to make spiritual decisions. In this case, the decision to attend worship services despite not feeling like it. Just as we go to work even when it's difficult due to a situation or circumstance we're facing. If we stop going to work, there will be serious economic consequences or we might lose our job, etc. Similarly in our Christian life, if we stop gathering, there will be spiritual consequences. How do I regulate my emotions? What does self-regulation involve? Self-regulation involves the ability to identify positive and negative feelings, controlling and directing emotions to benefit ourselves and those around us. It's about the ability to manage emotions, intensify the positive ones, and moderate the negative ones to achieve balance.

Questions:

- How can we ensure that our emotions are controlled by the Holy Spirit?
- What did the apostle Paul ask us to do in Romans 12:2?

Conclusion

Do I let myself be carried away by impulses and emotions? Do I allow the Holy Spirit to control my life? How do I regulate my emotions? It's important to understand how emotions function in order to identify, accept, comprehend, and change how we deal with them, enabling the development of emotional regulation skills. If we can identify thought patterns and then modify them, we'll be able to change how we feel. This way, we can approach each situation we face differently.



Think on This

Vivian Juárez (Guatemala)

Bible Study passages: Psalm 139:23-24; Proverbs 23:7; Jeremiah 17:9-10; Romans 12:1-3; Ephesians 4:17-23; Philippians 4:8; Hebrews 4:12

Memory Verse: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Philippians 4:8

Lesson Purpose: Discover the importance of examining our thoughts in the light of God’s truth, in order to identify those that need to be changed.

Introduction

Thoughts are information stored in our brain and are generated through stimuli that create connections between neurons. The processes of thought are still to some extent a mystery. Science continually invests efforts and resources to better understand the human mind. A study conducted by Julie Tseng and Jordan Poppenk at Queen’s University in Canada determined that humans have around 6,000 thoughts per day (<https://tendencias21.levante-emv.com/tenemos-mas-de-6-mil-pensamientos-al-dia.html>). Astonishing ... 6,000 each day! Imagine having a record of each of those thoughts. Thinking is considered a distinctive characteristic of humans, setting them apart from other living beings. This study reveals the great capacity of our brains to process information, even if it may go unnoticed consciously.

Many psychological studies focus on deciphering strategies that explain how we think, what thought patterns we have, and how to develop methods to change our way of thinking. Frequently, people turn to psychotherapy with the expectation of resolving conflicts caused by their thought patterns, or because their thoughts are generating anxiety, personal conflicts, conflicts with others, and a series of obstacles that prevent them from achieving their goals.

In Proverbs 23:6-7, the Bible provides an example that reveals the importance of thoughts. Using the example of a miserly person, it explains that more important than words are the intentions or thoughts behind those words: “Do not eat the food of a begrudging host, don’t crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of person who is always thinking about the cost. ‘Eat and drink,’ he says to you, but his heart isn’t with you.” This situation presents a challenge not only to evaluate how we interact with others, but also

to become more aware of whether our thoughts align with our words or actions, and determine if change is necessary.

I. How to Identify Our Thoughts and Challenge Them

An essential condition to identify our thoughts is to develop openness for self-exploration and self-awareness. Within psychology, there’s a concept known as “defense mechanisms,” referring to unconscious strategies our minds use to protect ourselves in complicated or crisis situations to maintain psychological equilibrium. While these mechanisms can shield us and prevent the situation from being devastating, they can also distance us from being aware of our reality, leading us to live in a state of avoidance or denial where circumstances are as we think and not as reality presents them.

During psychological intervention, a person might discover the strategies they’ve used to avoid facing their reality and begin adopting new coping strategies that allow them to coexist with their environment, feeling more secure and confident. Thus, it can be said that they would identify their thoughts and challenge them. Up to this point, it can be argued that through psychology, it’s possible to propose a solution to the need for change; however, the problem lies in human ability to identify thoughts that need to be changed. In light of this, in the book of Jeremiah, we find a passage that places us squarely before the greatest difficulty for a person on the path to self-discovery: “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.” (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Even as science advances in discoveries about how or how much we think, even as a psychotherapy process invites the exploration of our own thoughts, it's necessary to recognize that the condition of the human heart makes it unreliable. Selfishness, anxiety, lack of trust, or insecurity can manipulate thoughts and disguise them as ideas or beliefs that are difficult to recognize as false. When we allow the Lord to explore our hearts and guide that self-examination, He can reveal what needs to change, for at times He'll show us that we need to change aspects of our lives that have seemed positive so far, or that don't cause discomfort, or that we might even consider strengths.

King David acknowledged this in himself, and through one of his psalms, he asked God to be the one to reveal the quality of his thoughts: "Search me, God, and know my heart... Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there's any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (Psalm 139:23-24, emphasis added). Our greatest challenge is to accept that we might be wrong, that we might be thinking something incorrectly, that our mind and heart can deceive us, and that we need the Lord to clarify the intentions within us, allowing Him to guide us on this journey of exploring our thoughts in order to change those that are leading us away from Him or His purpose for our lives.

Questions:

- According to Jeremiah 17:9-10, why can't we rely on our heart to guide our actions?
- What are your thoughts on King David's prayer, asking God to examine and test his thoughts (Psalm 139:23-24)?

II. How to Change My Thoughts If They Are Negative?

There's a popular saying that goes, "Plant a thought and you'll harvest an action." The importance of our thoughts lies in how the way we think can affect the way we act and live. Many times, it's through a painful or uncomfortable thought that a person considers the possibility of change. A circumstance or life crisis suddenly opens the door inviting change, a process of personal self-examination. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can allow ourselves to start identifying distorted thoughts that prevent us from seeing or feeling as we truly are or as God sees us.

From a psychological perspective, when a negative thought is identified, it can be modified by exploring its foundation and the beliefs that support it, gradually discrediting it to replace it with one that generates well-being. This process is often an exhaustive exercise that, over time, allows the person to think differently and become less attached to the negative thought that was harming them. Again, the difficulty of this process lies in the fact that humans can deceive themselves, and as the proverb says, be wise in their own eyes (Proverbs 3:7). Therefore, it's essential that as Christians, we allow God to intervene in the process of changing our way of thinking.

In Romans, Paul exhorted us: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2). There's a risk in conforming to the ideas and criteria of the world and the society we live in. Christian values can be distorted or discredited, and if we don't engage in a transformation exercise, all those ideas could go unnoticed, affecting our way of living, our identity, and distancing us from the opportunity to experience and test God's good will for our lives.

In Romans 12:1, Paul made an appeal to the Romans, as an act of surrender, inviting them to offer their bodies as a sacrifice. This is a challenging alternative to the danger of conforming our lives to standards that focus more on ourselves or others' opinions than on what God thinks or wants. We need to take care of our thoughts. Not only identify them but also recognize the influences we're receiving: what we're seeing, reading, including in our conversations, or consuming through social media, and how we can take actions that distance us from potential risks and invite us to live a life of submission to God's will.

Though this might seem like a restriction of freedom or choice, Paul emphasized the result of transformation, showing the Romans that choosing this transformation process brought them closer to experiencing that which God wanted for them, and wants for us, which is pleasing and perfect (Romans 12:2). Finally, in Romans 12:3, Paul made a significant statement: "... Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment..." This is an invitation to take time for self-assessment, as our thoughts influence how we feel, and that leads us to actions that will have consequences for how we perceive ourselves and others.

What am I thinking about? What do my thoughts say about me? Where is the focus of my ideas? Is it on God or on myself? Only to the extent that we allow God to transform our minds and be the filter through which our negative thoughts pass, can we change them.

Questions:

- What's the greatest challenge we face in discerning which thoughts in our mind are negative and need changing (Proverbs 3:7)?
- In what areas of life do you consider it easier to conform to the world and forget the transformation God desires in us (Romans 12:2)?

III. How to Change My Thoughts If They Are False or Unhealthy?

The starting point for changing the way we think, as mentioned earlier, is to accept the possibility that we might be wrong. This action is a significant challenge for humans, since relying on our own judgment makes it difficult to consider another opinion. Thoughts need to be challenged; it's essential to analyze the process our mind goes through to draw conclusions or establish beliefs. It requires being questioned or confronted, carefully evaluating, in order to identify biases, prejudices, or limiting beliefs that shape our perception of reality. It's crucial to filter each thought through real evidence that supports or confirms that what we think aligns with what's truly happening or can happen.

How do we find the truth? Often, it will be challenging to go through this process on our own. It's important to recognize that to change, we need help – someone who invites us to change our perspective or expand it. This is because, as a result of past experiences, people develop learnings that determine how they think or approach reality. This is why having someone else's perspective, guiding us in transforming our false thoughts into true ones, allows us to identify what was wrong in our thinking.

Understanding that something is harmful or a lie isn't enough to change the mind. We need to help our brain generate new connections that allow it to modify an idea when confronted with a thought that needs changing. This will only be possible if we know the truth that contradicts the lie we've believed. A useful tool at this point is identifying thoughts that stem from generalizations or absolutes: "nobody loves me," "it will never change," "everything goes wrong for me," etc. Thoughts with these absolute characteristics often prevent us from

seeing necessary information to uncover the deception.

When considering seeking help, our minds might also intervene by suggesting people or places that won't challenge our way of thinking; hence, it's crucial that we carefully evaluate whose voice or advice we'll heed in the quest for truth. In Ephesians, Paul issued a warning about thoughts of vanity, ignorance, and a hardened heart (Ephesians 4:17-18), which result from living a life distant from God.

Though there may be many human strategies or techniques for changing the mind, as Christians, we must remember that we'll only find the truth through Jesus (Ephesians 4:20-21), that we need to shed our old nature to allow our minds to be renewed (Ephesians 4:22-23). Therefore, a crucial condition for the person who accompanies us in our renewal is that they're also guided by the light of God's truth.

An additional factor to consider in seeking a renewed mind is how vital it is to add daily devotional time to our routine. The best way to be prepared to overcome negative and erroneous thoughts is to have our minds filled with truth, dedicating time to learn it and store it in our hearts. If our foundation is correct, we'll respond with truth and be less susceptible to deception.

In Philippians 4:8, we find an invitation to cultivate in our minds that which is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, virtuous, and praiseworthy. These are useful criteria for evaluating everything we allow into our minds, helping us stay secure and focused on what God wants for us. Memorizing God's Word is an excellent resource for transforming our minds.

Questions:

- What should be the filter of our thoughts to be confident that they align with God's truth (Ephesians 4:17-23)?
- Why can memorizing the Bible help us guard the quality of our thoughts (Philippians 4:8)?

Conclusion

Our mind is constantly generating new thoughts. We need to be aware that many of them may be the product of deception, a distortion of the truth, or the result of misguided learning throughout our lives. We need God's guidance for the truth to rule our minds and hearts so that we can be renewed and transformed. Our thoughts affect how we act and live, so we must guard them.



Holistic Health: Both Mind and Body

Gabriela López (Mexico)

Bible Study passages: Matthew 9:35-38; Luke 4:18-19

Memory Verse: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the interrelationship between physical and mental health, and the impact of these on spiritual life, thus recognizing the wholeness of individuals.

Introduction

In 1946, the World Health Organization (WHO) defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (<https://www.who.int/about/faq/en/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CHealth%20is%20a%20state,of%20disease%20or%20infirmity%E2%80%9D>). This understanding has led to the realization that health goes beyond the visible; there’s a close relationship between the body and the mind. Therefore, we need to take care of emotional well-being and consider how it impacts physical health.

The WHO itself has advocated and promoted the integration of physical and mental health care, as experience has shown that there’s no health without optimal mental well-being. This involves recognizing that individuals are complete beings. Derived from the above, a correct definition of health should be understood as “a healthy state of well-being,” considering the entirety of a person—meaning the overall state of the body and mind.

Mental well-being cannot be separated from physical well-being. Physical and mental health and illness are essential aspects of life that are deeply interconnected. Various studies have highlighted this interrelationship, showing that severe physical illnesses influence the mental state of the affected individual and their family. Moreover, this topic has broader implications, as the importance of mental and physical health in the overall well-being of individuals, society, and nations has also been recognized.

I. The Interrelationship Between Physical and Mental Health

As previously mentioned, physical and mental health are closely related. Scientifically and in daily life, we

can observe that individuals suffering from an illness experience an impact on their mood, as there’s an evident loss for individuals: their health, their body, is diminished. Statistics reflect the impact of physical illnesses on mental health. For instance, it’s common for cancer patients to experience the following disorders: an anxious, depressive, or mixed adaptive disorder in 68% of cases. Major depression in 13% of patients. Delirium in 8% of cases (<https://www.observatoridiscapacitat.org/en/what-is-the-impact-of-mental-health-on-physical-health>).

On the other hand, mental health problems, often resulting in disorders, contribute to unfavorable changes in individuals’ immune systems, leading to physical illnesses. This is the case for individuals experiencing anxiety and depression. This has been linked to the idea that individuals with suboptimal emotional states don’t experience holistic development. Consequently, simple actions become challenging to carry out, such as maintaining a diet, exercising, adopting healthy habits, etc., which in the long run increase the likelihood of developing behaviors that worsen their physical health deficiencies.

Simultaneously, physical illness can exacerbate pre-existing depression and anxiety. The topic of mental health is currently an escalating concern. This is due to various factors such as societal, political, and healthcare system disinterest in this aspect of individuals, which isn’t as visible or tangible as physical illnesses. Nevertheless, conducted studies reveal alarming figures. The Spanish Observatory of Physical Disability has calculated that 46% of individuals with a mental disorder have a long-term physical problem. Similarly, the WHO predicted that “by 2020, depression will be the leading cause of disability globally.

Furthermore, there are various studies linking anxiety and depression to increased risk of death from cardiovascular disease and cancer” (<https://www.observatoridiscapacitat.org/en/what-is-the-impact-of-mental-health-on-physical-health>).

These levels of impact between physical and mental health have become highly evident in several societies worldwide, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. This virus has claimed the lives of over 7 million people around the world. However, the toll on mental health is also significant. Factors such as the fear of contracting the highly lethal virus, confinement, and social isolation have contributed to symptoms like hopelessness, irritability, changes in appetite, and sleep disturbances (<https://www.sepsiq.org/file/InformacionSM/SEP%20COVID19-Salud%20Mental%20Cuarentena.pdf>).

Other studies examining the psychological impact of quarantine have found negative psychological effects, symptoms of post-traumatic stress, confusion, and anger. Stressors include the longer duration of quarantine, fear of infection, frustration, boredom, inadequate supplies, insufficient information, financial losses, and stigma ([https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30460-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30460-8/fulltext)). What we’re experiencing with this pandemic clearly illustrates the impact of physical illness on mental health, generating a fragile emotional state that further deteriorates physical health.

Questions:

- How do physical and mental health interrelate?
- How do you observe that the pandemic has impacted people’s health in every part?

II. Holistic Health from a Biblical Perspective

The work of every Christian to share the Good News of salvation carries with it a much broader task; it requires expanding God’s kingdom on Earth, meaning that we must actively preach the gospel of Christ, addressing the immediate needs of our communities with a view to social transformation.

Therefore, discussing the topic of health is closely related to God’s integral mission, which involves the local church’s response to people’s physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs (as mentioned previously: addiction, homelessness, domestic and child violence, etc.), always exalting the name of God and His purpose for their lives.

A biblical passage that demonstrates the Christian’s attitude in their community can be found in Matthew

9:35-38. This passage highlights several actions Jesus Christ took to fulfill His mission in the world. In verse 36, we read: “When he saw the crowds...”. As Jesus traveled through cities and villages, He saw people’s needs—various needs: physical, emotional, spiritual (the helpless, the poor, sinners, the immoral, perversion, etc.). The Greek term here is related to the verb *Blepo*, which translates as “to see,” signifying observation to perceive events that are apparent. It’s defined as: “primarily, to have sight, to see; then, to observe, discern, perceive” (Vine, W. Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words. Spain: CLIE, 1984, p.15). Verse 35 relates directly to our topic: “...and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” This healing pertains to physical well-being and beyond; the Greek term *Therapeuo* implies service, restoring to health (https://www.academia.edu/39763857/vine_dictionary_of_new_testament_words), involving a caregiving process, treatment of individuals until their recovery. This is where we can observe wholeness of health; it’s not merely a reference to the physical realm but an accompaniment of the sick, regardless of their condition, including their minds, until recovery. Recognizing that these are processes; it’s not a single act of disease eradication. Of course, faith in God for miraculous acts of healing remains (Luke 1:37).

This view of the totality and wholeness of individuals is reaffirmed in the passage from I Thessalonians 5:23, which states: “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Here, the apostle Paul speaks of the three-dimensional nature of individuals: spirit, soul, and body.

Questions:

- According to Matthew 9:35-38, what actions did Jesus Christ take related to our topic?
- How can we implement the actions of Jesus Christ in our communities today? (Reflect on responses we can offer to people with different illnesses.)

III. Response to the lack of complete or holistic health

The example of Jesus Christ and the wholeness of His mission is an invitation for every Christian to care for their own health comprehensively and also extend that care to others. The response cannot be limited to traditional spirituality, which tends to, at best, not understand the realm of mental and emotional health.

Or at worst, condemn attitudes of discouragement in the face of physical illnesses. In the case of mental illnesses alone, they might be condemned and accused. However, the experience of God's grace and forgiveness will undoubtedly positively affect an individual's psychological, physical, and social well-being, among other dimensions of human health.

The Gospel of the Kingdom that Jesus Christ preached and lived embodies unique characteristics. He expressed these when declaring the fulfillment of messianic promises found in Isaiah. He proclaimed that the time was fulfilled and that the Kingdom was present in His own person: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). The Kingdom of God is a blessing for humanity in all aspects, revealing God's redemptive purpose for all nations. Jesus Christ was entirely inclusive, breaking barriers and establishing a new order through Himself and the transmission of His Kingdom until the end of time.

Following in the footsteps of Jesus as Christians means, among other things, giving paramount attention to those in need, particularly the sick. As mentioned, the number of individuals suffering from physical, mental, and related conditions is extensive. Consequently, the work of Christians and churches should be intentional. It's of utmost value to engage with sick individuals and provide various tools, not only medical but also therapeutic, in addition to spiritual care.

This topic has been addressed by various Christian groups, as it was in the case of the Holistic Mission Thematic Group of the 2004 Lausanne World Evangelization Forum. This group explicitly included mental health as part of integral mission, stating the following: "Holistic mission is the mission directed toward meeting basic human needs, which include the need for God, but also the need for food, love, shelter, clothing, physical and mental health, and a sense of human dignity" (<https://lausanne.org/content/holistic-mission-lop-33>).

Furthermore, it has been observed that global mental health problems, besides being frequent and debilitating, often face a treatment gap. Globally, fewer than 50 percent of people in need of mental health treatment receive it (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47545251_Reducing_the_treatment_gap_for_mental_disorders_A_WPA_survey). The efforts

should be directed towards timely and specialized care. Promoting or condemning real ailments in individuals, whether mental, physical, or both, should be set aside. Stigmatizing or accusatory religious discourses that undermine people's well-being must be avoided.

We must return to the Bible and recall the ministry of Jesus Christ, one of holistic healing, where the experience of grace and forgiveness will always positively affect individuals' psychological well-being. Today, as Christians and the Church, it's fitting to use tools, skills, and professions dedicated to a multitude of psycho-emotional, mental, and physical conditions, which are becoming increasingly multidisciplinary.

The impact would be even greater if specialized care were to be provided by Christian professionals who allow themselves to be used as instruments in God's hands for the complete restoration of individuals. The ministry of Jesus Christ serves as a clear example that we should provide holistic responses. If all the needs of individuals aren't met, the spiritual impact won't be enduring. This is because if there are illnesses that diminish morale, listening, and attention, there will be little interest in seeking a holistic response in God.

Therefore, the impact of mental and emotional health will enable a more liberated experience of spirituality (for instance, with less fear, compulsion, or obsession). It will also allow individuals to verbally and authentically express it, as it won't be limited by mental and emotional illness. This will help guide people towards finding abundant life.

Questions:

- If you know, name the type of care you can provide to individuals with physical and mental illnesses, and institutions or individuals you can refer to for care.
- What kind of attitude and responses can we, as Christians, have towards individuals with mental conditions?

Conclusion

When sharing the gospel, we must consider that at times, we need to broaden our approaches and guide people towards effective therapeutic treatments for both the body and mind. Therefore, it's important to prioritize mental health in Christian practice and think about ministerial responses.



How to Avoid Addictions

Natalia Pesado (USA)

Bible Study passages: Jeremiah 17:14; Matthew 11:28-29; John 14:27; James 5:15-16

Memory Verse: “‘I have the right to do anything,’ you say—but not everything is beneficial. I have the right to do anything—but I won’t be mastered by anything” | Corinthians 6:12.

Lesson Purpose: To reflect on what God tells us about what’s best for us, His sons and daughters, and how to avoid falling into chains of addiction.

Introduction

Today, we have a lot of information about addictions and how they affect the brain. For this reason, we can recognize more strategies to know how to avoid addiction and also how to help a loved one who is struggling with addiction. In our lesson today, we’ll reflect on biblical passages that can help us manage addiction.

I. What is an Addiction?

An addiction can be defined as a “chronic dysfunction of the brain’s reward, motivation, and memory functions” (<https://www.healthline.com/health/addiction>). Addiction produces changes in the way the brain functions, causing the person to focus on obtaining pleasure through a specific substance or behavior (such as shopping/spending, sexual images or acts, gambling, etc.). A person with an addiction problem is “unable to avoid the substance or stop the addictive behavior; lacks self-control; experiences an increased craving for the substance or behavior; disregards how their behavior causes problems; cannot emotionally respond to the situation” (<https://www.healthline.com/health/addiction>).

Over time, an addiction can lead to a radical change in behavior and cause the person to function in a completely different way than before (<https://www.healthline.com/health/addiction>). Changes can occur on many levels of the way a person functions: there may be emotional changes including anger, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, thoughts of suicide, and/or obsession with the world (for example: thoughts of persecution by the government, police, drug dealers, etc.); distrust of other people (for example: unrealistic thoughts about spousal infidelity, feeling judged by coworkers or schoolmates); and disillusionment with the future (for example: negative thoughts about their goals and future happiness).

Regarding daily performance, the person may stop grooming themselves daily; cease attending work or school; stop spending time with family and friends; cease physical exercise and stop performing daily tasks (cooking, cleaning, caring for children, paying bills, grocery shopping, etc.).

On a social level, we can conclude that a person struggling with the symptoms described above will experience severe consequences in their social relationships: detachment from family and friends; serious conflicts with loved ones due to the economic and emotional consequences of addiction, and the apparent lack of positive change in the addicted person; and finally, a certain detachment from society at large due to not engaging in socially healthy activities or experiencing problems with incarceration or bankruptcy.

At a physical level, there can also be changes in health deterioration. As mentioned earlier, the brain can change its way of functioning and lose certain functions for regulating emotions and making good decisions (this is specific to substance addictions). But in general, an addiction to illicit sex can also cause sexually transmitted diseases or symptoms related to such diseases.

Lastly, at a spiritual level, addiction can lead to a rupture in the Christian’s communion with God, as the source of the addiction takes the central place that belongs to God. By replacing a holy God of love with something else at the center of life, the result is always destruction. This is because only God guides us for our good and to give us life, and everything else leads us to death.

Questions:

- How would you define an addiction?
- What aspect of the different areas of life that can be affected by addiction caught your attention?

II. What Does God's Word Say About Addictions?

In His Word, God provides guidance for us to live our lives here on earth with proper care, to avoid becoming tied or chained to something that ultimately leads to our destruction. In our memory verse for today, we read that the apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Corinth and advised them on how to care for their bodies to bring glory to God. In biblical times, the city of Corinth was situated in a geographically central location, serving as an intermediate passage between the Asian and Roman markets (<http://helpmewithbiblestudy.org/16History/CityCorinth.aspx>). We see that the city mentioned was composed of people from diverse cultural backgrounds and had access to a variety of novelties since they were the center of trade. Religious worship in the city was centered around the goddess Aphrodite and excessive sexuality (<http://helpmewithbiblestudy.org/16History/CityCorinth.aspx>). For these reasons, their pastor Paul advised the Corinthian Christians to be careful about what they chose to engage in to avoid falling into an addiction that could take control of their lives.

We can conclude that in our current time, with global access to the internet, increased internet interactions (such as social media), and access to economic resources (such as credit cards), we must also take proper care not to chain our lives to a false god. God also assures us that in Him, we can find what our hearts seek in times of need, thus avoiding filling any void with an addiction. In John 14:27, we read the words of our teacher Jesus: "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."

Stress is a part of the human experience; however, there are moments when the level of stress can be very intense, such as during marital crises, a spouse's or child's illness or abuse, job loss and/or economic need, the death of a family member, conflicts at work or in the neighborhood or church community, wars or governmental instability, a global pandemic, etc. In these moments, a weakness or temptation may develop to seek immediate relief from stress by consuming alcohol, drugs, watching pornography, engaging in excessive spending, overeating, etc. Nevertheless, we read in Matthew 11:28-29, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I'm gentle and humble in heart, and you'll find rest for your souls." In this passage, Jesus invites us to find rest in Him when we're struggling with stress, providing healthy and effective relief that doesn't chain

us to self-destruction, but revitalizes us to move forward with new strength and courage.

Questions:

- What do you think about the importance of managing stress to avoid falling into addiction?
- Share another Bible passage that has helped you in moments of emotional intensity in your life.

III. What Can We Do to Avoid Addiction?

An important key to avoiding the development of an addiction is self-awareness and knowing which situations may tempt us more than others. For example, there may be people who aren't at all interested in excessive spending, so they probably won't be drawn to frequent shopping or abusing credit cards. Similarly, there may be people who have no interest in alcohol, who completely dislike its taste or smell, so they wouldn't even want to try it. However, neurological studies show that certain brains may be more susceptible to certain addictions than others, such as alcohol or engaging in risky behaviors (extramarital sex, excessive spending, etc.). Therefore, it's crucial to be vigilant and frequently analyze whether any behavior or practice is becoming an unhealthy habit and immediately avoid it. In these situations, it can be said, "It's better to have wings like a dove than teeth like a lion" (author unknown).

Next, we have some very useful guidelines to put into practice:

- Understand how addiction develops:** Substance abuse begins by using addictive drugs (whether illegal or prescribed by a doctor) for recreation, seeking intoxication every time they're used, and misusing prescription medicine.
- Avoid temptation and peer pressure:** Develop healthy friendships and relationships, avoiding friends or family members who pressure you to use substances. It's often said, "Show me your friends, and I'll show you your future," which means that it's challenging not to copy the behaviors of the people around us, as our brains work that way. They're designed to learn through imitation (just like babies learn to speak, use the bathroom, eat with utensils, etc., by observing those around them).
- Seek help for emotional issues:** Mental health problems and substance abuse often go hand in hand. If you have a mental illness like anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, seek professional help. A therapist or counselor can provide techniques to alleviate your symptoms without using drugs or alcohol.

d. Examine risk factors: You can explore your family history regarding mental health or addiction issues. Many studies have shown that illness tends to be inherited within families and can be prevented. The more you know about your biological, environmental, and physical risk factors, the more likely you are to overcome them.

e. Maintain a well-balanced life: People often turn to drugs and alcohol when something is missing or failing in their lives. Practicing stress management techniques can help you overcome life's challenges and lead a happy and balanced life.

f. Develop goals and dreams for your future: These will help you focus on what you want and realize that addiction is an obstacle preventing you from achieving your goals. (<https://www.pvamu.edu/sa/drug-and-alcohol-abuse-prevention-program-daapp/tips-for-preventing-substance-abuse/>).

Questions:

- Which key or technique to avoid addiction stood out to you the most? Why?
- What spiritual disciplines can help Christians stand firm in the face of potential addiction?

IV. How Can We Help Others with Their Addiction?

A vital aspect of knowing how to handle addiction is also understanding how to assist another person in our social circle who may be struggling with an addiction. Some techniques to keep in mind are as follows: it's necessary to have compassion, don't criticize or shame, expect difficulties, don't anticipate immediate changes, educate yourself, don't enable the loved one's addiction, seek therapy or counseling, don't be manipulated, take care of yourself, respect the loved one's privacy (<https://7summitpathways.com/blog/help-someone-with-addiction/>).

This list of ideas can help us navigate this relationship with the grace that only God can provide, avoiding falling into despair when witnessing a loved one's suffering, and enabling us to stay strong in our personal lives and care. As just described, it's essential to be wise and "not enable the loved one's addiction," since this dynamic frequently occurs in addiction situations. An example of how this dynamic unfolds might be giving money to a loved one to buy drugs. The initial thought might be that giving money prevents the loved one from stealing to buy drugs, and by providing money, we seemingly avoid them encountering legal problems.

However upon deeper analysis, we can conclude that giving money to the loved one is simply creating a cycle of codependency where the person providing money is using their earnings to buy the drug. By preventing the loved one from facing the consequences of the legal system, unfortunately, we're promoting their continued drug purchases and the intensification of their addiction.

Another example could be a spouse lying about a partner's sexual addictions, making excuses to family and/or friends for their absence. A spouse who keeps the partner's excessive debts secret. In these cases, it may initially seem that social embarrassment is being prevented; however on a deeper level, promoting the partner's involvement in addictive behaviors is taking place. By lying or concealing, a codependent chain is once again formed where a healthy family member ends up suffering many of the consequences of the addiction.

In these situations, it's of vital importance to seek spiritual and professional support to make wise decisions that provide emotional support to the addicted person, but don't unintentionally promote their addiction. Sometimes, it's necessary to have a serious conversation with the person and risk their initial anger, trusting that this is the true way out of the addiction situation. In Jeremiah 17:14, we can read a prayer for healing: "Heal me, Lord, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." We also read in James 5:15-16: "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."

Questions:

- Write down two ideas to help others with their addiction.
- How can we avoid falling into codependency with others and their addiction?

Conclusion

The addictions that can chain a human being are diverse, and they will require emotional, spiritual, social, and medical support. However, we must never forget God and His supernatural power to guide us and give us the strength to help others and/or ourselves overcome such situations. As we learned from our memory verse, the best strategy is to decide to avoid anything that could chain us; living wisely is a characteristic of God's children.



Prevention of Mental Illness

Laura López (Mexico)

Biblical passage for study: Matthew 4:23-25

Memory Verse: “Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” Proverbs 4:23.

Lesson Purpose: To recognize the main characteristics of mental illnesses in order to prevent and address them.

Introduction

Mental illnesses affect the mood, thoughts, and behavior of those who suffer from them. They cause pain and despair in individuals, their families, and friends. These illnesses deteriorate their quality of life by diminishing their abilities to take care of themselves and actively engage in studies, work, and social interactions. This puts the person in a cycle of isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, these conditions carry a social stigma that leads to discrimination and rejection, impacting the self-esteem of those who experience them. They're marginalized, discredited, and socially devalued. Mental illnesses are a concerning reality for 21st-century society. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 450 million people worldwide suffer from them. Among the most painful consequences, approximately one million people commit suicide each year, especially in the age group of 15 to 29 years old, causing suffering and guilt for the family and friends of the deceased, along with enduring disruptions in family and social dynamics (https://www.who.int/mental_health/advocacy/en/spanish_final.pdf).

The extent of this issue is evident in the rise in the number of people with mental health issues living in poverty and homelessness in metropolitan areas around the world. Risk factors for mental illness include addictions, as high levels of alcohol, tobacco, and drug consumption lead to dependency disorders, resulting in impaired thinking processes, emotions, and behavior of consumers. Additionally, they harm family, work, and friendship relationships, leading to isolation and lack of social support to prevent the worsening of mental illness due to substance abuse.

It's important to know that mental illnesses can manifest in anyone at any stage of life. Therefore, it's likely that at some point, we'll interact with someone who suffers from them, or even ourselves might be prone to developing them due to genetic inheritance, exposure to stressful situations, childhood traumas, neurochemical factors, brain injuries, or loneliness. Moreover, prolonged conflicts such as wars, domestic and social violence, and even the COVID-19 confinement, have left emotional scars on people worldwide, resulting in various forms of emotional disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, eating disorders, personality disorders, and mood disorders like anxiety, depression, or psychoses like schizophrenia.

As Christians, we must act with love and compassion and share the message of hope of the gospel of Christ with those living in these circumstances so they can access the resources provided by the Lord through the presence of the Holy Spirit. We should also accompany them in their situations, provide pastoral care, love, and acceptance from the family of faith: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36).

I. What are Mental Illnesses?

Mental disorders can affect individuals of all ages, occupations, educational levels, and social conditions. To identify them, we need a clear definition to help us understand them. They're emotional or behavioral difficulties or disturbances that cause suffering or harm to the individual experiencing them and to their environment. Thus, professional intervention is required to reduce potential conflicts, alleviate personal or familial pain, and contain their consequences.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that one in four families lives with someone who has a mental illness or behavioral disorder (https://www.who.int/mental_health/advocacy/en/spanish_final.pdf).

If not professionally addressed, it can result in severe outcomes, such as temporary or permanent inability to function in society. The consequences of mental illness aren't uniform, and often go undetected. Consequently, the individual might be unaware that they're suffering from it. Efforts to continue with regular activities without support can drain their emotional and financial resources. Mental illnesses can be temporary or permanent and should be diagnosed by doctors who are psychiatrists, who will determine whether medication is necessary. In some cases, receiving psychological help might be sufficient. As part of psychiatric treatment, attending psychotherapy to understand the disorder's manifestations, mitigate catastrophic feelings and thoughts, and recognize changes in mood can be recommended. This helps develop skills to manage these challenges. The affected person must learn to cope with or reverse them in some cases.

We believe that the Lord can intervene supernaturally and heal those with mental disorders, transforming their lives. However, we must pray, seeking divine manifestation for our requests so that the Father's name might be glorified (John 5:14, 14:13). In consistency with this, we see in the Bible that during His ministry, Jesus healed all types of illnesses and performed great miracles (Matthew 4:23, 9:35-36; Luke 4:40). He identified with those who suffered and intervened to free them from sin and pain (Matthew 8:17).

Following our Lord's example, we're called to pray for the afflicted to receive healing. Therefore, we must turn to the community of faith to offer hope and spiritual support to individuals dealing with these disorders. This way, they can find the help they need in salvation and grow in faith through means of grace. 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" (James 5:14-16).

Furthermore, the Church of the Nazarene Manual states: "We believe in the doctrine of divine healing and urge our people to offer the prayer of faith for the healing of the sick. We also believe that God heals through medical science" (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p. 28). Therefore, we must

appeal to all the ways that God provides to improve our lives, recognizing that His presence manifests with power and glory in all of them.

Questions:

- Based on the lesson, write down the definition of mental illness.
- How can we pray for people who suffer from a mental illness (James 5:14-16)?

II. How to Identify Signs of Mental Illness in a Loved One

We need to learn about the main signs and symptoms of mental and behavioral disorders in order to prevent and identify them in early stages, both in ourselves and in our loved ones, to minimize their impact on balance, satisfaction, and enjoyment of life. Since the range of emotional and behavioral disorders is extensive, it's important to stay attentive to changes in mood, behavior, concentration, eating patterns, disconnection from reality, isolation from family and friends, catastrophic thoughts, and aggressive behavior. In response to this, we should act and seek help to address the situation with an attitude of trust and rest, knowing that the Lord promised to support us in all circumstances of our lives (Matthew 11:29-30).

We need to take preventative measures to avoid the development or worsening of physical illnesses and attend medical appointments for routine health check-ups. Similarly, we must educate ourselves about mental hygiene measures. These will help prevent or delay mental illness and improve our quality and quantity of life. These measures include maintaining a healthy diet and getting enough rest, setting goals and projects that motivate us, regulating our thoughts, maintaining social and family support networks, engaging in regular physical activity, improving our coping skills for life's situations and changes, strengthening our relationships with others in the contexts we engage in, and healing our hearts through forgiveness (Romans 12:18-19).

A good start to preventing mental illness is recognizing the characteristics of the environments we're in: neighborhoods, families, churches, schools, workplaces, and recreational settings. This helps ensure that the stress levels we're exposed to don't exceed our capacity to respond to life's demands. We must trust in the fruit of the Holy Spirit to sustain us through life's challenges (Galatians 5:22-23).

Seeking both spiritual and professional help is also necessary to manage the consequences of trauma, abuse, violence, addictions, or behaviors resulting from constant interaction with alcoholics or drug addicts, as these can lead to neurosis and codependency. The Word of God provides resources to heal emotions; the most important being salvation, which grants us access to a close and caring relationship with the Lord (John 1:12), strengthened through maintaining a strong devotional life to maintain inner peace (John 14:27; Colossians 1:11-14).

Questions:

- What types of behaviors should we look out for in order to prevent mental illness?
- What resources does the Word of God provide for healing emotions (John 1:12, 14:27; Colossians 1:11-14)?

III. How to Manage Mental Illness in a Loved One

If you suspect a mental illness in a family member or yourself, it's important to consult with a doctor. They can refer you to the appropriate mental health professional to address the present symptoms and prevent their escalation. These interventions for evaluation, diagnosis, and, if necessary, prescription of medication to improve the patient's quality of life, as well as recommending psychotherapeutic treatment to alleviate emotional distress, increase daily functioning, and develop interpersonal skills.

When dealing with the complexities that emotional and behavioral disorders present for those experiencing them, it's important to recognize the hope provided by the Christian faith. This faith encourages us to trust in Jesus' victory on the cross to free us from the yoke of sin and death, providing us with peace and hope that His presence will always accompany us, as His coming is near (Romans 8:1-2; 2 Corinthians 3:17). Additionally, the Lord exhorts us to rest and cast our anxieties and worries upon Him, for He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). Recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) for managing emotional illnesses include maintaining daily routines for sleep and rest, personal hygiene, defining eating schedules, exercising, and allowing time for healthy recreation (<https://www.who.int/es/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome-mental-health>).

Seeking treatment and therapy, joining support groups, learning about the condition, maintaining spiritual life, and committing to the Christian faith are also important. Our congregations should be spaces that integrate faith and Christian communion for those suffering from emotional distress, inspiring them to practice spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, worship, and fasting. These practices help them recognize that the Spirit of God is present in the lives of families dealing with emotional health issues (Romans 8:26).

We shouldn't forget to support the professional, familial, or church caregivers of those with mental disorders. Constantly attending to the needs of others can take a physical and emotional toll, leading to uncertainty, sadness, physical and mental fatigue, distress, pain, and an overwhelming burden of responsibilities. Caregivers need to recognize their limits and needs, seeking help when necessary, enhancing their capacities to approach potential sources of support, resting, engaging in recreational activities, and caring for their physical, mental, and especially spiritual health.

Additionally, we need to strengthen our capacities for effective pastoral care and discipleship to address the challenges emotional disorders present for faith. Ultimately, guide those in need to find courage, power, love, and self-discipline to persevere in the Christian life (2 Timothy 1:7).

Questions:

- What does the intervention of a mental health professional consist of in addressing emotional disorders?
- How can the practice of spiritual disciplines help cope with mental illness?

Conclusion

Our congregations should be spaces of love, hope, and victory (2 Corinthians 2:14), promoting holistic well-being: spiritually, physically, and emotionally. To achieve this, we must start by recognizing the importance of preventing emotional disorders and responding to the pleas for help from those burdened by the distress this condition generates.



A Shared Responsibility

Carmen Gómez Orellana (Ecuador)

Bible Study passages: Deuteronomy 6:5-7, 11:19; Proverbs 22:6

Memory Verse: “Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he won’t depart from it” Proverbs 22:6.

Lesson Purpose: To provide guidelines for raising emotionally healthy children.

Introduction

The foundation of emotional stability in raising children is the family. The role of parents is crucial in the holistic upbringing of children at every stage of their development, requiring care and love. It’s a challenge for each parent to educate their children with the aim of fostering their emotional well-being. Despite the negative influences that the social environment may present, the education and value formation provided at home by those responsible for their upbringing will empower their path and development at every stage of their lives. This upbringing will be instrumental in the decisions they will have to make in their life’s journey.

According to the biblical family structure, the education of children during their early years was entrusted to the mother, who breastfed them and taught them their first steps. Fathers imparted the elements of moral education: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and don’t forsake your mother’s teaching” (Proverbs 1:8); and it also states: “My son, keep your father’s command and don’t forsake your mother’s teaching” (Proverbs 6:20).

The involvement of both parents in shaping their children’s lives was of utmost importance. Once the child transitioned from infancy, the primary responsibility shifted to the father, who was in charge of religious and professional education. Oral teaching held great significance. In Exodus 10:2, the Lord commanded Moses to recount the wonders of God: “and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians and how I performed my signs among them, and that you may know that I’m the Lord.” Additionally, in Exodus 12:24-27, during the institution of the Passover, God said: “Observe this rite as a statute for you and for your sons forever. And when you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this service. And when your children say to you, ‘What

do you mean by this service?’ you shall say...”

These biblical passages illustrate that children are to be nurtured and developed within a relational context. Teaching was shared orally and, secondarily, in written form. Deuteronomy 6:9 states: “Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.” Parents transferred religious and moral traditions, as well as divine laws given to their forefathers, to their children.

Instruction is a theme emphasized in the Bible on multiple occasions. God’s commands involve personal growth, transformation, and constantly guiding His children into a relationship with Him, wherever they may be. It’s a daily commitment to personal growth, health, and guidance that should be passed on to one’s children. Parents are meant to be alongside their children in everyday circumstances, thus transferring special values through patient and loving interactions. Regarding the concept of “education,”: According to Lázaro Valdés, it involves “training aimed at developing the intellectual, moral, and emotional capacities of individuals according to the culture and norms of coexistence of the society to which they belong. Early childhood constitutes a fundamental stage in the process of personality development and formation” (Valdés, Lázaro. *Educación infantil*. Spain: Editorial Pueblo y Educación, 2016, p.16).

I. What does raising emotionally healthy children mean?

Child-rearing refers to the act and consequence of nurturing, caring for, feeding, and educating a living being, or producing and developing something. The concept is usually applied to the task carried out by parents or guardians during a child’s early years (Perez, Julian. *Crianza*. Spain: Liberabit, 2017, p.17). When delving into the book of Proverbs about raising children, the Devotional Bible comments that “parents who don’t discipline their children run the risk of ruining them.”

The entire book is cast in the form of a father's words to his child, teaching them the "facts of life" (Devotional Bible. USA: SBL, 1986, p.86).

Teaching principles and life values will help the child achieve balanced mental health. Building on the biblical passage from Proverbs 22:6, which states, "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they're old they won't turn from it," early instruction is emphasized. The word "train" carries a special emphasis: it's initiating education so that the child learns and gains appropriate information, contributing to the formation of their character.

Who is called to fulfill this role? Parents, who despite being first-timers (a term applied when a couple experiences parenthood for the first time) and maybe haven't attended parenting workshops, possess love to care for, nurture, change nappies, sacrifice sleep hours to attend to them, care for them, sing lullabies to them, etc.; these elements provide security to the children. When parents are present, they actively participate in child care, including stimulation and upbringing.

Both paternal and maternal figures are important in the home; they're sources of support and security in a child's development, allowing them to acquire greater autonomy and independence. Parents must be consistent in what they say and do. One situation that wounds a child's heart is the lack of consistency when words don't align with actions, or promises are made and not fulfilled.

An important detail to consider is that sometimes parents themselves aren't willing to fulfill their promises. Therefore, it takes courage to responsibly fulfill what's promised. In Proverbs 20:7, the consideration of being good parents is evident, as the verse states: "The righteous lead blameless lives; blessed are their children after them." If there's consistency in the home between what's said and what the parents live out, they will provide valuable teaching and contribute to their children's emotional development. In such a household, the child will feel secure knowing they're part of a family that cares for them, guides them, educates them, and lives in coherence with its teachings.

Questions:

- What is the emphasis of Proverbs 22:6?
- Who is called to fulfill the role of emotionally healthy child-rearing?

II. What does raising emotionally healthy children entail?

The writer of the Book of Proverbs, while emphasizing teaching, used the Hebrew word *chanak*, present four times in the Old Testament, which refers to "dedicate or consecrate" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible. USA: CNP, 1980, p.143). Parents must take on the task of being consistent in their children's education. Time invested in teaching is crucial; the combination of quality and quantity of time shared will make a significant difference.

Parents must be clear about which assertive rules they will establish for daily education with their children. Parents who assume their role and responsibility must consider how both parents will participate in decision-making and the exercise of their authority. This clarity is essential for them as guides, as well as for those receiving these transferred values – in this case, the children. It's not about assuming but about clearly establishing the path they will take to support and strengthen their children's lives.

When establishing rules, it doesn't mean creating fear or intimidation; rather, it's about building skills, attitudes of obedience, and respect. Part of parents' responsibility is to observe, evaluate, and value the process that will contribute to the formation. As Clarke mentions: "Therefore, first of all, dedicate your child to God; raise them, teach them as children of God whom He has entrusted to your care" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible. USA: CNP, 1980). This is a functional, proactive, and participatory dynamic.

Every instructive rule established during childhood as an educational process should be updated. This means that each rule should lead to an objective. Once this objective is met, the next one will introduce new agreements and procedures. For this reason, parents must manage this process flexibly but firmly, based on the needs and stages their children are going through. This updating is necessary so that children receive answers focused on their life's journey. Parents must not neglect their responsibility; instead, they should be *chanak* parents (dedicated and consecrated parents) for this noble daily task.

Questions:

- Do you believe that as a church, we're preparing parents for raising children? Share your thoughts.
- What can you do to contribute to raising emotionally healthy children?

III. Recommendations for raising emotionally healthy children

The home is the most appropriate place for teaching and instructing children. In Deuteronomy 11:19, says: "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Here, an obedience command is emphasized. Therefore, every parent must play their paternal role responsibly. To do this, they must observe certain essential points of strengthening that influence the construction of their children's life projects. Let's explore these points:

- Potential external dangers that negatively impact their lives must be neutralized in a timely manner, such as undisciplined behavior, loss of respect for parents, indifference to the external organization of their home, and/or abandoning their studies, among others.
- Allocate significant time for them, both in terms of quality and quantity.
- Instruction and education are the responsibility of parents; it's not the competence of educational institutions. The latter are responsible for academic training.
- Parental authority within the home is shared in all areas.
- Demonstrate unconditional love: when expressing corrective guidance, avoid blaming, criticizing, or seeking faults.
- Loving your children involves preventing them from engaging in negative actions, inappropriate behaviors that can have unfavorable consequences for their life's development.
- Communication should be assertive. For this, parents should consider initiating a dialogue and understanding their needs, not to reprimand them. What kind of questions open the path to dialogue? For example: "How was your day at school? What did you enjoy doing today?" These questions build a space of trust and fluid dialogue. Children can identify when a parent is prying, and they may feel that certain probing questions could lead to punishment, such as: "Did you study? Did you take a shower? How did you behave?"
- Parents must observe, evaluate, and value the educational processes and development of their children; establish assertive rules; maintain an open and ongoing dialogue with them.
- Set consistent discipline boundaries that help the child reflect and consider that they're being attended to and protected from influences that may negatively affect

them in various situations they encounter daily.

- Foster children's self-esteem at each stage of their lives, encourage them to engage in activities beyond their comfort zone; cultivate a mindset of mental confidence, not comparing themselves to others.
- Acknowledge the effort and determination a child puts into achieving their goals and objectives; this will help strengthen the relationship bond with their parents.
- The education of children provides a positive foundation for their spiritual growth and character development.
- Parents must be aware of their limitations and recognize their strengths, which support and manage the upbringing of their children.
- They should focus on areas that require more attention and present weaknesses. Therefore, parents must be keen observers and attend to each child promptly, as each has a distinct character and temperament that places them in an independent scenario from their siblings.
- Care for and guide children in their faith life by being examples first. We observe that raising emotionally healthy children involves wisely attending to each process and stage of their lives, guiding them in the formation of their character, and aiding in the construction of their life's project. It's a process of family support and empowerment.

Parents must be focused on their responsibility in raising their children. With the help of God, the family is the foundation of emotional stability. Education and value formation will empower their path in each stage of their life. To fulfill this role, parents are responsible for transferring Christian life principles through patient and loving interactions.

Questions:

- What is the most suitable place for teaching children according to Deuteronomy 11:19?
- Write down three recommendations mentioned in the lesson that influence the development of a life project.
- How can you apply this teaching in your home?

Conclusion

The combination of the quality and quantity of time that parents share with their children will make a difference in their upbringing. Responsible action from parents to love their children is about preventing them from engaging in negative actions and inappropriate behaviors. Effective communication between parents and children builds a space of trust and a fluid dialogue.



God is the Model for our Relationships

Germán Picavea (Argentina)

Bible Study passages: Ephesians 5:1-2; James 1:19

Memory Verse: “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.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that in order to develop healthy relationships, we need to incorporate active listening into our daily lives.

Introduction

As human beings, we were created to live in relationship. Life in relationship is a part of us, a part of our constitution as human beings. We've heard this repeatedly; however, when we look at reality, it seems that we struggle a bit to fully grasp its dimensions. Let's remember that in the entire process of creation, the only time God said something wasn't good (Genesis 2:18) was when the human being was alone, facing all the tasks that God had assigned (Genesis 2:15). From then on, two humans (male and female) were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) to live in relationship, a relationship of equality, collaboration, and cooperation, without hierarchies, authorities, or discriminations.

Therefore, when God created the human being (male and female), it was for the purpose of living in such a deep relationship that it would represent Him. Yes, the way we humans relate to each other represents God. But how does this happen? Or in what way can we represent God? The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, instructed them to “follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us” (Eph.5:1-2). Perhaps we take this lightly, not with the strength with which the apostle said it. But the reality is that in the apostle Paul's command lies the key to all healthy relationships. It all derives from love.

Let's understand that we were created by the love of God (Gen. 1:26-27), His love redeems us (John 3:16), and invites us to manifest that love in our relationships (1 John 4:7-8). Love is the key to life. There's no life without love. But not just any love, the love that God modeled for us.

I. Healthy Relationships Are Built

It might seem obvious, but it's necessary to state that we build healthy relationships ourselves; they don't

develop by magic. They're not given to us as gifts, nor can we purchase them at a local store. Healthy relationships aren't the ones we idealize in our minds, free from conflicts and adverse situations. On the contrary, healthy relationships are the result of constant, daily, and diligent work with the clear objective of valuing the relationship over oneself.

The Argentine journalist Sergio Sinay, speaking on this topic, says: “One of the most recurring problems affecting couples today is the lack of time, attention, space, and empathy for each other's needs. Everything is fine if it contributes to my well-being, and everything starts to annoy when it requires my time, my attention, or my comfort” (Sinay, Sergio. *Healing the Couple*. Argentina: B, 2011, p.46). While Sinay refers to romantic relationships, this can be applied to all relationships.

Nowadays, the idea of stepping out of one's comfort zone is widely discussed, but in reality, only a few manage to do it. And yes, it's difficult to step out of comfort for the sake of the other; as the saying goes: “Nothing is done for the sake of art.” It seems challenging to love without expecting something in return. Moreover, if we're seduced by a world that in various ways pushes us to think more and more about ourselves and seek our well-being above others. Yet that's precisely what the apostle confronted with the mandate to the Ephesians of the first century and to us today. He said: “...follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2).

In every relationship, we should think about the relationship God established with us. How did He do it? Why did He do it? The passage from Ephesians tells us: He did it through Christ and out of love.

And this required God to step out of His comfort zone (Phil. 2:6-8), to put our needs first, and give Himself entirely for our benefit: salvation. What a way to relate to humanity! What a way to focus on others before Himself! Think for a moment how many reasons God had to argue, judge, and condemn humans; yet He didn't! Instead, He chose to love in order to establish a healthy relationship with us... even a relationship without guarantees. What a model He gave us! We often say that in our relationship with God, He took the initiative, and that's true. But He didn't just take the initiative, He also worked hard to reach us and establish a relationship with us. He is with us in every moment, allowing us to be and make our decisions, patiently waiting for us to go through our processes. He listened to us, didn't judge us, engaged in dialogue, and remained silent... all out of love... to relate to us. That's why we love Him, because He loved us first (1 John 4:19).

There's a reason why the apostle Paul said: "follow God's example" (Ephesians 5:1). Do we want healthy relationships? We have the keys to our relational life in God's actions. It doesn't matter what kind of relationship it is; these principles can be applied to all of them. That's why Paul continued to say: "and walk in the way of love..." (Ephesians 5:2a), which implies being guided by the decision to love others, establishing relationships that reflect God. The Message translation says: "Watch what God does, and then you do it..." This way, love becomes a normative principle for our thoughts and behavior. It becomes our way of acting, instead of acting conditioned by what others do to us.

It's worth mentioning Jesus' Golden Rule, which He shared as the essence of the law and the prophets, and which we often recite and practice the other way around. Jesus said: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Many times, I've heard it phrased like this: "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you." Quite different! What Jesus proposes is taking the initiative: "Do," .. it's an imperative. We shouldn't act in response to others' actions; rather, we should aim to influence the behavior of others.

All people want to be treated well, but the hidden question in Jesus' rule is this: how do we treat others? Do we treat others with respect? (1 Peter 2:17); with humility, considering others as superior? (Philippians 2:3). God invites us to be the builders of healthy relationships and has given us His model to follow. Let's remember that Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35).

Questions:

- Read carefully: "Everything is fine if it contributes to my well-being, and everything starts to annoy when it requires my time, my attention, or my comfort." What do you think about what Sergio Sinay said? Provide your comment in the first person.
- Do you believe that the mandate Paul gave to the Ephesians in the first century is relevant today? Why?

II. Healthy Relationships are Built with Good Communication

The great paradox of our time is that despite communication being in the spotlight, it seems that humans are disconnected or, at the very least, facing many problems in this area. When we talk about communication, we immediately think of "speaking," "sharing information," or "conveying a message." Nowadays, we also include audiovisual elements and social media. However, we almost completely forget that communication includes more than just speaking – much more. It's well known that only around 30% of communication is verbal; the rest is nonverbal.

Listening is a central aspect of communication that we frequently overlook. We can't build healthy relationships without good communication, and for that, listening is key. "To understand how the teenage grandchild is shaping their personality, it's essential to remember the motto: Listen, listen, listen... and speak occasionally" (<https://www.hacerfamilia.com/adolescentes/yo-edad-relacion-abuelos-nietos-adolescentes-2021/0201/1401.html>). Obviously, this applies not only to the relationship between grandparents and teenage grandchildren; it's a good motto and reminds us of what the Bible says in James 1:19: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry."

Don't you think that in our daily lives, we often act the other way around? First, we become angry; then, we talk until we're exhausted; and finally in many cases, after a long time we listen. It's in that moment of listening that we realize we were wrong or discover the true reason for the problem. However, in the process, people get hurt, and relationships are damaged or lost because we didn't listen to each other. Listening is a fundamental aspect of a healthy relationship.

When we listen to someone, we convey to them that we accept them, that they're welcome, that they're important, that we're interested in what they share and how they feel, and that they have a place within us.

When the other person perceives this, empathy occurs, and the relationship starts to form. Empathy follows active listening. Generating empathy without truly listening is impossible. Listening to others requires us to momentarily stop our own thoughts and focus on following the words, ideas, and thoughts of the person speaking. It requires time, dedication, and complete attention. We must set aside anything that distracts us and diverts our attention. Nowadays, we're bombarded with notifications from various devices that constantly demand our attention. We need to learn to silence these distracting sounds to give ourselves the opportunity to listen to others, especially the physical people right in front of us. James 1:19 says: "My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen..." This passage, talks about "everyone," about "readiness" and about "others." The first thing that catches our attention is that everyone should listen. Some people might naturally have a greater inclination to listen, but that doesn't exempt others from striving for good listening. Next, James speaks of being ready, an indication that lead us to an attentive posture, even alertness to listen. Immediately after that, James tells us who we should listen to. He doesn't refer to specific individuals; the reference is to "others," meaning everyone, without exception.

How much more should we be ready to listen to those people with whom we want to establish a relationship? James proposes an excellent rule for our relational life. It helps us see things differently: by focusing all our attention on listening. Because that's where everything starts. That's where communication becomes real, and the bond in building a healthy relationship strengthens.

Questions:

- Name some other elements included in communication besides speaking.
- How challenging is it for you to follow the guideline presented in James 1:19? What will you do about it?

III. Keys to Active Listening for a Healthy Relationship

Active listening begins with our complete presence. Current life circumstances lead us to normalize behaviors that don't contribute to the construction of healthy relationships. For example, the famous multitasking, the apparent human ability to perform more than one task

simultaneously. However, engaging in multiple physical and mental activities prevents true listening. It's important to clarify here that we're not saying that we can or can't repeat everything the other person said, because active listening encompasses more than perceiving the sounds emitted by the other person. In genuine listening, we register more than just words; we sense feelings, emotions, and everything that often hides behind the discourse.

From complete presence, we move to total attention. In the passage from James, we're called to be ready, willing, attentive. Total attention involves making eye contact and silencing our internal and external noises to focus on the other person. By doing so, we'll experience a world, often unknown, the world of the other person. Remember that primarily, we listen to understand, not to respond.

Giving total attention to the other person shows interest in what they're saying. Therefore, we should never pass judgment, invalidate, or minimize their feelings. We should never interrupt with references like "I..." or "to me..." Talking about ourselves and competing with what the other person is saying doesn't help the relationship. Nor should we provide solutions unless they ask for them. And under no circumstances should we fill the other person's silences. If these silences bother us, we must search within ourselves for the reason, but never fill them just because we're uncomfortable with wordless spaces. Each person has their pace, and we must respect it.

Of course, to let the other person know that I'm there and fully attentive, I can nod, ask and re-ask, paraphrase, accompany their shared ideas and thoughts. This helps us avoid responding based on what we think they said rather than what they actually said. Through this, we clarify and avoid misinterpreting what the other person said.

Questions:

- Next, list the keys to active listening presented in the lesson.
- How will you strengthen active listening in yourself? Outline some specific guidelines to strengthen this aspect in your life.

Conclusion

We are relational beings by divine design; it's our constitution. By engaging in relationships, we bear witness to our Creator. Therefore, it's imperative that we put into practice the apostle Paul's command to the Ephesians and the guideline that James presented in his letter.



Mutual Respect

Nery Pérez (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Romans 13:7-10

Memory Verse: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Luke 6:31

Lesson Purpose: To understand that as children of God, we need to practice respect as a human value directed towards ourselves and each other.

Introduction

Studying at the Nazarene Theological Institute in Guatemala City, during our first year of theological studies, a group of us had to take an exam about Theology. We had recently attended a retreat and had lunch there. The exam was for the end of the term. The last question of the exam deeply impacted my life, thoughts, and attitude. That question said, “What are the names of the two ladies who served us lunch at yesterday’s retreat?” I wondered, “How could that matter on a Theology test?” I thought it might be a teacher’s trick, unfair. And I kept asking myself, “How would I know the names of the ladies who served lunch?”

Theology influences daily human life; if not, it hasn’t been effective. I learned this later. Since then, the proper names of people have remained imprinted in my mind because addressing each person by name is a show of appreciation and respect. Today, we live in an impersonal, indifferent, and self-absorbed society. The name of the janitor at the supermarket, the traffic officer, or the lady selling goods at the market has become unnecessary for many. God commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:39).

Loving means valuing, appreciating, and respecting others, just as I’m to respect myself. In many communities, unfortunately, mockery is commonplace. Everything is a reason for ridicule. Mockery often comes with nicknames, many of which are cruel and derogatory. Respect for values, life, authority, adults, teachers, and even Christian principles is sorely lacking. For healthy relationships, we need to adhere to human values. We know that these are norms for harmonious coexistence, for the common good. And of course, there are many values, but in this lesson, we’ll focus on respect.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, respect is “admiration felt or shown for someone or something that you believe has good ideas or qualities” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/respect>).

In other words, respect is a value that recognizes the dignity of others simply because they’re individuals; even flora and fauna deserve and demand respect. This value is the kindness we extend to ourselves and others when we acknowledge qualities, merits, and specific situations. However, just like everything in life, respect has its counterpart, a negative value: disrespect. As Christians, we would say that as a result of sin, fallen human nature harbors selfishness, pride, intolerance, rudeness, disdain, and a derogatory attitude. All of these elements cultivate disrespect, which gives rise to enmity, quarrels, anger, disputes, violence, conflicts, crises, and the breakdown of healthy relationships.

In our society, it’s common for the weaker party to suffer. It’s a chain of manipulation, humiliation, degradation, and devaluation. “And what examples can you give me of disrespect?” you might ask. For instance, recurring and careless lateness can signal a lack of respect for others’ time. Not respecting the queue and jumping ahead. Littering in the street. Dressing inappropriately for formal situations. Interrupting someone who is speaking. Violating a family or cultural tradition... In short, there are many ways to show disrespect. But today, we must focus on respect as a human value, as mentioned in the Bible for mutual edification and as a continuous Golden Rule (Luke 6:31) that will contribute to healthy relationships.

I. Respect as a Way of Life

The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans about Christian conduct in relation to the government.

In the opening verses of Romans 13, he exhorts submission and non-resistance to authority. Furthermore, he exhorts respecting authority, especially as Christians. He explicitly says: "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). The topic of respect implies obedience and reverence towards everything that requires respect for its position and authority, even when we disagree with how that authority was attained.

As a result of the respectful attitude and behavior demanded of believers in Christ, Paul stated: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (v.9a). Because a believer, as a child of God, radiates a genuine love, and someone with that love urges us to fulfill the commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." (v.9b).

Here, love for one's neighbor, the Golden Rule, and respect, converge. The apostle couldn't have stated it more clearly when he expressed: "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law." (v.10). If human beings followed God's commandments by:

- loving their neighbors as themselves (v.9),
- recognizing that love does no harm to others (v.10), and
- adhering to the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12),

interpersonal, national, and international relationships would be healthy, free from disputes and tensions that provoke conflicts, crises, and wars.

A. Respect between Spouses

The age-old dispute of sexism vs. feminism is a result of sin (Genesis 3:16). There's no culture in the world that's not sexist. Regardless of who teaches children sexism (mother or father), it has persisted to this day with such strength that subjugation of women is a disrespect to the equality with which the Lord created human beings (Genesis 1:26). The marital relationship is a gift from God for both men and women. God states that marriage is honorable (Hebrews 13:4) for everyone.

It's clear that when God wants to talk about faith, He gives examples in Hebrews 11, but when He wants to talk about marriage, He establishes rules (Ephesians 5:21-

33). In verse 33, God says, "...the wife must respect her husband." And I know this verse delights many husbands. But when the apostle spoke of respect, he wasn't advocating blind or servile submission to one's husband. Respect in a marriage is mutual; submission is from both sides (Ephesians 5:21). Respect encompasses attitude, behavior, and communication. Proper communication is necessary and shows respect towards the other person. The Bible says, "Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone." (Colossians 4:6). Respect between spouses will manifest in elements such as:

- 1. Communication:** A respectful marriage effectively utilizes fundamental conversational rules for both speaking and listening.
- 2. Forgiveness:** When loving and respecting your partner, it's essential to confront and resolve situations constructively. Forgiveness involves valuing your spouse's thoughts and feelings. This is necessary to value the person with whom you are one flesh (Genesis 2:24b).
- 3. Conflicts:** Respecting your partner entails facing conflicts head-on and looking them in the eye. At times, people avoid conflicts, but love and respect serve as fuel to confront and overcome crises.
- 4. Violence:** Domestic violence knows no boundaries. In the United States, it's the number one health problem. Domestic abuse is underreported and is the leading cause of injuries to women aged 15 to 44. Where is the love and respect amidst so much violence?
- 5. Jokes:** Have you noticed that making jokes or belittling your spouse's feelings damages their soul and most likely harms the relationship as well? Of course, as spouses, we should laugh together, even heartily if possible. You can joke with your spouse, but with caution. We must make it clear that we should avoid joking about sensitive issues like their weight, family, physical flaws, etc. The challenge is to laugh with them, not at them.

B. Respect and Fidelity

A strong sign of respect is marital fidelity. Flirting, chatting sensually with others, and similar actions bring sadness, bitterness, and division to a marriage.

Both spouses are expected to be faithful to their marital vows. Disregarding these vows includes both adultery and using physical, psychological, verbal, economic violence, etc. Marital vows are violated by anything that transgresses those sacred promises.

Questions:

- What do you believe is a common reason for the lack of respect between spouses?
- Do you think it's possible to joke with a partner without crossing the line into disrespect? Provide an example.
- Is infidelity, as a lack of respect, more frequent in men than in women? Discuss.

II. Respect of Children

An old hymn says: "My home, My home! There's no place under heaven sweeter than my home" (Ball, H. C., ed. *Himnos de Gloria*. USA: Gospel Publishing House, 1933, s/p). The word "home" or "hogar" in Spanish comes from "hoguera - fireplace" (<https://dle.rae.es/hogar?m=form>), which implies warmth of a fire. The Lord says, "Fathers, don't embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (Colossians 3:21). Respect is something parents must earn from their children. A father earns the respect of his children not only by being a good guide, but also by being a good example. It's futile for a father to tell his children he wants them to go to church if he doesn't attend with them.

Children learn through imitation. They learn to walk, talk, and think from their parents or caregivers. Respecting children means giving them time and attention. It's living consistently with what's said and done. There are aggressive, dominating, inadequate, indifferent, passive, threatening, hostile, or overprotective parents. All of them can, in one way or another, convey disrespect to their children if they don't give them a proper place in their formative education during the early years. Another way to disrespect children is through verbal, psychological, or physical violence.

Lastly, violence can also be sexual. Incidents of this type of abuse are increasingly common in many families, whether by biological parents, step-parents, or close relatives. It ranges from inappropriate touching and suggestive language to incestuous rape. Lack of respect in this area is a scandal that needs to be eradicated.

Questions:

- How can a father or mother earn the respect of their children? Give a couple of examples.
- What behavior from a child is a sign of disrespect towards their parents?

III. The Effect of Words

The Bible says, "The lips of the righteous know what finds favor..." (Proverbs 10:32a); "The heart of the righteous weighs its answers..." (Proverbs 15:28a); "The Sovereign Lord has given me a well-instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary..." (Isaiah 50:4a). The Lord desires His children, us Christians, to be light, salt, a blessing, an inspiration, and respectful towards our environment, our families, and our fellow beings. The challenge is to bless with our mouths. The effect of words is powerful.

When children are offended with vulgar, offensive, degrading words, these words can affect them for a lifetime unless the Lord truly sets them free (John 8:36). Words like "fool," "idiot," "dummy," etc., aren't only a gross lack of respect but also disqualifications that can linger indefinitely. In everyday interpersonal relationships, whether with a spouse, children, or friends, Christians are called to bless with their mouths. This means refraining from mocking, belittling, hurting, or ridiculing with jokes, laughter, or sarcasm. Initially, it might be amusing, but it becomes tiring. The worst thing that can happen to a family is for them to attack each other and thus disrespect one another. Conversely, kind words, verbal and physical caresses, expressions of approval, will serve as soothing balms and satisfying refreshment.

Questions:

- What repercussions can occur when a group of friends or colleagues lacks respect?
- What is the effect on a child of receiving kind and uplifting words from parents? Discuss.

Conclusion

The gospel of Jesus Christ holds the solution for harmonious and peaceful coexistence. If there was mutual respect, interpersonal relationships would be marked by equality, dignity, and valuation. Respect is a value that can be learned; it's a human value that the Lord expects to be part of our Christian character. May it be so.



Finding Delight in Others

Natalia Pesado (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Luke 19:1-9

Memory Verse: “The Lord God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone...’” Genesis 2:18

Lesson Purpose: To reflect on what God tells us about having a healthy relationship with our neighbors.

Introduction

Today, many people report dissatisfaction in their social relationships, perhaps especially in their marital relationships. In such cases, upon exploring the dynamics of the relationship, one can discover that harmful or toxic patterns have developed, leading to cracks and eventually more serious ruptures in a relationship that began with much love and hope. In today’s topic, we’ll study one of the keys to strengthening a social relationship so that they may grow strong and healthy; and that key is spending quality time together.

We’ll see that spending quality time together can lead to an emotional connection between two individuals that helps to foster a healthy attachment, resulting in a relationship that endures over time, even in the midst of life’s difficult storms.

I. What makes a relationship healthy?

Relating to one another is part of God’s original design. In the book of Genesis, we read that “...the Lord God said, ‘It’s not good for the man to be alone...’” (Genesis 2:18). God desired that Adam should have an emotional connection with another human being. It’s impossible to ignore that today, after seeing the great harm that sin causes to humans and their relationships, the relationships that God originally intended have been corrupted. Today, many relationships between people are wounded or destroyed. There are many attitudes and personal decisions that can lead to ruptures in a relationship, such as selfishness, mistreatment—whether verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual, lack of respect or support, failing to apologize when causing offense, and neglecting to dedicate time to strengthen the relationship.

However, through His saving grace, God allows us to restore His original design, which includes healthy relationships between people. A healthy relationship includes sacrificial love, respect and honesty, loyalty, mutual support, and a commitment to work to keep the relationship healthy and growing. In such relationships, people feel so loved that they live their lives with wonderful satisfaction and joy, full of hope and strength to dream and achieve goals; and that physical and emotional health overflows to others.

We can illustrate these relationships as “a piece of heaven here on Earth”; that is, despite the difficulties a person may encounter in the secular world, such as work-related stress or mistreatment, or at school, when that person comes home to their family, they can breathe deeply and truly relax because they have arrived at “their piece of heaven.” This is where they can heal and find refuge from everything they experienced during a tough or draining day.

In the book titled “The Five Love Languages” by author Gary Chapman, five specific ways of showing love to another person are detailed. Dr. Chapman described the following traits that make a relationship last:

- 1) words of affirmation
- 2) quality time
- 3) gifts
- 4) acts of service
- 5) physical touch

These five guidelines can help us understand how to develop a healthy relationship in very specific ways that can make a big difference in how the person we’re relating to feels within the relationship.

The author teaches us that these traits can be applied in all relationships, including with children.

Questions:

- How would you define a healthy relationship? Explain in your own words.
- What struck you the most about the differences between a healthy relationship and a damaged one? Discuss.

II. What is Quality Time?

In today's study passage, we read the story of a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. The story tells us that he was short in stature (Luke 19:3), but we can also understand that he was low in social esteem because he collected taxes, often inflating amounts to enrich himself. Focusing on Jesus, we see that His love and attention for the despised Zacchaeus was unparalleled. In Luke 19:5 it says: "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up..." We see that Jesus was fully aware of the one seeking Him and focused on Zacchaeus amid the surrounding crowd. Jesus started talking specifically to him: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5). In the following verse, we read that Jesus and Zacchaeus shared a meal together (Luke 19:8); and after this special quality time with Jesus, Zacchaeus was transformed.

Today we'll study quality time in detail. In "The Five Love Languages," we read: "emotionally, the important thing is that we spend time focused on each other" (Chapman, Gary. *The Five Love Languages*. Colombia: Editorial Unilit, 2005, p.64). As we can see from the description, the author helps us understand that it's not about a specific activity or a particular place; the key is planning to do something together and enjoying each other's company. Successful quality time can be evaluated by the fact that people feel seen and valued, that they feel important to each other because a person chooses to set aside other activities or people for a certain time to solely focus on being with that special person.

This way of relating may come more naturally at the beginning of a relationship. For instance, when two people first meet, they have the desire to learn more about each other and try to spend time together. Another example could be a person who doesn't enjoy shopping but still goes shopping just to spend time with their loved one, or a person who doesn't enjoy car mechanics but is

willing to spend time on car repairs simply to be with their loved one. Similarly, choosing to spend quality time with the other person throughout the years promotes an unparalleled sense of mutual value.

Quality time can vary in duration; it could be meeting for coffee once a month or going on a camping trip together for several days. The activity isn't specific either; some people enjoy going to watch a movie together or attending a sports game. Some people enjoy working on a remodeling project together or engaging in hobbies like listening to music, cooking, or doing a puzzle. Some are passionate about volunteering together, etc. As we can see, the activity truly depends on the individuals' choices, and it's ideal to take turns choosing activities each person enjoys, rather than always doing something only one of them enjoys.

It's crucial to avoid distractions that could take attention away from the other person, including the TV, cell phones, other people, etc. For instance, if quality time is between two friends, it's good to spend time without other friends occasionally. If it's between a couple, it's good to seek alone time without other people or children. If it's with a child, it's useful to take turns and dedicate individual time to each child. If it's difficult to find another trusted person to watch the kids, creative ways can be found to make quality time even more unique, such as picking up a child from school for lunch and eating together while the other siblings are at school (in this scenario, it's important to always be fair and spend quality time with each child to avoid resentment from favoritism; so, you can have lunch with one child one month and another child the next month).

Author Gary Chapman recommends five guidelines for having a quality conversation:

1) Maintain eye contact when talking to the person. This prevents your mind from wandering and communicates that you're giving them your full attention.

2) Don't do anything else while listening to the other person. If necessary, ask if the conversation can wait a few minutes until you finish cooking, and assure them you'll give them your full attention as soon as you're done.

3) Pay attention to the feelings the other person expresses. When you think you have the answer, confirm it; this communicates that you're actively listening to what they're saying.

4) Observe body language. It can give indications of what the other person is feeling, although you can ask to make sure.

5) Resist interrupting. The goal is to discover their thoughts and feelings, not to defend yourself. (Chapman, Gary. "The Five Love Languages." Colombia: Editorial Unilit, 2005, pp.67-68).

In John 1:14, we read about our Master, Jesus: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus took the initiative and came from His heavenly realm to spend time with us. He worked with His father Joseph; traveled with His parents to Jerusalem; walked and ate with His disciples; paid attention to children; spoke and taught the people around Him. Jesus showed us the importance of spending time with others, giving them genuine attention and finding delight in their existence.

Questions:

- What is your opinion on the importance of spending quality time with others?
- Share another Bible passage that reminds you of how Jesus dedicated time to people.

III. What Can We Do to Have Quality Time?

The key to today's lesson is that we must commit to being intentional in dedicating time and effort to spend quality time with the people around us with whom we want to have a healthy relationship. In today's world, despite having many technological advancements for communication, such as cell phones and the global internet, we must recognize that the pace of human life can be very fast. People often spend a lot of time working

and dealing with responsibilities that draw their attention away from loved ones. That's why, to have quality time, we must develop self-control to set limits on anything that might take away from the time that should be spent with family.

So, there's a need to plan for spending time with loved ones, particularly one-on-one, whether it's a couple, a parent or a mother with one of the children, etc., in order to focus on that person, understand how they're doing, delight in their personality or interests, and truly connect emotionally.

We can compare this to our spiritual life and our relationship with God. Beyond the importance of worship and community service, it's also necessary to spend time alone with the Master and open our hearts to Him, allowing Jesus to speak to us and taking delight in our praise. By spending distraction-free quality time with Jesus, we enjoy His love in a special way and feel deeply connected to Him as our friend.

Questions:

- Which activity would you prefer for spending quality time?
- Share a way in which you can spend quality time with someone this week.

Conclusion

Human relationships can become quite complex, and they're never static, but always evolving. We can pray each day and ask God to strengthen us to make the necessary decisions to express this form of love to the people around us, helping us discipline ourselves to make time for our loved ones, and thus maintain healthy relationships that bring glory to God.



Managing Anger

Macedonio Daza (Bolivia)

Biblical passage for study: John 2:13-22

Memory Verse: "In your anger don't sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."
Ephesians 4:26

Lesson Purpose: To understand that it's possible to have control over emotions, especially anger, always seeking the help of God and His Word.

Introduction

To begin with the proposed lesson, let's consider the memory verse: "In your anger do not sin..." (Ephesians 4:26). This verse is based on the Old Testament, specifically Psalm 4:4, which says: "In your anger don't sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent." Even under the conditions generated by Christian indignation due to the presence of evil and injustice, as the apostle Paul mentioned: "... Who is led into sin, and I don't inwardly burn?" (2 Corinthians 11:29b); emotions must be firmly controlled.

If the provocation is caused by a degeneration of justice, it must not be allowed to grow into sin. Righteous anger is in harmony with a Christ-like life, as seen when our Lord cleansed the temple. Foulkes comments: "The Christian must be sure that his anger is righteous indignation, and not merely an expression of personal provocation or wounded pride. It must have no sinful motives, and it must not lead to sin in any way" (Taylor, Willard. *Beacon Bible Commentary*, volume 9. USA: CNP, 1985, p.239). The world would have lost much if it hadn't been for the burning indignation of Wilberforce against the slave trade, or Shaftesbury against 19th-century working conditions" (Barclay, William. *The New Testament Commentary*, volume 10. Spain: Ed. CLIE, 1995, p.192).

Therefore, "do not sin." In other words, keep that anger under control; don't let it turn into bitterness. It's better to reach an immediate solution and not let the grievance take root in your heart.

I. How to Identify Anger? (John 2:13-16)

To identify anger, let's briefly define what anger is: anger is a powerful energy that increases physical strength. It's a stimulator. It's the mood that becomes predominant in an individual. "Emotions or forms of excitement of life:

irritation, fury (motor phenomena: violent movements, agitation, paroxysm, anger, outburst, distress, ecstasy)" (Friedrich, Dorsch. *Dictionary of Psychology*. Spain: Ed. Herder, 2002, p.730). Taking these definitions of anger into account, we can identify it as follows:

A. We can identify anger

When our emotional state varies in intensity from mild irritation to intense fury, when our heart rate and blood pressure rise, along with our energy hormones adrenaline and noradrenaline, in this way we can identify that we're angry. To enter an emotional state is a natural human response which helps us to react to threats, inspiring intense feelings and behaviors that allow us to fight and defend ourselves when attacked. It can range from mild irritation to uncontrolled violence. In the case of our study Bible passage, there were causes that generated annoyance in Jesus: "When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money" (John 2:13-14). This refers to the outer court designated for the Gentiles where animals were prepared for sacrifice. Only John mentions that Jesus drove out the cattle and sheep. "Money changers were the people who exchanged foreign currency for the official temple currency. This was a legitimate occupation, but it was open to abuse and the opportunity to charge excessive amounts for the service" (Guthrie, D. et al. *New Bible Commentary*. USA: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1981, p.698).

Therefore, the money changers facilitated the exchange of foreign currency for paying temple taxes and profited from the transactions. What annoyed Jesus was the extortion and profit they made in the temple.

Jesus clearly understood the concept of temple services, with all its details designed to teach people the essence of encountering the living God, reconciling and being at peace with the Creator. He reminded the wrongdoers of the temple's purpose.

B. Anger can be identified by observing the person's behavior

John graphically described Jesus's anger as He drove the merchants out of the temple; and he's the only one who mentions the "whip of cords" (John 2:15). "This has been described as a violent scene, with the figures of the merchants crouching desperately over the tables as they were thrown from side to side, or running after their scattered money as it rolled this way and that, or cowering before the whip that showed no mercy until the holy place was cleansed" (Mayfield, Joseph H. *Beacon Bible Commentary*, volume 7. USA: CNP, 1985, p.58). Matthew and Mark describe the story as follows: "... Jesus... drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (Matthew 21:12; also see Mark 11:15). Then his disciples remembered that it is written: "... Zeal for your house will consume me" (John 2:17b), a passage from the Scriptures they knew (Psalm 69:9). The energetic way the Lord dealt with evil isn't calm or light. He is a light that shines in the darkness.

Questions:

- Anger can be identified by oneself. How do you know if you are angry?
- Anger can be identified by observing a person's behavior. Why did Jesus get angry and how did he demonstrate it?

II. How to Express/Feel Anger Healthily?

A. Expressing anger consciously is the healthiest solution

Let's look at some of Jesus' expressions. The Master reminded His audience of the Scriptures prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah respectively: "... for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations" (Isaiah 56:7); "Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you?" (Jeremiah 7:11a). Based on these Scriptures, Jesus admonished them, which is recorded in the Gospels: "... Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!" (John 2:16). The other three parallel Gospels agree in recording what Jesus said: "... My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it 'a den of robbers'" (Luke 19:46), a hiding place for robbers, whose practices were protected by the religious leaders in the sacred precinct.

B. Expressing anger through metaphors

Jesus was able to speak truth to the Pharisees through figurative language: "... you are like whitewashed tombs..." (Matthew 23:27). They were religious people who loved external observance with superficial appearances, in contrast to integrity; hence, the comparison: the "tombs were whitewashed to prevent people from stumbling over them and becoming defiled" (Guthrie, D. et al. *New Bible Commentary*. USA: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1981, p.633). Continuing with the account, Jesus used another figure that was also used by John the Baptist; and He said to the Pharisees: "You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33). The Pharisees didn't find His words gentle.

C. Returning with the same messengers causing the anger

On one occasion, Jesus told them to tell Herod: "Go tell that fox..." (Luke 13:32). The Lord used a qualifying term for that ruler, who wasn't legitimate, denoting cunning and cowardice. The Pharisees had come saying, "Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you" (Luke 13:31). Of course, Herod could be expected to eliminate any religious leader, as he had already done with John the Baptist. However, Jesus had a mission to fulfill that no one could stop.

D. Catharsis is a way to express anger healthily

Talking to a friend, unloading by telling every detail, will release the accumulated tension, and one will feel much better. Speaking to a understanding friend, sharing and expressing one's own frustrations can help defuse anger. However, it's important to understand that no one can change someone else's emotions. That's an intimate and personal process. Remember not to hold onto anger, as it can make you sick.

E. Talking to the person who is angry

This option is the healthiest, as it can solve problems once and for all and overcome them. Jesus, while teaching about anger, said: "leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Matt. 5:24).

Questions:

- Mention at least three out of the five considerations discussed in this section for expressing anger in a healthy manner.
- Based on what you have learned, what could happen if anger isn't expressed or felt in a healthy way?

III. Ideas for Managing Anger

“Anger is probably the most destructive emotion when not handled well. It commits homicides, destroys property, plans revenge, and turns a sweet mouth into a dagger dipped in poison. It’s the seed from which bitterness grows. Depression can originate from unresolved anger, though there may be stages of bitterness in between” (Neff, Miriam. “Women and Their Emotions.” Colombia: UNILIT, 2013, p.29). Anger is a normal human reaction that often prevents clear perception of the problem’s reality, making it difficult to solve. However, there are certain techniques that can help manage emotions better and face difficult moments with more calmness. Here are some ideas to control anger and take care of spiritual, physical, and mental health (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es-es/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/anger-management/art-20045434>):

A. Think Before Speaking

In a moment of anger, it’s easy to say something you’ll later regret. The Scriptures, through Solomon’s proverbs, warn us: “Whoever is patient has great understanding, but one who is quick-tempered displays folly” (Proverbs 14:29); “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it’s to one’s glory to overlook an offense” (Proverbs 19:11a). Take time to respond. Don’t act instinctively. If necessary, step away from the problem area, take some time, take deep breaths, regain tranquility, and then confront the conflict situation as soon as you can think clearly, expressing your anger and frustration in an assertive way. Remember what the Word says: “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

B. Physical Activity Reduces Stress

The Bible says: “For physical training is of some value...” (1 Timothy 4:8a). Some people, when angry, go out to exercise to feel better. The release of endorphins and the distraction of the activity allow for clearer visualization and a different perspective on everything.

C. Take Time to Reflect on God’s Word

Continuing with the advice of the apostle Paul, consider the following: “... For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8b). Spiritual exercises, like godliness, help clarify and depose attitudes that can harm your relationship with God and with others. Moments of calmness after being spiritually strengthened will help you feel better prepared to handle what comes next, without irritation or anger.

D. Use humor to relieve tension

Turning to a sense of humor isn’t synonymous with trivializing problems; rather, it’s an effective method for accepting things naturally as they happen. Use humor as a tool to confront what angers you, and possibly the unrealistic expectations you might have about how things should be. However, keep in mind that sarcasm should be avoided, as it can hurt the feelings of the other person and make things worse. The goal is to alleviate tension. Remember these biblical proverbs: “A soft answer turns away wrath...” (Proverbs 15:1a); and “Fools give full vent to their rage, but the wise bring calm in the end” (Proverbs 29:11).

E. Learn to forgive

Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer to ask for forgiveness from God and to forgive our debtors (Matthew 6:12). Recognizing and accepting that not everyone thinks and acts the same way is an effective way to avoid an outburst of anger. Empathy and the willingness to understand why someone acted in a certain way allow us to eliminate anger and extend forgiveness. Forgiveness is a powerful tool. No wonder Jesus said that we should forgive seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22).

Sin disrupts relationships; therefore, it should be put to an end promptly. As the apostle Paul said: “...do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). Put an end to your anger during the day. This means that conflict resolution should be immediate. Don’t let your anger linger until it turns into wrath and becomes entangled with other sins.

Questions:

- “Think before you speak.” Quote a verse related to this idea.
- How does physical activity help reduce stress? Explain.
- Write down other suggestions you’ll start applying to manage your anger.

Conclusion

Christian indignation in the face of evil and injustice is in harmony with a life like that of Christ, as we see when our Lord cleansed the temple. But if anger seems to be out of control and hurts those around you, it’s necessary to turn to God and exercise self-control. Don’t let your anger last beyond twenty-four hours; learning to ask for forgiveness and to forgive will make your relationships with others harmonious.



How to Resolve Conflicts

Natalia Pesado (USA)

Bible Study passages: Proverbs 16:6-7,21-24,32, 17:9,11,14,19,22,28

Memory Verse: “Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so, drop the matter before a dispute breaks out” Proverbs 17:14.

Lesson Purpose: To reflect on what God advises us regarding how to handle a conflict situation with our neighbor.

Introduction

Social relationships provide some of the most satisfying experiences we can have in our human existence. However, conflict in a relationship with another person can also lead to intense unpleasant feelings. The reality is that conflict is a natural part of human relationships since each person has their own way of thinking and acting, and each person has their own temperament that can differ significantly from the temperaments of those around them.

But God hasn't left us alone in these social dynamics; instead, He offers unparalleled advice in the book of Proverbs to handle conflicts in a healthy and godly way, preventing wounds from arising in ourselves and in those we love. God created us in the womb of our mother (Jeremiah 1:5); so, we can trust that His instruction manual (the Bible) won't fail us. In today's lesson, we'll reflect on four characteristics that are highly effective ingredients for managing conflict: humility, patience, forgiveness, and faith.

I. Humility in Conflict

In today's memory verse, “Starting a quarrel is like breaching a dam; so, drop the matter before a dispute breaks out” (Proverbs 17:14), we receive a powerful piece of advice. The biblical writer warns us that if we start a fight, we must recognize that we have no control over the outcome of such a decision. In other words, the only true choice we have is whether to start a fight or argument with someone; but we have no control over how it will end. No one can guarantee that we'll “win the fight.” We can also look at Proverbs 20:18 and Proverbs 24:6 as support for this idea.

For this reason, I believe it's important to seek God in prayer, with great humility, to ask for His direction on how to best handle a conflict with another person; He has all the wisdom we need. At this stage, we can consider Proverbs 16:22, which says, “Understanding is a fountain of life to those who have it, but folly brings punishment to fools.” Before confronting the other person, we must consider if they're willing to talk, understand, and change. If these characteristics aren't present, then the Word warns us that it's “folly” to attempt such a conversation. In these cases, we must seek other ways to heal inwardly or set personal boundaries.

My recommendation is that most of the time, it's always better to try to have a conversation. Because if we pray in advance, God can work in the person's heart (we will see this in point 4 of this lesson), but if the person refuses to consider our point, at least we won't have the regret of not having tried. Once we have determined that it's necessary to have a conversation with the person about the conflict we're experiencing, we must also use humility to ensure that the way we present our complaint is wise and useful, rather than automatically triggering a reaction of anger or defense in the other person.

If our attitude and words (including tone of voice, facial expressions, hand gestures, or body language) project an attitude of hostility, the other person will mirror the same attitude back to us, meaning an attitude of anger. On the contrary, the wisdom in Proverbs 16 instructs us: “A person's wisdom yields patience; it's to one's glory to overlook an offense” (v. 32); “The one who is wise in heart is called discerning, and gracious words promote instruction” (v. 21); “The hearts of the wise make their mouths prudent, and their lips promote instruction” (v. 23);

and “Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.” (v. 24). Consider the idea that kind words not only “sweeten life and heal the body” of the listener, but also of the speaker.

In the field of psychology, communication experts have noted that using expressions that start with “I” better convey a personal message to express a need, as opposed to expressions that start with “you.” An example of appropriate communication in a conflict would be: “I feel sad when you raise your voice at me,” rather than saying: “You always yell at me” (note the emphasis on pronouns). Psychologist John Gottman, in his book “The Marriage Clinic,” advises that criticism, contempt, defensiveness (instead of taking personal responsibility), and stonewalling are as toxic as the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” that destroy a relationship. The writer of Proverbs reminds us to avoid these horsemen and to seek to express kind and gentle words when we speak to others about our needs or desires. If this way of speaking doesn’t come naturally to us, perhaps due to how we were raised as children, we shouldn’t hesitate to pray to God for His Holy Spirit to fill us with His power and love so that our way of speaking is transformed for His glory.

Questions:

- How would you describe an attitude of humility in your own words?
- What kind words have you used or heard that are useful in managing conflict?

II. Patience in Conflict

The other key ingredient we find in the Word of God for good conflict resolution is patience. In Proverbs 16:32, we encounter an easy-to-memorize rhyme filled with wisdom: “It’s better to be patient than powerful. It’s better to win control over yourself than over whole cities” (Good News Translation). In this passage, we once again see the contrast between the kingdom of God and human nature. The latter would probably misunderstand “powerful” as the strength to start a fight or argument and fight until “winning” or getting the upper hand. However, in the kingdom of God, it’s the opposite; “being patient” is more valuable.

With patience, we seek to wait for the right time to speak, and also for the person we wish to talk to about changes to be in a place in their life where they can pay attention, understand the need, and make the changes

we would like to see. This attitude is very different from one that expects immediate changes. We shouldn’t confuse relationships with a McDonald’s drive-thru where we order food and it’s ready in three minutes. On the contrary, it generally takes time for a person to make changes.

The second part of the verse (Proverbs 16:32b) is a truth that strikes the true Christian heart like a double-edged sword: “. . . It’s better to win control over yourself than over whole cities” (GNT). When we face a conflict situation, I believe we should always start by asking about our internal motivations; and God is always faithful to help us realize if we’re failing. Often, human nature wants to put “self” on the throne, and that egocentrism seeks to have its personal will done, often involving dominating others.

This sinful dynamic can occur in marriage, with children, in work relationships, in church relationships, etc. Proverbs 17:11 warns us: “Evildoers foster rebellion against God; the messenger of death will be sent against them.” Even though we sometimes believe we’re right, or even guided by God’s wisdom, we shouldn’t seek to dominate others by force. The wise writer of Proverbs offers us a much better option: seeking to “dominate oneself.” We must master our thirst for power, authority, or control, our desire for fame or recognition, our feelings of sadness or anxiety/fears, our impatience, our envy, etc.

The reality is that these characteristics described here are often the root of internal conflict that we can only recognize through honest introspection and divine wisdom. At this stage, we understand that often what we thought was a conflict with another person is, in reality, a lesson for personal growth. Once again, consider the idea that patience in a conflict is as necessary for the other person as it is for ourselves, since we are also in a process of improvement and growth.

Questions:

- What makes practicing patience difficult, either in your life or in others’ lives?
- What is your favorite verse about patience?

III. Forgiveness in Conflict

The third ingredient for reflection today is forgiveness. We must recognize that at any stage of a conflict (before, during, or after), conflict can hurt the feelings of both individuals involved.

It could be due to the demonstrated attitudes, decisions made, words used, or even the indifference or distance that sometimes arises in the relationship. For this reason, our loving Designer advises us in His Word: “Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends” (Proverbs 17:9). In this verse, we’re confronted with a resounding truth and a decisive choice. When we have been offended by another person, we have the choice to forgive the offense and seek to restore the relationship. In this case, we strive for goodness and love to prevail in the world.

On the contrary, when we choose not to forgive, regrettably, that person becomes an enemy, and we allow Satan to win a victory of division and destruction of the relationship. It’s a decision that can require a lot of emotional effort, but choosing forgiveness has miraculous results.

I once heard someone say that choosing to hold onto resentment is like thinking that one can drink poison and the other person will die. In other words, it’s totally illogical to think that staying angry and unforgiving helps us win the conflict; in fact, it’s the opposite, filling us with negative consequences.

Experts have even found that when a person becomes filled with resentment, they experience emotional symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or irritability, as well as medical issues like high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. In contrast, Proverbs 17:22b says: “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.” In stark contrast, Proverbs 16:6 tells us: “Through love and faithfulness sin is atoned for; through the fear of the Lord evil is avoided” (emphasis added). As true children of God, when His holy love fills our hearts completely, we understand that forgiving our neighbor in the midst of conflict is doing the will of the Father.

And the results of choosing to extend forgiveness bring great glory to God as we witness a restored relationship. God is so faithful and powerful that He is always willing to help us through this process. Similarly, the person who chooses to forgive avoids being filled with resentment, and “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones” (Proverbs 17:22a). Once again, consider the idea that forgiveness not only blesses the life of the recipient with mercy but also greatly benefits the one who extends forgiveness, enabling them to lead a life of freedom, true love, and regaining a friend.

Questions:

- What is your opinion on the importance of forgiveness? Share an idea that helps with forgiveness.
- Mention a biblical passage that reminds you of how Jesus thought/lived forgiveness.

IV. Faith in Conflict

Faith is another essential ingredient for handling conflict with another person in a healthy manner. In Proverbs 16:7, we’re reminded of God’s supernatural power: “When the Lord takes pleasure in anyone’s way, He causes their enemies to make peace with them.” Here we see that if we feel that a conflict is of greater magnitude and we cannot humbly and patiently talk with the person to extend forgiveness, we can fully trust God to work and bring peace. There are times when social conflicts are a special opportunity to see our faith grow and trust in God, because the reality is that we cannot control any human being, their reactions, attitudes, or decisions. So, trusting in God is our sublime refuge.

When we give God full control of each of our relationships, we give Him the opportunity to act according to His holy will and in His time with others, and He also works within us to grow in wisdom, patience, love, and faith. Proverbs 17:3 reminds us of a transformative truth: “The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the Lord tests the heart.” We must recognize that many times we cannot judge the intentions of the other person because we simply don’t know them, but God does, and He helps us understand our own intentions and works to purify and align them with His perfect will. So, let it be!

Questions:

- What are your thoughts on the idea of having “faith” in the midst of interpersonal conflict?
- In what practical ways can you apply faith in a conflict situation?

Conclusion

Conflict in a social relationship can cause us a lot of pain. Humility, patience, forgiveness, and faith can help us make a difference. Experiences of conflict can help us mature, heal, and grow. Finally, Proverbs 17:28 ends with wise advice: “Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise; when he closes his lips, he is deemed intelligent.”



Sadness

Management Clinic

Elvin Heredia (Puerto Rico)

Bible Study passages: I Samuel 1:1-28; Luke 2:52

Memory Verse: “She said, ‘May your servant find favor in your eyes.’ Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast” I Samuel 1:18

Lesson Purpose: To learn to identify feelings of sadness, to express them healthily, and to handle sadness constructively in our life experience as Christians.

Introduction

We have heard at times about the so-called “pain management clinics,” medical centers dedicated to addressing health problems related to pain, its causes, and its effects. How wonderful it would be to have a “clinic for managing sadness” where we can enter distressed and leave happy and content after the first session! Many people think that psychologists have these extraordinary “healing powers” to eliminate sadness in a single therapy session, but believe me, as a psychologist, I know that’s not what happens.

Interestingly, the Word of God offers us an integral and functional structure for managing sadness. This structure is defined in Luke 2:52, where the Bible tells us: “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” This passage defines Jesus as our model of integral life and outlines the aspects of life in which Jesus grew comprehensively. These integral aspects of life that we should also grow in are as follows:

- Wisdom: intellectual or knowledge aspect.
- Stature: physical aspect.
- Favor with God: spiritual aspect.
- Favor with men: social or relational aspect.

“How will this structure help me manage my sadness?” To demonstrate that this integral structure works practically in managing a case of sadness, we’ll apply it to a real biblical case. We’ll take the case of Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and by examining the reading from I Samuel 1:1-28, we’ll identify the integral aspects of life shown in Luke 2:52 and apply them to this intriguing historical account with a high psychotherapeutic content. I hope that this “session” of managing the sadness of this woman will show us that the “clinic for managing sadness” offered by the Word of God is also open to us today.

I. Intellectual Aspect or Knowledge (I Samuel 1:4-7)

“Luke 2:52 indicates that Jesus grew ‘in wisdom.’ Teolosis, [a theory of human development that incorporates vital aspects of being, that we find in Luke 2:52], therefore recognizes the intellectual aspect or knowledge as a vital aspect in human development. The importance of formal and informal education is emphasized as a fundamental part of individual formation, and all possible streams of information accessible to the individual are highlighted” (Heredia, Elvin. “La Teolosis como Teoría del Desarrollo Humano.” USA: Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019, p.21). According to this quote, knowledge can be acquired through formal education, or the individual can gain knowledge about things through their experience or information shared by the environment.

The intellectual aspect allows us to identify the known elements of Hannah’s problem. First of all, she had no children. Of course, in our current cultural context, this issue might not have much significance, but in the culture and idiosyncrasy of the Israelite people, a woman without children bore a curse, and was supposedly sinful. This was part of socially acquired knowledge, and its particular connotations deeply affected Hannah. In the light of this social and cultural understanding or knowledge, she felt and “knew” herself as cursed, incomplete, and unhappy.

To make matters worse, this was knowledge that Peninnah, Elkanah’s other wife, took advantage of to humiliate and compete with Hannah (vv.6-7). Now, was Hannah’s true problem that Peninnah irritated her, made her angry, and saddened her because she had no children? If that had been the real problem, we would have to say that Hannah would have been distracted from the true intellectual issue of her case.

The necessary focus of the aspect of knowledge shouldn't have been on the rivalry with Peninnah but on her true problem: the fact that she had no children (v.5).

When we analyze the case from this fundamental aspect of life, we realize that, just as in Hannah's case, many might also be distracted from the true cause of their particular situations. Many perish for lack of understanding (Hosea 4:6). For the resolution of a problem, it's advisable to first understand the details of the situation and then attack the problem from its true root. In Hannah's case, she realized that the solution to her conflict wasn't in fighting Peninnah but in seeking God's help to grant her a child. The best use of her intellect was to rely on God to address her problem.

Once the problem was recognized from the intellectual aspect or knowledge of the life structure presented in Luke 2:52, we can move on to the next aspect of life considered in this case.

Questions:

- In what element of Ana's case do we identify the intellectual or knowledge aspect?
- Can we identify the intellectual aspect in any situation we live in today?

II. Spiritual Aspect (I Samuel 1:9-11)

"Science increasingly recognizes the presence of spiritual matters in human development, attributing them to emotional circumstances that could impact health and behavior, as in the case of psychology, pharmacology, and psychiatry" (Heredia, Elvin. "La Teolosis como Teoría del Desarrollo Humano." USA: Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2019, p.23). In the case of Hannah, what her intellectual aspect conveyed to her deteriorated her spiritual aspect. Her emotional state was depressed. Hannah wept, her heart was distressed, and she didn't eat (I Samuel 1:7).

Now, once Hannah had identified her true problem, the appropriate action would have been to seek help from the one who could truly help her. According to the intellectual elements that her condition implied for that time, she didn't have children because God hadn't granted her any (v.5). Thus, far from blaming her husband for Peninnah's provocations or even responding to her rival's humiliations, Hannah decided to present her case to the one who mattered (v.10).

As a result of her intellectual analysis, Hannah understood that she wouldn't be able to solve her problem by disconnecting her spiritual aspect from managing her sadness. If the intellectual understanding of the problem led her to a spiritual understanding of her situation, her

next move had to be towards the supreme spiritual being: God. And that's what she did. She immediately made her "appointment" at the "clinic for managing sadness." Verse 10 tells us that "in bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord," indicating that Hannah came to her "therapeutic session" with a strong determination. Hannah poured out her heart before the altar and in the presence of the Lord, which is what we know in psychology as "the release valve." It's a liberating action that allows the afflicted person to release emotional pressures and oppressions. She unburdened her enormous emotional and spiritual weight before God. For this, Hannah employed the power of prayer. Indeed, prayer is a mechanism to release our fears and anxieties. It's no coincidence that the apostle Peter exhorted us to "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (I Peter 5:7).

Through prayer, God begins his "spiritual therapeutic adjustment" in us, allowing us to free ourselves from the spiritual burden reflected in our sadness. The prayer of sincere and genuine faith is undoubtedly the therapeutic process in the "clinic for managing sadness" that removes a heavy emotional and spiritual burden from us, so that our attitude towards the problem starts to shift as a relief. There's a Christian saying my wife Carmen once taught me: "Prayer is the place where burdens change shoulders."

Of course, as often happens when we leave an emotional or physical therapy session, we'll return to our usual environment. We'll once again face the reality of our world. The same happened to Hannah. Her environment or surroundings presented her with a new challenge. This is where we'll consider the third essential aspect of our life according to Luke 2:52.

Questions:

- What place do we give to the spiritual aspect in the face of a conflict?
- What can I do today to apply this teaching to a situation that I'm experiencing?

III. Social or Relational Aspect (I Samuel 1:12-17)

"For Jesus, the social or relational aspect in human development will be decisive in the consideration of intellectual, physical, and spiritual aspects of human beings, as human relationships, the social aspect in human development will equally pass through the scrutiny and evaluation of the environment, as a system superior to the individual as a particular system" (Heredia, Elvin. "La Teolosis como Teoría del Desarrollo Humano." USA: Amazon Kindle, pp.24-25).

There will always be those who want to judge our actions in search of spiritual remedies. The world has always wanted to fill emotional and existential voids with elements that suggest some spiritual content, but certainly aren't the main source of our spirit. In terms related to our class, it has always sought "alternative remedies" to those offered in the "clinic for managing sadness," or even negatively judges the healthful alternative that Scripture offers in Luke 2:52.

Hannah's case was a typical case of premature judgment and mistaken first impressions that many around us propose. For the priest Eli, she seemed like a drunken woman who must have serious emotional conflicts, trying to "drown" them in alcohol (vv.13-14). Unfortunately, today we can see the same scene and consider the aspects suggested by Eli's comment. I don't justify the priest's attitude, but it's equally true that many currently indulge in drunkenness to forget their sorrows, believing that under the influence of "spirits," "drugs," "forbidden sex," "money," etc., they'll remedy what only the Spirit of God can heal.

But, on the other hand, this teaches us not to judge by appearances or reach conclusions about people's life situations without first establishing a relational bond that allows us to understand the inner workings of the case. This is where the social or relational aspect of the integral structure of Luke 2:52 becomes crucial. Notice how Eli clearly changed his impression of the matter when he heard what Hannah had to say. This part of the story calls us, the priests of the kingdom of heaven, to create empathy and understanding with the afflicted. The world already suffers due to not having "the Son"; it suffers rivalry and contempt from its own components, family members, and friends, so the church shouldn't adopt an attitude of "adding fuel to the fire."

Just as Eli had to retract his hasty judgment, we also need to retract our Pharisaic attitudes towards those who suffer, even if it's due to their own sin. The church should be the place where "Hannah" can come to cry out her bitterness, where she can release her pressure valve, where she can find the "clinic for managing sadness." Once Hannah found the social and relational support she needed, her change in attitude began to reflect in the fourth integral aspect of her life.

Questions:

- What implications does the social aspect have for our function as a church?
- How does prejudice harm the establishment of the church as a "clinic for the management of sadness"?

IV. Physical Aspect (I Samuel 1:18-20)

In some way, the physical aspect is a showcase of the integral inner content of the human being, which is considered in the other three integral aspects of the life structure in Luke 2:52. Jesus made it clear in Luke 6:45: "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart." Hannah's case pointed in that direction. Once she could intellectually identify the reason for her sadness, she submitted to the spiritual therapy of prayer to release her feelings, doubts, concerns, and, of course, all her sadness and anxiety. Then, she clarified her position to her immediate surroundings, clearing up any misunderstanding about her situation and even gaining the moral support she needed at the time (v.17).

Then, Hannah would begin to show signs of integral recovery in the area of life that was lacking. Verse 18 tells us, "She went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast." It was undoubtedly a change reflected in her physical appearance. She was no longer the bitter, sad, and distressed woman her husband tried to revive in every possible way. This time, Elkanah would find an animated, determined woman, strengthened in her soul and even in her body. A woman who, most likely, looked attractive and healthy. A woman who clearly rekindled passion in her husband. Verse 19 tells us that "Elkanah made love to his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her."

Hannah became pregnant and gave birth to the son she desired because, in addition to restoring her emotional, intellectual, and relational areas, her physical aspect was prepared to receive the long-awaited blessing from God. Her face, her spirit, her self-esteem, and the appreciation she now had for herself also made her womb fertile.

Questions:

- How did the restoration of her physical appearance manifest in Hannah?
- Does the integral structure of Luke 2:52 serve in a practical way as therapy for managing sadness? Comment.

Conclusion

When we address our situations under the integral structure of Scripture presented in Luke 2:52 and remain faithful to its "treatment," the relief and remedies that God wants to give us begin to manifest. The "clinic for managing sadness" is also open to us today. Let's come with confidence, sincerity, and determination. God will ensure that his "integral therapy" works for our good.



Goodbye, Anxiety!

Verónica Lorena Rocchetti (Argentina)

Biblical passage for study: Philippians 4:8-20

Memory Verse: “casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” 1 Peter 5:7

Lesson Purpose: To identify the areas of our lives where we experience anxiety and to apply some biblical advice in order to manage them.

Introduction

Ask your students to write down how they would feel if they were stranded on a deserted island. Have them make a list of things they would need and explain why they chose those items. After a few students share their lists, read the following excerpt from the poem “Instantes,” attributed to Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges: “I was one of those who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, an umbrella, and a parachute; if I could live my life again, I would travel lighter.” Ask: Why would the mentioned author carry all these things? Were they necessary? What differences are there between the list you wrote and the author’s list? Why did he say that he would “travel lighter” if he could live his life again? What daily concerns do we have and carry “just in case”?

According to the dictionary, *anxiety* is “an uncomfortable feeling of nervousness or worry about something that is happening or might happen in the future” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anxiety>). The excerpt from Borges’ poem encapsulates it well: the author needs to feel that he has control over all variables in the face of “possible problems,” only to realize later in life that worry robbed him of enjoyment and peace.

This isn’t a new emotion. In Philippians 4:6, Paul urged the church not to be “anxious about anything.” However, specialists agree that since the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety levels have surged due to a new and unknown situation. This has led to an increase in the use of psychotropic medications.

I. Identifying Anxiety

We can mention anxiety with various synonyms that allow us to recognize it: constant worry, restlessness, unease, discomfort, agitation, uneasiness, distress, anguish, tribulation, pain, craving.

A. Symptoms

The body starts releasing adrenaline in response to a real or imagined imminent danger. Tachycardia begins,

accompanied by a feeling of breathlessness, difficulty in performing daily activities, distraction, insomnia, negative and suicidal thoughts, problems relating to others, etc.

B. Some Causes of Anxiety

In the Word of God, several causes of anxiety are mentioned:

1. **Food** (Luke 12:22-23). “What if I were to lose my job and couldn’t provide food for my family? What if inflation increased and I couldn’t afford to meet the basic needs of my household?”
2. **Clothing** (Luke 12:27-28). This is the age of image; for both men and women in the postmodern era, clothing goes beyond mere attire. The fashion industry and social media make one believe that if a person lacks style or their image isn’t the best, if their weight isn’t ideal, they won’t fit into society and won’t be accepted by others.
3. **Worry about the future** (Matthew 6:34)
4. **Concern about possible wars** (Matt. 24:6-8)
5. **Fear of COVID-19 or any other illness** (Psalm 91:5-6)
6. **Worry about everything** (Philippians 4:6).

Clearly, if Paul said not to be anxious about anything, it means that one can be anxious about everything: friends, work-related, and family relationships, people speaking ill of you in person and on social media, guilt over past actions and anxiety, real problems, imagined problems, etc.

This is how panic attacks arise. The adrenaline our body produces in response to a real problem, meant for defending us from danger, starts being produced in response to “possible imaginary problems.” Thus, the entire body suffers the consequences, and fear paralyzes the person because everything, perhaps even things that will never happen, becomes a source of concern and uncertainty.

Questions:

- Define in your own words what anxiety is.
- Identify and name the most frequent causes of anxiety in your life.

II. How Can I Manage My Anxiety?

In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul wrote to the church and gave them some useful imperatives to practice in moments of anxiety.

A. Be Joyful

Apostle Paul emphasized that they should always remain joyful: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). One might think that the apostle had life figured out, which is why he emphasized joy. However, Paul wrote to the church while unjustly imprisoned in a dungeon (worse than present-day situations); he had been beaten; he awaited a fair trial before the Roman emperor. Many had abandoned him; he was fighting against false teachers from a distance (Phil. 3:18-19) who preached out of rivalry and envy (Phil. 1:15); he interceded for conflicts among the brethren (Phil. 4:2), and the list goes on. He had more reasons to be anxious than to be joyful. So, what was the secret of his joy? What can we learn from him? Let’s explore the following teachings:

1. Joy is a decision. Paul gave them the imperative to be joyful; they had to make the decision to be joyful and do it.
2. His joy wasn’t dependent on material things: “I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it’s with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little” (Phil. 4:12a).
3. It’s in God: “Rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 4:4). When our minds are focused on Him, worry cannot steal our peace, and we’re joyful because God is in control. Hence, we can ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with this gift (Gal. 5:22).

B. Pray Continuously

Phil. 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” We can continually talk to God and present our concerns to Him. The result will be the sought-after peace that will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

C. Be Thankful

Philippians 4:6 says, “...and thanksgiving.” Instead of focusing on what we lack or what might happen to us, we should give thanks in all circumstances. Surely, Paul had reasons to be anxious and could have experienced post-traumatic stress after shipwrecks, imprisonment, snake bites, beatings, etc. However, he chose to give thanks,

and he shared this secret of life with us: “be thankful.” Complaining and reproaches lead to anxiety; gratitude brings peace.

D. Choose What to Think

In Philippians 4:8, the Apostle Paul provides a list of things to think about: “...whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” God didn’t create us as robots who can only think what’s predetermined or programmed. We can choose what to think. When a disturbing thought arises, reminding us of an unwanted past event or bringing thoughts of an unsettling future event, we can identify it and choose not to dwell on it.

We can replace each of these thoughts with a biblical truth. What does the Bible say about this? Find Bible verses that address each of your concerns and start thinking about them. Writing these truths on cards and placing them where you can see them or using them as wallpapers on your phone or computer can be very helpful to remind yourself constantly. The apostle Paul didn’t suggest thinking about it; he gave it as an imperative: “think about such things” (v. 8), “keep your minds on” (v. 8). What do we keep our minds occupied with? We have the remote control of our thoughts; let’s change the channel.

E. Meditate on the Word of God

The Psalmist said that his meditation on God was sweet (Psalm 104:34). When we recognize the symptoms of a panic attack, we can close our eyes, take deep breaths, and start replacing those thoughts with a Bible verse. Just like ruminants chew their food, we can “ruminate the Word,” repeating this verse over and over again in our thoughts or even aloud. If anxiety paralyzes us, we can imitate others who show us how to get out of it (Philippians 3:17).

F. Not Staying Alone

Paul had learned that he could face all problems in Christ who strengthened him. However, he felt comforted knowing that the Philippians had thought of him and collected funds for his benefit (Philippians 4:10-14). This teaches us not to think that nobody cares about our problems, to not let pride get the best of us. The Christian life is a life in community. We can ask for or accept help from our congregation.

The acts of love by the Philippians not only benefited Paul but also themselves (Phil. 4:14-17). Another version says, “...you may be credited with a full reward” (v. 17) Sharing with those who have less, giving someone our time, even if it’s just an hour or two per week, giving money, skills, food—it benefits us even more when it’s someone from the family of faith.

Jesus taught that it's more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Staying locked away, alone, overthinking, allowing room for complaints and anxiety, isn't the solution.

G. Living Day by Day

Jesus spoke in Matthew 6:34 about not worrying about tomorrow because each day brings its own concerns. He also told the parable of a man who lived so anxiously, so worried about not suffering in his future that, when he wanted to relax and start enjoying, death was already coming for him (Luke 12:13-21). Several groups of former addicts have the motto "One Day at a Time." They don't know if they'll overcome their addiction forever, and simply thinking that they might fail creates more anxiety and could make them fall faster. However, they can resolve not to succumb to temptation one day at a time, one hour at a time, one minute at a time. It's good advice to follow. Letting go of the past and moving forward (Philippians 3:13-14).

The past can't be lived again; it can only be forgiven by grace. You can't stay anxious about something you can't change; that's why you can rise, forget what's behind, take a deep breath, and move forward.

Questions:

- Which of the pieces of advice given by the apostle Paul do you follow when you feel anxious? Discuss.
- After identifying the areas of your life where you tend to feel anxious, find a Bible verse for each of them that you can repeat and meditate on when you recognize any anxiety symptoms attacking you. You can write them on posters to place in areas of your home where you'll see them regularly.

III. Anxiety is an Emotion, Not a Sin

One might think that Christians don't experience anxiety; however, they're also human beings. Many times, they're urged to "believe and not doubt." This causes discomfort when facing physical or mental illnesses that can't be overcome. Along with the anxiety that the entire rest of humanity experiences, the person adds the guilt of feeling this way; and often, they try to appear different to avoid judgment. This adds more anxiety and complications. Anxiety is a feeling that causes emotional problems and sometimes physical symptoms. Can it lead to spiritual problems? Yes. Is feeling anxious a sin? No. In fact, the apostle in 1 Peter 5:7 spoke to the church, saying, "Cast all your anxiety on him."

An example of how anxiety can lead to spiritual problems is to be found in King Saul (1 Samuel 15) when he offered sacrifices that only the priest could offer. He allowed his anxiety to lead him to act against the Word

of God and disobey. He gave room to his thoughts and let them govern him: "What if Samuel doesn't arrive and we lose the battle?" He wouldn't allow it; his anxiety led him to sin when he offered the sacrifices only Samuel could offer, and he fell from grace.

Many times, we often believe that illnesses are solely physical. However, we're integrated beings with spirit, soul, and body. If anxiety is already causing physical symptoms but the person continues to attend church, seek God, and obey His Word, they don't have a spiritual problem but rather an emotional one. There's still time to seek help.

It's also not wrong to seek medical help. The Church of the Nazarene Manual, Article 14, says: "We also believe that God heals through medical science" (Church of the Nazarene Manual, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p. 28). There are excellent professionals who can help. If a fellow believer doesn't feel confident with a non-believer, they can seek a Christian professional. The important thing is to not stop seeking help, which also includes psychological medical help.

Use this illustration: "Recently, I visited the northern part of Argentina, traveling to the city of Iruya. The road was winding, gravelly, with precipices, full of curves and counter-curves. The bus we were on was a type of school bus that kept trembling so much that it lost a window. Thoughts like 'What if...?' kept arising throughout the journey. It wasn't easy to stay calm and relaxed on the way there. Upon arriving in the destination town, I spoke with one of the passengers who was seated near the driver, and he told me to rest assured because the driver was skilled, experienced, and had perfect control over the vehicle and the road. That comment helped me think and repeat to myself, 'He's in control,' 'He knows what he's doing.' Then I took a deep breath and could sleep on the way back to the hotel where we were staying."

Questions:

- Find another biblical example of someone who experienced spiritual problems due to anxiety.
- What's your opinion about the statement: "Anxiety is an emotion, not a sin," and that seeking psychological help is acceptable?

Conclusion

What if we trust in our God who guides our lives and leave control to Him when we're anxious? What if we can entrust the control of our journey through this life to the best driver: God? It will make us happy to know that we'll arrive safely at our destination. It will rid us of anxiety.

Useful Recommendations for Believers: James, 1 & 2 Peter

Third Quarter

Blessing in Trials and Temptations
Faith and Good Works
The Tongue
In Search of Sophia
Practical Advice for Christian Living
A Profitable Wait
A Call to Holiness
The People of God and Their Purpose
Behaving in a way that pleases God
Partakers of Christ's Sufferings
Useful Exhortations
Beware of False Prophets
Getting Ready for His Coming



Blessing in Trials and Temptations

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Bible Study passages: James 1:2-5, 12-15, 19-25

Memory Verse: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him."

James 1:12

Lesson Purpose: To understand that enduring trials and temptations in the light of God's Word brings forth marvelous blessings.

Introduction

From a biblical perspective, we see that the definition of trials is a way of demonstrating our spiritual character in the face of life's situations or circumstances. They demonstrate the truth with which we have been formed and the certainty or falsehood of our conviction of faith. We can infer, then, that trials and temptations aren't the same within biblical consideration.

A trial can come from various sources and, of course, can be a product of temptation; however, a temptation will certainly put us to the test. Temptation will test our character, our faith, and our inner being. Temptation is an external stimulus that will bring to light what's in our soul and our inner being. Usually, we highlight the hardships that trials and temptations produce in us, but in this lesson, we'll identify the blessings that both situations offer for our development and strengthening in our Christian life, and how the Word of God plays a crucial role in this aspect.

I. Blessedness in the Midst of Trials (James 1:2-5)

Trials may seem like unwanted impositions. A trial compels, limits, and stretches us. Indeed, trials urge us to give our best in the most adverse circumstances. In the Christian's life, trials are often like the tension applied to a string of a musical instrument. The tighter the string, the higher the pitch. Therefore, trials help us tune and elevate our spiritual tone or character. That's why the apostle James instructed the church that we can consider it pure joy when faced with various trials (v.2). The apostle's exhortation arose from what these diverse trials produce in us.

Trials produce patience (v.3); they strengthen our character and properly refine our response to them. Thus, trials connect us with the Holy Spirit, who, through them, produces, defines, and matures His fruit in us.

We know that patience is one of the components of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). James found great joy in the fact that we're subjected to various trials (James 1:2) because they will produce the necessary patience to endure them. Simultaneously, they will test the fruit of the Spirit dwelling within us. Trials will reveal the spiritual material we're made of and the truth of our Christian character.

James highlighted wisdom as a characteristic of those who, in various trials, seek help from God. Wisdom, as suggested in verse 4, leads us to patience and, at the same time, perfects its work in us. For the apostle, patience has its complete work in the wisdom acquired through the experience lived in the midst of the trial.

Thus, wisdom and acquired experience are additional blessings of being subjected to various trials. We become more patient and wiser when tested. This, undoubtedly, should be a source of great joy for us.

Questions:

- With what other illustration can we compare the effect of trials on us?
- What are the blessings we can receive when subjected to various trials?

II. Blessedness in the Midst of Temptations (James 1:12-15)

We are often tested by “temptations.” As mentioned earlier, although trials don’t always come through temptations, temptations will always test us. However, temptations will produce trials in us only if we allow it. Resisting temptation is already a test, but being seduced into falling into temptation will provoke a more intense and painful trial. This seduction is what the passage refers to as “their own evil desire” (v.14). It’s our carnal and sinful desires that can make us succumb to temptation.

It’s essential to note this detail because we often think that God allows us to be tempted. I must point out that indeed, God allows trials and afflictions to touch our lives, but not to prove our Christian character to Him. That would imply that God doesn’t know how much we can endure and needs to test us.

In fact, the apostle Paul told us in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you except what’s common to mankind. And God is faithful; he won’t let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.” In that sense, the trial doesn’t really serve a practical purpose for God but for us. The trial doesn’t demonstrate God’s knowledge of us but rather how much knowledge, faith, and trust we have in God.

I have always thought that trials aren’t for God to find out what He already knows about us, but are a magnificent opportunity for us to prove and examine ourselves, checking our degree of faith and fidelity to God. Temptations test our beliefs and convictions.

On the other hand, trials refine and adjust us to be useful strings and instruments for God. I don’t know how you might appreciate this thought, but to me, it seems like another great blessing for our lives. It must be for this reason that the apostle James pointed out resisting temptation as a blessing (James 1:12).

As we resist falling into temptations, we’re not subjected to the various trials that temptations may provoke. Notice that the passage highlights the blessedness of being able to resist temptations. This is why the apostle Paul exhorted his spiritual son Timothy to flee youthful passions (2 Timothy 2:22). The apostle’s advice considered the urgency of not even stopping to pay attention to these matters.

There are tempting situations that don’t deserve even the slightest consideration from us. We don’t negotiate with them; we simply must flee from them.

The blessedness highlighted by the apostle James resides in that attitude. God promises salvation and eternal life to those who resist temptations because resisting temptations prevent unnecessary exposure to the trials that temptations may bring. As a musician and guitarist, I know that tightening a string too much can break it. As a psychologist, I also know that exposing ourselves to the tensions of life can shatter our stability, nervous system, and peace. Those who resist temptations don’t allow unnecessary tension to break the string of their instrument. Those who resist temptations cut off the possibility of their instrument going out of tune.

As mentioned earlier, temptations will produce trials, but we can reduce the impact of temptations as we flee from them. Resisting temptations is a way to demonstrate our Christian character and temperance without necessarily having to go through various trials. Now, does this mean that if we have fallen into temptation and are being tested, we have no option to be blessed? The apostle James considers this in the same passage. The apostle provides the means by which we can resist temptations and endure trials. Of course, this means also another great blessing.

Questions:

- Are temptations necessary? Explain.
- What are the blessings we can receive when we resist temptation?

III. Blessedness in Being Doers of the Word (James 1:19-25)

From this point, the Apostle James seemed to gather the motivations for his exhortation. Furthermore, he appeared to point out the characteristics that can lead us into temptations and trials, as well as the alternative we have to know to resist temptations and endure trials.

Firstly, the apostle exhorts us not to resist the Word of God, or prevent it from taking root in us. The passage indicates that, in this regard, we should immediately seek to hear the truth taught by the Word of God. It also suggests that we shouldn’t be quick to speak or speculate about this truth, let alone become angry or irate in the face of this truth (v.19).

Verse 20 specifies that offering this tenacious resistance to the Word of God will prevent God's righteousness from working in us. That's to say, resisting or rejecting the Word of God will hinder us from knowing what's necessary to resist temptation and endure trials.

James went further by stating that merely hearing the Word of God isn't enough; we must put into practice what Scripture advises us to do (v.22). Keep in mind that those who resist the truth of the Word of God have heard it but prefer not to obey it. They prefer not to be obedient to its counsel and ordinances. They prefer not to be doers of the Word. To a large extent, the Word of God also tests us; resisting it, however, turns us into that string of the instrument that cannot be tuned. This attitude can be defined as rebellion, and being rebellious to the Word of God is undoubtedly a reprehensible sin.

There can be no greater lack of wisdom and a worse sin against God than resisting His Word because rebelliously resisting it constitutes reckless disobedience. It's a conscious and willful resistance. Other passages of Scripture consider this attitude as rebellion and disobedience, condemning it with the full severity of divine law:

- Saul's disobedience to the word of the prophet Samuel was considered rebellion and stubbornness, representing a sin as serious as idolatry and divination: "For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king" (1 Samuel 15:23).
- The people of Israel were urged to be obedient to God's voice, or else they would experience serious consequences: "See, I'm sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he won't forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies

and will oppose those who oppose you" (Exodus 23:20-22). Certainly, as we can also see in these passages, there's blessedness and blessing for those who are obedient and doers of the Word of God.

Note that the implied blessedness in being doers of the Word is that everything we do will bring happiness to our lives. Indeed, we can interpret in the light of what the biblical passage suggests (James 1:22) that those who are doers of the Word of God can be happy and blessed even when tempted and subjected to various trials because the blessings mentioned earlier will reach them. The blessings of trials and temptations become promises of God for those who are obedient to Him by being doers of His Word.

Being doers of the Word also demonstrates the acquired wisdom and patience developed through trials and the resistance to falling into temptations. Once again, what the apostle Paul said in Romans 8:28 is confirmed when he said, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." Loving God will lead us to obey His Word and be doers of it. This, in turn, will help us know and practice everything necessary to resist temptations and endure trials. The Word of God is our provision for resisting temptations, enduring trials, and being blessed.

Questions:

- What is the main blessing highlighted in the biblical passage?
- What other characteristics are perceived in those who are doers of the Word?

Conclusion

At the end of the process, everything turns into joy and blessedness for us because we'll have acquired the wisdom and experience to recognize and avoid temptations, and the same Word of God will lead us to strengthen our faith in God, which will help us endure trials.



Faith and Good Works

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Biblical passage for study: James 2:1-26

Memory Verse: “In the same way, faith by itself, if it’s not accompanied by action, is dead.”
James 2:17

Lesson Purpose: To understand the inseparable relationship between faith and good works.

Introduction

The first-century church had to resolve conflicts of all kinds. The majority revolved around the way of life that the New Covenant demanded, while others were purely doctrinal. There was a real need to establish theology that would help to shape thinking in accordance with what God had established through Christ. One of the topics that needed clarification was the relationship between faith and good works, whether they were in opposition or inherently connected.

James, addressing the Jewish community, emphasized the demonstration of faith through good works. He made it clear that it’s impossible for a believer with faith not to demonstrate it through good works. Thus, good works shouldn’t replace faith; however at the same time, good works are a result of faith, making them indissolubly linked.

While the church has generally understood this principle theologically, each believer needs to embody it in their daily life. How can we do this? Let’s analyze what the Word of God has to tell us.

I. Faith Does Not Involve Partiality (James 2:1-13)

A. Faith Does Not Make Distinctions

James’s teaching on faith is practical, addressing a historical issue in human social life—the significant inequality between the rich and the poor—and how this should be interpreted from a New Testament faith and theological perspective. The words are clear: “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism” (v.1).

The illustration James provides is intriguing (vv.2-3). Upon analyzing the text, we see two men entering the same place, but with a marked difference in appearance—

clothing and a gold ring. This signifies the material wealth of one and the material poverty of the other. Welcoming both rich and poor into the congregation is commendable, but the sin lies in the attitude toward them. The difference in material wealth isn’t the issue. The problem arises when preference is given to the rich, showing partiality. This is where the sin lies because, in the kingdom of God, there’s no distinction. All have equal rights and responsibilities. This statement should cease to be a mere concept and be lived out by the church.

James provides reasons for why favoritism is a sin:

- Because we make distinctions (v.4).
- Because we become judges with evil thoughts (v.4).
- Because the poor are heirs of the kingdom of God (v.5).
- Because we should love our neighbor as ourselves (v.8).
- Because we become transgressors of the law (v.9).

The first-century church had to contend strongly against religious and social concepts that accepted partiality. They struggled to define and change a prevailing mentality in those who formed the early church, based on precepts different from what they had heard. Yet they maintained a clear conviction in what the Master had taught. It was challenging for that era to understand that in Christ, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, woman and man, slave and master were part of one body without privilege or superiority.

B. The Contemporary Church and Partiality

Despite the church teaching against practicing partiality, the reality sometimes diverges from theology or belief.

More than 2,000 years after James spoke of the incompatibility of faith with partiality, there are still churches:

- Granting more privileges to those with higher social status.
- Where believers with greater financial contributions have more rights to exercise leadership.
- Where the biggest contributor decides what should or shouldn't be done in the church.
- Where the first and best positions are reserved for wealthier individuals.
- Where an ecclesiastical hierarchical position grants privileges to some but not to others.
- That allows racial, linguistic, origin, and citizenship differences.
- Where the sins of those who contribute more financially to the church aren't judged.

In the world, social inequality, injustice, and favoritism exist, but these aren't the premises of the New Covenant. At the Lord's table, no one is greater than another; there are no privileges of any kind—all are disciples. When someone in the church of Christ practices partiality for any reason, they're committing sin. The church isn't a social club or a business model; it's a body of believers with different functions, none greater than the other, serving one another and the purpose of the kingdom of God. The apostle Paul explained it well: "Here there's no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Col. 3:11).

Questions:

- Why is partiality a sin and incompatible with faith?
- Do you know of cases in the current church where favoritism is evident? Share.

II. Faith Without Works is Dead (James 2:14-20)

This is one of the most well-known phrases in the church, but it poses a daily challenge for us to fulfill. James wasn't against faith; rather, he simply emphasized that good works should demonstrate true faith. The actions of a believer should respond to what they have believed.

A. Belief and Action (v.14)

For James, it was essential for believers to demonstrate, through actions, their faith in Christ. It's impossible for someone to have faith and not be led to perform good works. This is the basis for the questions in verse 14.

James wasn't questioning salvation by faith; rather, he was addressing the hypocrisy of many who claimed to be what they truly were not. He was saying that if you're truly a follower of Christ, your faith will inevitably be evidenced by your good works. Thus, he placed works as clear evidence of genuine faith. This doesn't mean undermining faith but giving it a practical concept because, for a follower of Christ, doing good is natural.

Many believers struggle to interpret the question James posed in verse 14, thinking it contradicts Pauline theology: "Can such faith save him?" (v.14). This question isn't in opposition to the criteria of the apostle Paul; rather, James was asking a rhetorical question with a clear intention to describe the legitimate faith of salvation. That's why he wanted to express that the kind of faith some wanted to show, which didn't include any works, wasn't legitimate. Therefore, that faith isn't a saving faith. The Living Bible version translates the verse as follows: "Will that kind of faith save anyone?" (v.14b TLB).

It's clear that James didn't intend to affirm salvation by works, nor did he suggest that someone has to perform a specific action to deserve salvation. Instead, he was emphasizing the evidence of legitimate faith in Christ. "For both Paul and James, works are the natural consequence of true faith (Phil. 1:27; 1 Thess. 1:3; James 2:20-24). Of course, we cannot use our works to earn God's favor" (Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary, James and 1-3 John*. USA: Ed. Grand Rapids, 2007, p.80).

B. Good Works Show True Faith (vv.15-20)

The congregation to whom James is writing appears to be composed of converted Jews with an Old Testament religious background. The aim was to establish a formation of faith in Christ, which is purely spiritual and subjective. However, its evidence needed to be objective, without ceasing to be spiritual, demonstrating the visibility of inner faith.

James' advice leads us to contemplate the value of the believer's faith who sees their needy brother and does nothing to help. Offering a word of encouragement is good, but not providing anything to cover their physical need isn't enough (vv.15-16). This is what James called dead faith (v.17), because it lacks works to back it up.

It's crucial that the church, in the face of any difficulty that a member could have, should pray, give words of encouragement, provide hope, and appropriate counseling.

Many needs that must be addressed are spiritual, and others that are material often stem from an impoverished mindset that needs to be transformed by the Spirit. Alongside these actions, we understand that material assistance should be offered when someone needs it. This is what Jesus taught (Matthew 25:35-45); He not only taught people but he also fed the multitudes (Matthew 14:15-20).

As churches full of believers, if someone is hungry, we need to provide them with food. If a brother or sister needs clothing, we need to provide it for them. People will see our faith in what we do for others. Although it's always good to offer knowledge and skills, as well as giving aid so that people don't become dependent but can obtain resources themselves, we need to understand that many are in a situation where it's impossible for them to do so, and the church should help unconditionally.

Questions:

- Explain how faith and works are intrinsically linked.
- Explain how the church, through works, can demonstrate genuine faith.

III. Biblical Testimonies of Faith Evidenced by Works (James 2:21-26)

James wanted to continue demonstrating that true faith is evidenced by good works, and resorted to illustrating it with examples from Scripture. Verses 21 to 26 represent, in the apostle's words, the clear proof that faith without works is dead.

A. The Example of Abraham's Faith (vv.21-24)

It's almost impossible to speak of faith to a Jewish community, even if converted, without touching on the example of Abraham, who was the paradigm of faith for the Israelite community. That's why James, a Jew who wrote to converted Jews, considered it necessary to mention Abraham when talking about faith.

For James, this story is strong evidence that works reveal true faith. Abraham, through the intentionality of sacrificing his son Isaac, demonstrated his faith in God. God was trying his faith and he passed the test. These binding examples between faith and works are what James wanted to convey to the emerging church. Faith is demonstrated through good works, or good works are evidence of genuine faith.

In this story, works consisted of giving up the best and most precious thing, Isaac his son, to God as an example of faith.

In their daily walk, a person of faith will demonstrate it when they give the best and most precious thing they have to God. In this story, Abraham showed that God was different from other gods. In the context in which Abraham lived, it was common for parents to sacrifice their children to gods, and in fact, many died. But in the case of the God of Abraham, it was different because He is a God who didn't allow such an act, but provided the sacrifice; for the first time, the phrase "God the provider" (Genesis 22:14), appears in Scripture. God provided and Abraham was obedient to God and had great faith in Him, showing profound obedience to the Lord.

B. The Example of Rahab's Faith (v.25)

In the Story of Rahab, the testimony of faith could have been compromised for the Jewish community because a Gentile woman was presented as a good example, and moreover, she had a sinful background because she was known to be a prostitute. However, through her work of receiving and caring for the Jewish spies and risking her life, she showed her faith by helping in the mission of the people of God (Israel) (Joshua 2:1-22). In this particular story, faith was demonstrated through good works for people in need. So every time good works are performed by a believer, their genuine faith is being evidenced. For James, real faith had to be seen through their works. If there were no good works then, that faith didn't exist; it was dead.

For the world we minister to, human beings see our faith through good works, actions. That's why people can see Jesus in us when we help the sick, the needy, the elderly, widows, prisoners, etc. It's through action towards our neighbor that others can see that Christ dwells in our hearts and that our faith is deep in Him. The church that has a living faith doesn't tire of doing good works to this lost world and, consequently, serves the kingdom of God.

Questions:

- Which biblical examples did James mention to demonstrate faith evidenced by works?
- How would you personally apply James' teaching on faith and works to your life?

Conclusion

At the end of the class, we can affirm that there's an indissoluble relationship between faith and works. Therefore, true faith doesn't include favoritism, it doesn't show partiality. We must "walk the talk" otherwise, our faith has no meaning, it's dead.



The Tongue

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

Biblical passage for study: James 3:2-12

Memory Verse: “We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.” James 3:2

Lesson Purpose: To understand the importance of mastering our tongues if we want to live healthy Christian lives.

Introduction

In the early chapters of the book of James, we find profound and wise teachings on how to overcome temptation, the importance of prayer, faith, and putting the Word of God into action. Additionally, he describes the healthy relationship between faith and works for the edification of a church that increasingly reflects Christ. James then sought to foster practical Christian living, especially at a historical moment when damaging attitudes and habits began to emerge within the church. Therefore, there's a need to strengthen the foundations of a Christian practice that reflected Christ's character, making the church a community that not only proclaims holy living but experiences it in all aspects of life.

It's in this context that we reach chapter 3, where the writer paused to impart wisdom regarding a growing issue among the congregations of his time: the use of the tongue and the need to master it for a full Christian life. Use of the tongue, understood as Christian behavior in speech, holds a significant place in the list of Christian responsibilities for holy living, indicating a pure heart and ethically responding to Christ's character. Read James 3:2-12 with your class, then have students work in groups to create two lists: one with examples of ways Christians today can misuse their tongues and another with examples of proper use. Ask each group to share their lists while you note them on the board. Conclude the activity by emphasizing the relevance of the tongue's theme and its mastery for Christians in our times.

I. Difficult, yet it Must Be Bridled (James 3:2-8)

Scripture reminds us that “we all stumble in many ways” (v. 2a), meaning that we're all prone to making

mistakes, especially in speech, which signifies a great responsibility we've taken on as the people of God. When we open our mouths to speak, the Lord encourages us to guard our tongues to avoid the temptation mentioned in Proverbs 10:19: “Sin isn't ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues.” James points out the temptation to sin through speech, by which we often cause offense. The harm that our tongues can cause in interpersonal relationships of a congregation can have incalculable effects.

Therefore, there's a need to pay special attention to this ethical issue raised in this passage of Scripture. Alongside a life of prayer, reading and studying Scripture, interest in people's salvation, the desire to glorify God, and love and mercy toward others, the mastery of the tongue is part of the signs of a Christian who is maturing, growing in the values of Christian ethics and walking in holiness, integrating more and more into their personality the ideal of Christ's character.

Regarding this, Purkiser states: “The growing Christian will also use words carefully. The tongue is a rebellious member of the body, and the Christian must learn to subject it to his spirit” (Purkiser, W. T. *Exploring Our Christian Faith*. USA: CNP, 1994, p.534). This is why James affirms that “Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check” (James 3:2b), emphasizing the importance of speech in Christian life. In this case a “perfect” person represents someone who fully lives out their Christian calling, glorifying the Lord in all aspects of life with integrity, and where speech is one of the characteristics of Christian ethics that reflects their maturity and growth in the life of holiness.

James says: “When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal” (v. 3). Although the bridle used in the mouths of horses is small, it allows the rider to guide the animal wherever they wish through the control of its mouth. The same applies to the small rudder (v. 4) that a pilot can use to steer a large vessel wherever they desire. Both illustrations, the bridle and the rudder, can be applied to a Christian’s speech, where a small tongue can be used both as a means of blessing and cursing, depending on the control the Christian has over it.

However, we shouldn’t address the issue of mastering the tongue without recognizing its effects, as James illustrated in verses 6 to 8. He emphasized the contrast between the smallness of the tongue and the incalculable effects it can have, like a great forest fire ignited by a small flame. He used the example of the fallen person’s tongue—an evil, unrestrained, and untamable tongue that destroys, contaminates, and is caused by the devil; meaning it has the ability to destroy lives. Without Christ, it’s impossible to tame it because humans lack the necessary self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Questions:

- Why is it important to pay attention to mastering the tongue?
- What are the effects of an unrestrained tongue?

II. Power to Curse and Bless (James 3:9-12)

Having established the need and also the difficulty of mastering the tongue, James states that it’s clear that in the Christian life, achieving a certain maturity or fullness in Christ isn’t possible without mastering the tongue as part of a Christian ethics for holy and abundant living. In verses 9 to 12, James directed his teaching to the Christian community, explaining that when we speak with a double meaning, we show inconsistency as a Christian, like a fountain of fresh water that has salty water or like a fig tree producing olives.

Among the early Christians, following a Jewish custom, the expression “Blessed be He!” was commonly used when mentioning God. However, with that same tongue, they cursed their neighbor, disregarding the teaching of the second great commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:36-39). This behavior needed to be condemned and corrected urgently as Jesus warned: “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or

sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell” (Matthew 5:22).

It’s not ethically right for us to use our tongues to bless God and then curse our neighbor. This conduct must be eradicated from the Christian community because the effects of this practice can be devastating.

Today, we can find numerous examples of Christian communities whose crises and difficulties began with a few words uttered by someone who didn’t know how to shut their mouths in time. Imagine how many conflicts would have been avoided if some malicious words had been stopped in time.

Similarly, think about the times when a word came out of a believer’s mouth to heal the wounded heart of a brother or sister or how many times a phrase or word was edifying for the entire community, serving to bless, restore the fallen, and help the needy (Ephesians 4:29).

Like the readers of James, today we’re also challenged to develop the habit of analyzing and reflecting on our words, identifying those that may have offended or damaged our relationship with God or our neighbor. This will help us to act quickly to correct our behavior, with humility.

This combination of introspection and behavior change is essential because persisting in the misuse of the tongue, knowing the need to change for the sake of our relationship with God and our neighbor, would only lead us into moral and ethical contradiction, distancing us from God’s purpose for our lives. This is why James affirmed that “this shouldn’t be” among Christians (James 3:10b).

The community of believers must reflect love for God and neighbor on every occasion, and even more so when they have the opportunity to make their tongues a means to bless and not to curse.

Questions:

- What should be the position of the Christian regarding mastering the tongue?
- What are the effects of the misuse of the tongue in Christian communities?

III. Divine Solution

In contrast to the impossibility of the natural person to tame their tongue, the Scriptures say that with God, all things are possible (Luke 1:37). James's words about the tongue aren't aimed solely at making us reflect on its importance; they're also presented as wisdom, a recommendation for believers to live their Christianity more fully, glorifying Jesus Christ in all things without duplicity and closing the doors of the heart to any possibility of hypocrisy.

That's why this passage is also crucial for us today. Jesus said: "...how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him" (Matthew 12:34-35), indicating that "when the inner life is clean and dominated by the Holy Spirit, the speech of the Christian can be disciplined to be pleasing to God. The tongue, however undisciplined, is caged in the mouth, and God can give grace to close the cage when it needs to be closed!" (Harper, A. F. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume X. USA: CNP, 1992, p.230).

So, the mastery of the tongue, as part of personal Christian ethics, doesn't depend on human strength. Instead, it's supported by a spiritual power that's from above (Luke 24:49) and is experienced through the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5, 8). This power enables the believer to follow Christ's example with their life and service, growing in all areas of their existence with a pure heart. We might try to discipline our tongue through mental exercises; however, this would result in a mechanized, forced behavior that would likely lose its power in a critical situation and reveal what's truly within us.

Therefore, it's essential to recognize that restraining and mastering the tongue is intimately related to the character of Christian ethics that emerges and develops on the basis of a pure heart that has Christ as a model. As Orton Wiley affirms: "Christian revelation, culminating in the perfect life of our Lord Jesus Christ, becomes the foundation of Christian ethics. His words, deeds, and

spirit become the norm for all Christian conduct" (Wiley, Orton. Introduction to Christian Theology. USA: CNP, 1992, p.380).

This conduct must be a reality for believers today. First, because, like the original readers of the book of James, Christians need to not only know the details of God's Word, but also to put it into practice with power.

Second, Christianity that reflects the character of Christ and impacts society in our time isn't possible if Christians don't experience coherence between their thoughts and the actions they carry out. Thoughts purified by the power of the Holy Spirit will allow us to recognize that it's not by our own strength that we can live up to the high moral and ethical standards in this life. Instead, it's the supernatural intervention of God Himself that can help us reflect Christ in our lives, especially when it comes to speech.

Let's examine our words, identify speech that doesn't come from God, and act quickly to correct our behavior. Let's acknowledge that the power to change this isn't naturally within us, but that Christ Himself has provided us with the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to live our Christianity fully, and that our words must also reflect His holy character so that the world may know that He is the Lord.

The mastery of the tongue isn't a minor issue in the life of a Christian, but is part of Christian responsibilities for holy living. The task of restraining the tongue isn't simple.

Questions:

- In what way do I reflect Christ in the use of my tongue?

Conclusion

We must live in harmony with what we think, live, and say. This coherence doesn't come from our own strength but arises from a pure heart, blessed with the experience of baptism with the Holy Spirit, who empowers us to grow and mature on the path of holiness, glorifying the Lord in all our ways, including our speech.



In Search of Sophia

Peter Salinas (Ecuador)

Biblical passage for study: James 3:13-17

Memory Verse: “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” (James 3:17).

Lesson Purpose: To understand the true sense of biblical wisdom and its necessity in the development of our lives, in the church, and in society.

Introduction

In recent years, we have experienced extreme polarizations, from major world powers like the U.S. to our Latin American countries. This is due to political issues or topics related to climate change, vaccines, apocalyptic theories, etc. The problem isn't so much our differences in opinion, beliefs, or convictions; it's that they have led to external manifestations of hostility, repression, and the breaking of relationships. In these circumstances, we need to pay attention to the call of Scripture: “Out in the open wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice...” (Proverbs 1:20-23). We need to seek Sophia (wisdom), but not just any wisdom, but the one that comes from above.

I. Wisdom

The word “wisdom” in the Bible comes from the Greek *sophia*, and “wise” from *sophos* (Rossano, Ravasi, and Girlanda. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Spain: Ediciones Paulinas, 1990, p.1712). Ancient cultures in the Middle East placed a primary emphasis on practical wisdom that was shown and reflected in everyday life. The Hebrew people also embraced this tradition, as reflected in the writings of the Old Testament. In these proverbs, young people were instructed for life (Proverbs 4:10-11). This wisdom arises not so much from applying the scientific method but from observing the everyday experiences of humans, animals, and plants. These are expressed through popular sayings, such as “Shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current.”

The Scriptures aren't exempt from this emphasis. God reveals in the book of Proverbs the wisdom of the Hebrew people in their daily lives. A proverb was part of a long experiential journey based on observation. Therefore, wisdom in the Bible has a primary emphasis on knowing how to live and how to act based on the experience of everyday life (Rossano, Ravasi, and

Girlanda. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Spain: Ediciones Paulinas, 1990, p.1712). It was due to Greek influence, through Plato, that a drastic change occurred, relegating wisdom to merely an intellectual matter

Questions:

- What purposes did Hebrew wisdom serve?
- Do you consider this type of approach important? Why?

II. The Evidence of Wisdom (James 3:13)

James posed the question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” (v.13a). In his response, James set the condition for its demonstration, and surprisingly, he didn't appeal to how much a believer knows or how many truths they're acquainted with. No! His response was this: “Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (v.13b). The way to demonstrate or show wisdom is through good conduct.

The Greek word used here is “*anastrophe*,” which has the basic meaning of conduct or way of life (Balz, H., & Schneider, G. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. I. Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, 2005, p.276); but in itself, it doesn't have a moral quality—it depends on the actor. Therefore, the biblical writer added that this conduct must be good. The Greek word used for “good” is “*Kalós*.” This “frequently designates the righteousness or appropriateness of a way of acting or a state of affairs” (Balz and Schneider. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Spain: Ediciones Sígueme, 2005, p.2185); but it also carries the meanings of “beautiful” and “fair.” Good conduct is conformity to the will of God. It shows the goodness and beauty of every behavior and way of living; hence, the psalmist exclaimed, “Oh, how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97a).

James didn't appeal to how much knowledge a person has in any area of human knowledge, how expert they're in theology, or how much mastery they have of Christian doctrine. Instead, he appealed to how people act, how they react to pressing circumstances. It's not what they say but what they do. It's not their beliefs but their way of living according to God's will that makes a person wise. This was also a concern for Peter, who instructed his listeners to "Live such good lives among the pagans." (1 Peter 2:12).

James said that we must show our wisdom by doing good things (James 3:13b). Here, James returned to a theme he had already directly addressed in 2:14-26; the question of the relation between faith and works. He didn't intend to make us choose between faith and works; instead, in those verses, he discussed the fact that our faith inherently leads us to act in obedience to it. Genuine faith leads us to a life practice that reflects submission to the will of God.

In verse 13, our works are manifested in our good conduct. Therefore, our good conduct will reflect those works that proceed from our obedience to the Lord. Conduct won't be good because it's culturally acceptable but because it aligns with the model of Christ and His kingdom. Therefore, we must not only be hearers of the Word of God but doers too (James 1:22).

In James 3:13, we read also that these works expressed in good conduct must be done "in the humility that comes from wisdom." The works expressed in good conduct will have the fragrance of meekness in human relationships. Meekness or humility permeates and shapes all actions with wisdom. The Scriptures present it this way; we're called to live with humility and meekness (Ephesians 4:2); to correct with meekness (2 Timothy 2:25); not to insult or quarrel (Titus 3:2).

Questions:

- How can we know if someone is wise or not? What sort of wisdom is this?
- What is the "aroma" that identifies wisdom? Quote a biblical text where Jesus identifies with it.

III. Destructive "Wisdom" (James 3:14-16)

In 3:14, James tells his readers not to keep "bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts." Apparently, within the Christian communities, internal disputes were occurring with selfish motives, generating envy, rivalries, and divisions, even violent acts of hostility toward others. For this reason, they were living a lie; such people couldn't be wise. Trying to be wise, they became fools (Romans

1:22). James told them not to boast or lie against the truth (James 3:14b).

A. James mentioned the characteristics of a kind of wisdom that's contrary to God:

- **Bitter Envy.** The Greek word for 'envy' by itself doesn't necessarily have a negative connotation. Moo will say that "Basically, it has two senses: one neutral or even positive, 'zeal,' and another negative, 'envy'" (Moo, Douglas. Commentary on the Epistle of James. USA: Editorial Vida, 2009, p.202). In Scripture, God is identified as a jealous God (Ex. 20:5), or we see it when Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers (Jn 2:17); but in the context in which James wrote, qualifying these envies as bitter, he was referring to the negative sense, well translated by the New International Version as "envies" (James 3:14). Envy is contrary to wisdom because it comes from a selfish heart, centered on oneself, which destroys the bonds of brotherhood, mercy, and compassion that we should have towards one another. Envy corrodes relationships, leading to hostility, separation, and division.
- **Selfish Ambition.** James was describing those who, with their selfish ambition, generated rivalries, using any means to achieve their goals. The logic of such people is this: "If you don't agree with me, then you're my enemy." In turn, they assert that the end justifies the means, even if it involves violence and hostility towards others. The important thing is to achieve their goals or impose their ideas and opinions. What this produces is confusion and evil actions (James 3:16). Confusion paves the way for every evil deed, and God isn't a God of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), and from Him alone come every good gift and every perfect gift (James 1:17).

B. James described the source and nature of this wisdom as follows:

- **Earthly.** When reference is made to "earthly," it's being contrasted with the wisdom that's from above (James 3:17). Therefore, it's not from God but man. This wisdom is what the world values, proclaims, and teaches, and is in total opposition to God's purposes and will. It's self-centered wisdom that manipulates and perverts the truth (James 3:14b), especially the truth of the gospel. With this wisdom, humans can never know God (1 Cor 1:21). As a purely human product, it's always destined to fail.
- **Unspiritual.** It refers to the wisdom that's part of fallen human nature. Therefore, it's in opposition to the spiritual and doesn't understand the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14).

For the unspiritual, God's ways are foolishness. It's governed by mere human reason and understanding, which is finite and fallible; in turn, all its deepest affections and motivations are dominated and governed by sin and the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21).

- **Demonic.** It's a "wisdom" that comes from the devil. Wisdom rooted in envy and rivalries is the perfect instrument of Satan. This wisdom doesn't build or edify the kingdom of God but contributes to the works of the enemy of God and the adversary of our souls, which are to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10).

Questions:

- What are the fundamental characteristics of this kind of wisdom? Describe them.
- What is the source and nature of this wisdom? Explain.

IV. Edifying Wisdom (James 3:17)

In James 3:17, the apostle presented those qualities that characterize the wisdom that's entirely opposite to the one he described before. This is the wisdom that descends from above, from God. Let's see what these characteristics are:

- **Pure.** James placed this quality as the foundation of the others, saying, "firstly"; the ones that follow will depend on it. Since it comes from God, and God is pure, without any contamination, or in other words, Holy; this wisdom is pure. Whoever lives with the wisdom from above reflects the character of God in their behavior. Thus, they're free from all envy and selfish desire that characterizes earthly wisdom. Being pure, it's free from all corrupted motivation; its motivations are without mixture, with a clean conscience.
- **Peace-loving.** Being peaceful is against anything that generates rivalries. On the contrary, it strives to seek and maintain peace (Matthew 5:9). In every place and at all times where the wisdom from above shines, there's a disposition for dialogue, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Therefore, any act of violence of any kind is excluded.
- **Considerate.** Here, it's not merely about showing kindness in treatment, but it's expressed in being reasonable and understanding with others. It recognizes that others can make mistakes, and that they themselves are subject to mistakes; therefore, they don't demand or claim arrogantly but have a gentle and cordial manner.
- **Submissive.** Here, James wanted to highlight the attitude of being able to listen. The person who acts with God's wisdom is open to other ideas and learning

from others. They recognize when the arguments of others are better or more reasonable than theirs and are willing to change or correct them. In turn, they're willing to receive exhortation and be corrected (Prov. 9:8). They're characterized by seeking dialogue and not confrontation.

- **Full of Mercy.** In the Bible, it emphasizes action in response to the needs of others. For James, faith without works is dead (James 2:26). In this way, compassion moves us to active commitment, not passivity (vv. 15-16). The wise person is "full" of mercy or compassion; that is, they're controlled by it.
- **Bearing Good Fruits.** It's related to the previous one. Thus, the one who lives with wisdom is easy to notice by their fruits that build and construct relationships and communities. Jesus, referring to false prophets, said, "By their fruits, you'll recognize them" (Matthew 7:16a). For James, wisdom must also bear good fruits, and these can be recognized.
- **Impartial:** This means not taking sides for or against something or someone because it suits us; instead, leaning towards truth and justice. It also refers to an unwavering attitude, without double-mindedness (James 1:8); but decisive, with firm character, remaining faithful.
- **Sincere:** Those who behave with wisdom from above don't use masks to hide their true intentions or motivations; instead, they're genuine, sincere, and transparent. For this reason, they can be trusted; we know that we'll always find a sincere response, advice, or opinion from them.

This wisdom is needed in our lives and in our communities. It begins with the fear of the Lord (Proverbs 1:7), and it must be sought with faith (James 1:5-6).

Questions:

- Where does this wisdom come from? What are its qualities?
- What kind of wisdom do you think prevails in your local church, neighborhood, or workplace? Why?
- And what kind of wisdom will you seek in your life? Share.

Conclusion:

Wisdom is reflected in the way we live. It builds relationships and communities, does the work of God, and works for the kingdom of Heaven. "Man cannot live wisely by himself or for himself; the ability to live wisely comes from God and is granted for the service of God" (Knoch, Otto. Letter of James. Spain: Editorial Herder, 1976, p.84).



Practical Advice for Christian Living

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

Bible Study passages: James 4:1-4,6-17

Memory Verse: "...God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble. Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." James 4:6-7.

Lesson Purpose: To help us to reflect on a series of practical advice that we should apply in our life of holiness.

Introduction

The writer of this letter was a Christian Jew who wrote in the typical literary genre of the wisdom books of the Old Testament (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, among others). He also echoed the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and emphasized the correct way we should act in the Christian life. The passage for our study is full of imperatives aimed at promoting a life of holiness. James reminded us that "faith by itself, if it's not accompanied by action, is dead" (James 2:17).

In this passage under study, there are veins that run deep: Christians shouldn't love the world more than God; Anyone who prefers friendship with the world cannot be God's friend; The worldly person reflects a proud attitude, while the humble lives in communion with God, with their families, and with members of the community of faith; With the help of the Lord, we'll overcome the devil; We shouldn't judge others because only God has the right to judge; and finally, we must live each day to the fullest with God's help in making plans.

I. Care regarding friendship with the world (James 4:1-4)

Gallardo, at the beginning of his commentary on James, says, "James is a letter of imperatives. It's not a lukewarm letter. Sometimes the tone sounds harsh to our modern ears, but perhaps its reading is more necessary today than ever" (Gallardo, Ángel. Contemporary Bible Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1627). James was writing to a group of Christians: "...the twelve tribes scattered among the nations..." (James 1:1). It's implicit in this greeting that he was addressing Christians and perhaps groups of churches scattered around the Mediterranean basin.

In these first four verses, what were the problems he wanted them to fix? It seems that in some of these

faith communities, there were quarrels and fights. They exchanged angry words. There could be many reasons for these problems. Perhaps they argued about doctrinal issues or who should be the leader of the group. Maybe, as in the church of Corinth, there were serious divisions among them. James pronounced his diagnosis in the first verse (James 4:1). The real cause of these disputes was the desire to cling to their point of view. Everyone wanted what pleased them, and when they couldn't agree on what they wanted to do, problems arose. In our churches, sometimes, we also discover a lack of unity.

A suggestion in this part of the class would be to ask students about the different causes of divisions in today's churches. In verse 2, James used a series of verbs: "You desire," "you kill," "you burn with envy," "you fight," and "you wage war." The feelings of these brothers and sisters became owners of their hearts and minds. There were feelings of hatred so strong that they were compared to murders. Perhaps, at the bottom, there was a desire for prosperity; the more they had, the more they wanted, and what they already had didn't bring them satisfaction.

James pointed out the problem: they didn't get what they desired because they weren't asking God correctly (vv.2b-3). They prayed to the Lord, but they didn't receive what they asked for because they asked with wrong motives, to spend on their pleasures. Ask: what are the conditions for receiving positive answers to our prayers? Is it wrong to pray for prosperity?

In the Old Testament, the apostasy of God's people was often highlighted by the prophets as "adultery," unfaithfulness to God; for they worshiped false gods. James 4:4 is very clear: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

Gallardo comments: "...Desiring material things, and valuing material goods more than God, changing the place of the Creator with created things. As a consequence, these will lead us to personal destruction and the rupture of the relationship with God and with others" (Contemporary Bible Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1632). We have to choose between God and the world. We cannot be friends of God and friends of the world at the same time. Ask: what are the marks of a Christian who feels love for the world?

Questions:

- What are the causes of divisions in churches?
- Describe the characteristics of a Christian who loves the world.

II. Submit, Approach, and Humble Yourselfes Before God (James 4:6-10)

The first expression in verse 6 declares, "But he gives more grace." If we want to overcome the temptations that surround us in the worldly contexts in which we live, God offers us help to be victorious. It's His love that can help us reject the temptations of the world. However, there's a condition: we have to be humble. As Proverbs 3:34 says, "He mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed."

God opposes the proud, those self-sufficient individuals who don't believe they need God's loving help. Whereas the humble acknowledge their own weakness and long to receive the grace help that God wants to give them. In the verses of James 4:7-10, there are nine imperatives: "Submit," "resist," "draw near," "cleanse," "purify," "grieve," "mourn," "weep," and "humble yourselves." Together, they express orders to fulfill if we want to receive answers from the Lord. Let's briefly look at them.

- "Submit yourselves, then, to God" (v.7a). We must completely surrender ourselves to God as the Lord of our lives. John Calvin said, "Submission to God is more than obedience; it implies humility" (Pfeiffer, C. and Harrison, E. The Wycliffe Bible Commentary. USA: Moody Press, 1962, p.1437).
- "...resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (v.7b). By surrendering ourselves to serve God, He empowers us to fight and defeat the evil one. Although the devil is our worst enemy, humble Christians can overcome him.
- "Come near to God and he will come near to you" (v.8a). The humble seek God. Intimate communion with the Lord ensures His friendship and help.

- "Wash your hands, you sinners" (v.8b). Psalm 24:3b-4a says, "... And who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands..." Washing hands was part of the preparation for worship in the temple. Many times, we act with our hands, so this imperative refers to our conduct. Repentance of wrong actions is necessary.
- "... purify your hearts, you double-minded" (v.8b). A double-minded person is characterized by divided loyalty, in this case, between the things of God and the things of the world. This imperative focuses on inner motives.
- "Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom" (v.9). In this verse, we have three imperatives. This verse points to the need to deeply repent of pride and worldly attitudes.
- "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (v.10). Gallardo summarizes this section by saying, "A healthy relationship with God is achieved by humbling oneself before Christ and asking Him to purify our minds through the Holy Spirit to direct our desires toward our heavenly Father" (Contemporary Bible Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1633)

Questions:

- What are the evidences of humility in a person?
- What does it imply to consecrate oneself completely to the Lord?

III. On Speaking ill of Others (James 4:11-12)

In James 3:1-12, the writer had already dedicated a section to the need to control the tongue. Indeed, very few people know how to keep silent when it's wise to do so. James 4:11 clarifies the issue: "Brothers and sisters, don't slander one another." In this passage, the interest of the brother and sister and the interest of the law seem to be identified. Speaking ill of a brother or sister by judging them is speaking against the law and becoming a judge of it. God is the only legislator and judge, and in His hands are the matters of life and eternal death. Compared to the power of God, human beings are weak; therefore, it's foolish for a man or a woman to judge their neighbor.

It's too common in our churches and in society in general to speak ill of others. How much damage does it do in the church and in society to criticize others, gossip, share "fake news" on Facebook, or hurt members of our family? Jesus said: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you'll be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?"

How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there's a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you'll see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1-5. See also Matthew 12:36-37; Romans 2:1-3; among other passages condemning judging others).

Ask the students: What is the correct way to draw attention to someone who might be acting wrongly? How should you respond to someone who wants to share gossip with you?

Questions:

- What could be the effects of speaking ill of others?
- How to stop a person who wants to share gossip with you?

IV. Putting God at the Center of Our Plans (James 4:13-17)

In the first century, there was a long period of stability within the domains of the Roman Empire, the so-called Pax Romana, so many people could travel from one place to another for business. In the churches, there were also groups of merchants who traveled selling their products. In Acts 18:2-3, we see that Priscilla and Aquila were Jewish Christian tentmakers, like Paul who stayed with them while in Corinth. Ask the following: Should Christians make plans in their work activities? Is it wrong to be an entrepreneur or a merchant?

It seems that James was returning to the warning he made in the earlier verses, the desire to enrich oneself as a sign of still having one foot in the "world." James 4:13 says, "Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we'll go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.'" Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. Either you'll hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money" (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13).

James 4:16 picks up one of the strongest arguments in this chapter of James; the problem with these merchants was their pride: "As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil." Priscilla and Aquila used their business for the glory of God, founding churches and helping others. It's not wrong to be a merchant when we have a correct and humble relationship with the Lord.

James wanted to show that it's a huge mistake to plan our lives without God. There's a great truth: yesterday has already passed (we cannot live it again); tomorrow hasn't yet come; so this moment we're experiencing

is the only real portion of time. James reminded us, "... What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (v.14). Jesus said, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:33-34). Let's remember the story Jesus told about the rich man who made grand plans for the future, unaware that he would lose everything when he died (Luke 12:16-21).

Is it wrong to make plans? Certainly not when they're based on a search under the will of God. James 4:15 clearly states, "Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we'll live and do this or that.'" Discuss with your students how to make plans for home or work considering the will of God.

Gallardo summarizes the teaching of this section with the following words: "Whoever bases their plans on their own knowledge takes on the role of God, since only God knows and has control of the future... The temptation to control things through human ability is the essence of original sin: human presumption to be like God" (Contemporary Biblical Commentary. Argentina: Ed. Kairos, 2019, p.1633).

In verse 17, there's a final warning for these self-assured merchants. They were Christians, and therefore, they knew that humility and dependence on God are essential in the Christian life. Knowing this and not doing it is sin. So, sin isn't just doing bad things but also not doing the good things. Ask the students for examples of sins of omission or things that we haven't done well.

Questions:

- How can we include God when making plans?
- How can we live in the present without being anxious about the future?

Conclusion

James rebuked his readers for having boastful and worldly attitudes. They were arguing and fighting among themselves, they were speaking ill of others, and they had too much interest and self-confidence in their businesses and resulting prosperity. All these attitudes don't come from God but rather from the enemy. The prescription is to repent of their proud attitudes, be humble, resist the devil, stop loving the attractions of the world, make our plans in prayer, seek the will of the Lord, and receive His loving help that He offers in His grace.



A Profitable Wait

Mirelys Correoso (Cuba.)

Biblical passage for study: James 5:7-18

Memory Verse: “Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains” James 5:7.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that the Second Coming of the Lord should be awaited with patience, in constant prayer, and by following His commandments, including avoiding oaths.

Introduction

The reality of contemporary society was already illustrated many centuries ago by Isaiah, Christ, and even Paul; therefore, what’s happening shouldn’t surprise the church. Whenever we hear about conflicts, wars between nations, earthquakes, and other natural phenomena, exacerbation of poverty for some and wealth for others, as well as the degradation of human beings, we must acknowledge that these episodes were already anticipated (Isaiah 24:5; Matt. 24:1-13; 2 Tim. 3:1-8).

We are in the supersonic era, where everything is for yesterday. Immediacy is an attribute of these times. People rush aimlessly towards short-term goals and projects. What takes time loses its value for people today. Consequently, patience in today’s society isn’t a virtue but a mediocre attitude and an excuse for the sluggish and failures. Expressions like “You have to be one step ahead” are part of the slogan of the “successful,” those who, in their haste and boldness, forge their own time. But in the face of this human dynamic, the eternal Word of God rises, reminding us in Ecclesiastes 3:1 that “There’s a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.”

Today, relativity is a maxim. Everything can be or not be. The truth of things and their significance depends on how you want to see them. Inconstancy, fluctuation of ideas and viewpoints are in vogue. Changing philosophy, ideology, and creed is a sport. Pacts and oaths are susceptible to being violated without justified cause. Christians and non-Christians alike have been victims of COVID-19. As a result of this pandemic, millions of people, including celebrities, children, and great men and women of God, have died. This virus shouldn’t alarm those of us who know that the presence of plagues would

be one of the many signs of the end (Matthew 24:7).

Alongside pain and death, there has been an increase in resource scarcity, unemployment, selfishness, and lack of love. In the face of such events, the world has exploded with an attitude of catharsis and desperation. They haven’t been able to assimilate that everything they have clung to for life is crumbling, and they’re realizing the ephemeral nature of human existence.

Ask: But how is the church of Christ reacting to these problems?

I. Patience until the Second Coming of the Lord (James 5:7-11)

Nowhere in the Bible does it say that believers would be exempt from experiencing these events and suffering their consequences. With this statement, we’re not dismissing God’s promises to care for us, heal us, and deliver us from dangers and even death. However, we’re reaffirming that the Father’s will for our lives is always good and perfect (Rom. 12:2). On the other hand, we’ll not lack afflictions, consequences of original sin, which will affect us on this earth until Christ comes (Rom. 8:18). But “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you...” (1 Peter 1:3-4).

Faced with this promise, in which all our faith and hope must be centered, we can live always in a calm and peaceful manner. We don’t know the day and the hour when our Lord will return (Matt. 24:36-39), but we have the absolute certainty of His Second Coming.

In the midst of so much fear and hopelessness in which we currently live, without rejoicing in what's happening, it's comforting to know that all these things must happen for the coming of our Savior to take place. Therefore, paradoxically, and it may be madness for those who don't believe (1 Corinthians 1:18), the more difficult the panorama appears, it should be a reason for hope for us, as it's an omen of the great day for which we have been preparing since we turned to Christ.

So, far from joining the ranks of the complainers and the discouraged, we must show the world that the joy of the Lord is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10) and take a victorious stance no matter what happens, because the marriage of the Lamb is approaching (Revelation 19:7). The Lord calls us, in anticipation of this event, to adopt an honorable attitude and, above all, use the patience with which God has endowed us through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It's time to wait on God, trusting in the way and manner He has arranged everything.

If our focus is on the Second Coming of Christ, and this is one of our incentives and reasons for living, nothing can steal our peace because this event depends not on any human work but on the One who doesn't lie, nor is there any change in Him, nor a shadow of variation (James 1:17). But since patience isn't synonymous with inactivity or laziness, God wants us to fulfill the purpose He has for our lives on earth while waiting for Him: fighting the good fight of faith and laying hold of eternal life (1 Timothy 6:12).

Therefore, we must ask the Comforter to help us maintain a balanced posture during our transit on earth, being diligent in what it requires (Romans 12:11) but also measured in what it demands, allowing everything that happens in our lives to undergo the required spiritual process so that it can be fulfilled in the way the Lord designed it (Psalm 31:15a). Christians must learn to live not only aware that each day is a gift from the Lord, but also see each day as a new opportunity to grow in grace and Christian perfection (Ephesians 4:14-15).

Let's take advantage of every second we remain in this world to be genuine bearers of peace, hope, and, above all, the good news that sustains us: Christ is coming! Feel blessed for every situation you face, however adverse it may seem, knowing that facing it with patience and in a victorious manner, aware of its temporality, will produce in us an increasingly excellent and eternal weight of glory

(2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Questions:

- Do you consider patience difficult to attain? Please explain your answer.
- For Christians, is adopting a patient posture synonymous with inactivity? Why or why not?

II. Avoid Oaths (James 5:12)

We can appreciate in Jeremiah 15:19a that the Lord gave the following command to the prophet: "If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me..." This command is still valid today for every child of God. People in this era are prone to lies, deceit, and double-mindedness; therefore, to gain credibility for their words and promises, they resort to oaths to validate what they say. As Christians, we don't have to use this resource; instead, let's avoid it. Let our good testimony as men and women of God be a sufficient endorsement for everyone who listens to us. In Matthew 5:33-37, Christ alluded to the topic: He listed a group of aspects on which we shouldn't base our oaths. This was later reiterated by James (5:12). Both explained that our words must be truthful and supported by a responsible and conscious attitude towards every expression and promise we make, knowing that our credibility as people of God is at stake.

The Lord exhorts us to be serious and cautious in our expressions, knowing that we'll be held accountable for every idle word on the day of judgment (Matthew 12:36). How good it is to be recognized by our family, brothers and sisters in the faith, people in general, and even our enemies and detractors, that our statements, whether positive or negative, are always truthful. This compels us to be very careful about what we articulate and not to echo everything we hear; always verifying the source of what we disseminate, with silence often being the best option.

Questions:

- Do you believe that people in the world frequently use oaths? Explain.
- What attitude should Christians adopt to avoid oaths and have their statements and commitments trusted?

III. The Power of Prayer (James 5:13-18)

There's a song that Sunday school children sing with a chorus that goes like this: "Heaven's telephone is never busy."

We know that children's hearts are ready to treasure this truth; it's not in vain that the Lord said that unless we become like them, we'll not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3). Sadly, not always do adult Christians take as true everything we proclaim and sing in church. How good it is to know that the Almighty God, our beloved Father, is always there, ready to hear all our prayers and act accordingly (1 John 5:14-15). Many times, new converts ask: "Why do we have to pray and ask God when He knows all our needs?"

There's a powerful spiritual activation of the Father, a triggering effect, when He sees His children dismissing all human effort and, placing all their hope in Him, focus on prayer as the most effective means of grace. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, the Lord asks us to pray without ceasing, as that constancy, which constitutes a tremendous act of faith, makes us increasingly participants in His power and glory. Prayer is the most direct form of communication with the Father, as well as the most intimate and necessary. It's the most direct because it's through prayer that we engage in not a monologue but a dialogue with the Lord, without intermediaries, where He will speak to us and reveal His will for our lives (Jeremiah 33:3). It's intimate because there are no witnesses other than the Lord.

Therefore, in prayer, we can express what we dare not share with anyone; there's nothing we cannot articulate, but it's also necessary because it's a spiritual discipline that benefits us the most. Our spiritual maturity and perseverance in faith depend on it. If we don't make use of it, we lose the connection with our Creator and our salvation (Matthew 26:41). God has an answer and a solution for everything (Luke 18:27). His eternal attributes are sufficient to resolve what we place in His hands. But we must approach His presence knowing that His will is good and perfect (Romans 12:2), and learn to accept it with joy. We must have enough spiritual maturity to accept the Lord's "No" as answers that will always work in our favor, just as when the Father says, "Wait," we must embrace the certainty that the promise will be fulfilled in His time (Romans 8:28). We must also consider that there's a close relationship between our spiritual condition and God's response.

The Lord isn't only sensitive to the faith of His children (Luke 8:46) but also to the holiness of those who seek Him (James 5:16). God is merciful by nature and doesn't repay us according to our condition, but rewards the one who has been faithful in their relationship with Him and

their neighbor. God is mighty to do far more than we ask or understand (Ephesians 3:20). The Lord is pleased when we offer prayers that express our sincere gratitude to Him, where we show the joy we feel for all the good He has done for us, even for what we don't understand (Ephesians 5:20). Similarly, we're called to be as fervent in intercession for others as we're for ourselves.

That speaks volumes about what's in our hearts (James 5:16). In the face of scientific advances, unbelievers place all their hopes in it, ignoring that it's also the result of God's hand. Thus, far from attributing to the Lord the credit for successes and healings, they attribute it to scientists and various health professionals. What they have never been able to attribute to anyone is the miracle of conversion: that process of regeneration that occurs in the human being when repenting of sin and accepting Jesus as their personal Savior. This miracle remains the most extraordinary thing that happens every day for the glory and honor of the Lord and occurs through the power of prayer. God continues to be the same healer, the same warrior, the same miracle-worker described in the Bible. But the question is this: does the church of these times seek the Lord enough to make supernatural things happen.

It's a great challenge for the people of God in the 21st century to show the lost that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Once again, Christ confronts us with a question he asked his disciples over two thousand years ago: "So, could you not watch with me one hour?" (Matthew 26:40)

Questions:

- Do you believe that the church in these times is activating the power of prayer? How?
- Briefly share a recent personal testimony that demonstrates the manifestation of God's power in your life through prayer.

Conclusion

The Lord, who placed the fruit of the Spirit in us, endowed us with patience as an attribute that gives us the ability to patiently await the Second Coming of Christ. Meanwhile, we must live a life of testimony that endorses our words and accredits everything we affirm, so that we don't have to resort to oaths. Let's continue praying at all times for our lives and others, knowing that through this means of grace, we activate the power of God, and great things will happen.



A Call to Holiness

Zeida Lynch (USA)

Biblical passage for study: 1 Peter 1:3-23

Memory Verse: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.” 1 Peter 1:15

Lesson Purpose: To understand that holiness should be expressed in our daily actions.

Introduction

Peter was one of Jesus' most well-known disciples. The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles help us understand a bit about his character and the transformation in his life after Pentecost. Peter went from being the disciple who denied Jesus to leading the first public preaching after Jesus' ascension, resulting in the conversion of 3,000 people (Acts 2:41). Tradition suggests that Peter wrote the epistles of 1 and 2 Peter. The first epistle was initially dedicated to churches, perhaps groups meeting in homes in five provinces: Rome, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. These churches likely had a majority of Jewish members, given Peter's tendency to preach to the circumcised and the content of the letter. Peter's desire was to remind them that the kingdom of God is through faith in Christ and to motivate them to live a holy life—a life reflected in actions and perseverance during difficulties.

I. A Living Hope (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Peter began this segment by blessing God, recognizing the greatness and mercy of our God in granting us salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ (v. 2). One reason Peter gave for this attitude is that “he has caused us to be born again” (v. 3). Christ's sacrifice on the cross at Calvary was completed with His resurrection. Christ's resurrection shows that God the Father accepted His sacrifice for humanity and the payment for our sins. It also opened a door for us to approach the Father as His children.

Christ's resurrection is a great victory over death, sin, and Satan. The first messianic promise in Genesis 3:15 was fulfilled with His sacrifice and subsequent resurrection. Christ's resurrection is the foundation of our faith. As 1 Cor. 15:14 says, “And if Christ hasn't been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” Because Christ rose, believers now enjoy true spiritual life—not through rituals or ceremonies, but through a direct relationship with God by faith. They have a living

hope received by grace, undeserved but a result of God's mercy. A compelling reason to bless the name of God. For He gives us “new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (vv. 3-4).

Peter addressed this letter “To God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (v. 1). Perhaps these were Jews in exile, living in distant lands, longing for the promised land. But he also addressed Christians longing for eternal life, not belonging to this world, feeling like “exiles” yearning for the “redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23).

This inheritance given to the children, “And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), cannot be earned with good deeds but is by God's grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). This inheritance is described as:

- Imperishable; nothing perishable can be there. Believers will receive glorified bodies (1 Corinthians 15:53-54).
- undefiled, no place for sin.
- Unfading, it cannot wither.
- Reserved in heaven for everyone who put their faith in Christ the Lord. Salvation isn't inherited, transmitted, or bought; it's personal and unique. The inheritance of eternal life will be solely for those who accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

The next reason Peter blessed God is knowing that we'll receive “the coming of the salvation that's ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Peter 1:5). Peter knew well the fragility of human beings. He himself had faced his emotions and convictions when he denied Christ (Matthew 26:75). He had experienced forgiveness and transformation by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he knew firsthand the need for God's help and protection. God not only gives us grace for salvation but also preserves us until the end (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

His loving care is evident in giving us power through the Holy Spirit. While this doesn't negate our responsibility to guard our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), divine grace is there to help. The use of our freedom to choose free will ceases at the end of our lives. Let's use it wisely.

Peter encouraged the church that during affliction due to trials, earthly sorrows, and persecutions, they should maintain their faith. It's during these difficult times that we can experience God's grace in a new way. The trial of faith is necessary for its growth. Just as gold is tested by fire to check its purity, the trial of faith will reveal strong convictions and areas needing attention. The result will be growth and the ability to celebrate each victory with Jesus Christ, "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). The living hope in Christ is thanks to His resurrection, allowing us to await complete redemption in eternity, and His grace that guards us during our pilgrimage in this world.

Questions:

- Mark the answer that correctly completes the statement: "The foundation for a living hope is in ____."
a. the Jewish tradition b. the resurrection of Christ c. the fulfillment of the law of Moses.
- Briefly explain how you maintain a living hope.

II. A Glorious Revelation (1 Peter 1:10-12)

The prophets, inspired by God, had glimpses of what the glory of the Messiah would be like. From God's promise to Adam and Eve, that a descendant of theirs would crush the serpent, God continued indicating more details about the coming of Christ. Even to Abraham, God said, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Through his descendants, humanity would obtain salvation, and this would be through Christ.

Throughout the Old Testament, we can see the image of Christ. During the time of the kings, and later the exile, God revealed through his prophets the glorious hope of the Messiah. The prophets revealed his virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14); the place of his birth (Micah 5:2); his compassionate ministry (Isaiah 9:1-2, 61:1-2); the triumphant entry; his suffering and sacrifice (Isaiah 53); among others.

The prophets knew that the Messiah wouldn't come during their time, but they had the assurance and confidence that it would happen. As Hebrews 11 says, all those who died believing in the coming of Christ, even before his arrival, showed their faith in the future hope of the Messiah's coming. They looked towards Christ. For the church to whom Peter was addressing, and for us, our faith is placed in what Christ has already done.

Peter represents the Jews who knew the prophecies and awaited their fulfillment. Perhaps the apostle couldn't fully comprehend them, but his encounter with Jesus, witnessing his ministry, and experiencing redeeming grace, allowed him not only to know but also to understand and believe in each prophecy. Now, Peter preached the Christ of the prophecies as a reality. A privilege that even angels can't have.

Questions:

- Mention how Christ was revealed in the Old Testament.
- What sustained those who were waiting for the Messiah?

III. The Call to Holiness (1 Peter 1:13-23)

Peter now made the connection between the glorious hope and the purpose of earthly life. God's plan for humanity is that we can show our new nature to the world to bless and invite others to this new relationship. Peter gave them some recommendations on how to do this. Let's look at them.

A. Spiritual Preparation (v.13)

This verse tells us to have "minds that are alert and fully sober." Peter exhorted the church to search and understand what the Word of God is indicating. Just as the prophets had investigated and had been inspired to announce the Messiah, in the same way, the church now has to continue searching the Word of God for the purpose of the redeemed. The purpose goes beyond forgiveness of sins; it's a complete transformation.

At the same time, he asked for self-control, sobriety; not seeking transformation with emotion but with balance and faith. Hope is the manifestation of faith ... faith that God's grace will complete the work he began in their lives (Philippians 1:6). Peter knew what it was like to wait for the promise. He and the disciples received Jesus' command to return to Jerusalem and wait for the promise of the Father. They obeyed, returned to Jerusalem without knowing how long the wait would last (Acts 1:4, 12). But about a week later on Pentecost day, God fulfilled his promise and sent the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4).

Spiritual preparation begins with our desire to know and understand the Scriptures, being aware of the need, and having faith that God will fulfill his promise.

B. Change through Obedience (v.14)

Not conforming to what one has will motivate change. With greater knowledge, there will be greater transformation. But that change as a result of knowledge, sobriety, and faith must come through obedience.

And obedience comes out of love for the new relationship with God. A relationship from Father to son: "... as obedient children..." (v. 14). It shouldn't be a change out of fear of punishment or a change for convenience; it should be a change motivated by the desire to please the one who performed the adoption and invites a new relationship with the human being.

The more one knows God and the wonderful plan of total redemption for humanity, the greater the desire to please him grows. God can help us consecrate every area of our lives that requires change and help us make that change out of conviction and love for Him. It may not be easy, but it's necessary.

C. A Call, a Mandate, and an Example

These two previous points will result in a new state. The state of holiness.

A call to holiness. In God's plan of salvation, he wants to impart his holiness to us. He offers us the ability to receive power to live in holiness in the midst of a sinful world. It's a real invitation. 1 Thessalonians 5:24 says, referring to sanctification: "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."

1. A call to be holy. God invites every regenerated believer to seek more, to desire to be completely cleansed and filled with his Holy Spirit. If the Lord is the one calling, we must trust that He always keeps his promises. God will sanctify the life of the consecrated believer who accepts this call and asks for it in faith.

2. A mandate for holiness. The Scripture says it in the Old Testament; God demands holiness from his people (Israel); and now, in the New Testament, from his children (the church). In the next chapter, Peter drew the connection between God's invitation to Israel on Mount Sinai to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) and the call to his church to be "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Peter 2:9). Throughout Scripture, we find the command to be holy, separated completely for God.

One of the reasons for this mandate is to reveal God's glory. In the Old Testament, God demanded holiness from Israel to make his name known to the nations. Now, God demands holiness from his church to be witnesses to the nations (Acts 1:8).

3. An example: God is holy. He himself is holy; he doesn't demand or ask his children for something impossible. Jesus proved during his ministry on earth that one can live in holiness. He left an example to follow. Hebrews 4:14-16 tells us that Jesus, as our great High Priest, intercedes for us, has compassion on our weaknesses because he himself experienced and

overcame them. And that's why he can give us help at the right time. The example of holiness, a life without sin, was given by Christ, and He himself offers help to every needy heart.

D. A Good Testimony

But holiness must be manifested "in all you do" (1 Peter 1:15). It cannot be hidden; it has to be external. It must show the internal change of the heart in relation to other people. The internal purification of the heart will be shown in a new way of life, in a real testimony.

Therefore, the following is necessary:

1. Take Care of It (v. 17): "conduct yourselves in reverent fear," with reverence and great care; considering that our actions will be judged. Let's be responsible. Remember that we have free will. Holiness doesn't take away the freedom with which humans have been created. It's in the use of freedom that we decide to fully obey God. Conducting oneself in fear involves care, constancy, and daily self-evaluation to allow God to continue cleaning new areas in our lives.

2. Value It: It hasn't been free. It represents the sacrifice of Christ for us. The new lifestyle, as a result of the transformation made by God in the heart, is undeserved grace. While on the one hand, God demands holiness from His children, at the same time, He has done, is doing, and will continue to do everything possible to help us achieve and maintain it.

3. Show It: Show it with pure love towards each other. A genuine brotherly love. The Word of God that remains forever and purifies souls through obedience to the truth will shape the behavior of every believer. The internal change produced by the Spirit of God must be polished, strengthened, and grown every day so that the external change, shown in love for others, is also perfected.

Questions:

- What requirements are needed for personal spiritual preparation?
- Is holiness a call and a command for your life? How do you apply it?

Conclusion

God's plan for humanity is a living hope, imparted by the victory of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary by rising Him from the dead. A hope that has been revealed in the Scriptures since ancient times and continues to be valid today by the power of God calling humanity to live in holiness ... internal holiness reflected outwardly in a holy life.



The People of God and Their Purpose

Jessica Nogales de Castro (Spain)

Bible Study passages: 1 Peter 2:9, 11-25

Memory Verse: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1 Peter 2:9.

Lesson Purpose: To understand and practice the true meaning and responsibility of being part of the people of God.

Introduction

As human beings, we’re generally interested in understanding the purpose of our existence because it gives meaning and direction to our lives. This curiosity isn’t exclusive to individuals; it also applies to any type of organization or company. The church is no exception. What is the church? Who are we? Why are we here as a church? Is there a purpose behind every adversity the church faces? Followers of Jesus Christ need to understand the true purposes behind each experience as a people redeemed by God. Thankfully, the Word of God itself, as a manual of faith, reveals these truths to the church, and in this case, through the First Epistle of the Apostle Peter.

In a significant portion of this letter, Peter encouraged the Christians in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), who were facing difficulties and suffering due to their faith. In addition to urging them to remain steadfast in their faith, he exhorted them to continue bearing witness to Christ with a lifestyle worthy of God’s will. It’s not easy for any Christian to live against the tide, especially when living in other cultures, as was the case with the “expatriates,” as Peter called Christians living outside their nation (1 Peter 1:1).

Let’s review our study passage and see the guidelines that the Apostle Peter gives to the 21st-century church to fulfill the true purpose of their lives by understanding their identity, mission, and vision.

I. The identity of the people of God (1 Pe 2:9a)

The first-century church, like today’s church, needs to be motivated by remembering who they are in Christ. Thanks to the words of the Apostle Peter, we can understand the significant meaning of the church as the people of God. Note that verse 9 begins with a “But,” indicating that the apostle wanted to introduce nuances that differentiate between unbelievers and those who believed in Christ.

A. Chosen Generation

Firstly, for Peter, the church is a chosen people; that’s what he told them. This means that those belonging to the people of God aren’t just any kind of people. They became a special people by believing in Christ and following Him. The Beacon Bible Commentary says the following about this: “They’re a chosen lineage, separated from the world and placed by their new birth in a new relationship...” (Nicholson, Roy. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume X. USA: CNP, n.d., p.288); in other words, God set them apart for Himself and for communion with Him.

Applying this concept to our reality as a church, we can say that all who have believed in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord become part of God’s family. This is revealed in this passage: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12).

B. Royal Priesthood

Secondly, anyone who belongs to the church through the saving grace of Christ automatically becomes a priest in the service of the King, Jesus Christ. But what was a priest, and what was their function according to the Bible? The priesthood was a special office dictated by God in the Old Testament. Since the people of Israel were liberated from Egyptian slavery, God set aside an exclusive tribe to serve Him in the tabernacle. This tribe was the tribe of Levi, initiated by Aaron and later continued by his descendants (Exodus 28, 29; Leviticus 8; Numbers 3). In these biblical passages, we see that being a priest wasn’t for everyone, especially since the service involved offering sacrifices and offerings to the Lord.

The priests were intermediaries between God and the nation. Exodus 19:6 says, “you’ll be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This prophecy was fulfilled with the eternal sacrifice of Jesus on the cross of Calvary. The death and resurrection of the great High Priest Jesus made it possible for the church, the people of God, to also participate in the royal priesthood by serving Him in heartfelt worship. Today, God demands that His priests be a living, holy, and pleasing sacrifice in His presence (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5).

C. Holy Nation

Thirdly, Peter told the church of his time that in Christ, they had become “a holy nation,” and the Word confirms the same to the people of God today. The laws, precepts, and commandments of the Old Testament were given for the Israelite nation to fulfill, and in fulfilling them, holiness would be in their hearts. Through Moses, God reminded them on several occasions that they were to be holy, separate from all contamination, because He is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:23, 21:8). However, we know very well that for many, this was impossible to achieve; hence, the Jewish nation was punished repeatedly for their rebellion. But now, Peter reminded the church that by the grace of Christ and through His Holy Spirit, it’s possible to live in holiness.

Today, no matter where the children of God live, the current society may be very pagan, but those who seek God’s presence in sincere worship can receive the Pentecostal power to stand firm and make a difference in a hostile, libertine, and conformist world. Thanks to His Holy Spirit today, Christians, the children of God, are still under the same demand to be holy because God is holy (1 Peter 1:16).

D. People Acquired by God

Finally, the people of God or the church should feel very loved because someone paid a very high price to acquire us. And that price was paid with blood, the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. God’s grace doesn’t mean there was no cost; salvation may be free for the sinner, but the one who died on the cross paid a price to redeem the world. It wasn’t just any life that was given on the cross, but a holy and spotless life, done so that He could save us, bearing in His own body all our sins and transgressions. Otherwise, our redemption wouldn’t have been possible.

This teaches us that we should live grateful to our Lord Jesus for the act of love He performed for His people, grateful because now we’re His children through faith in Him. All of these characteristics I just mentioned are privileges that God has granted to His church; moreover, they reveal the essence of being the people of God on earth.

Questions:

- According to the identity described by the apostle Peter, what do you understand by “chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, God’s special possession”?
- How do you live out Peter’s affirmation in your daily life?

II. The Mission of God’s People (1 Peter 2:9b)

Within the same verse 9, one word makes clear the purpose of the identity of the people of God; the word “that.” This means that the people of God have a mission to fulfill: to proclaim the virtues of Christ. The term “declare” calls us to “communicate, spread, or publish the great news of the good news.” In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (16:15). Peter had received this command directly from Jesus. Now decades later, he was passing on this mandate to another generation. Peter’s purpose was that by announcing the word of salvation, we can help others enjoy the privileges described earlier.

The Message translation says: “But you are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God’s instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you—from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted” (1 Peter 2:9). God encourages us to share with others, telling them what He has done for us. Ask: Has God made a difference in your life? Get the class to share some examples.

In reality, there are many miracles that God has done for His people. Peter continued his teaching in verse 9, concluding by making the church aware that the greatest work God has done is calling them “out of darkness into His wonderful light.” We used to live blind and enslaved under the oppression of sin and in the midst of spiritual darkness; but upon hearing the message of salvation, all guilt was forgiven, and the spiritual blindfold was removed. Thanks to Christ, the light of life has shone in our hearts, removing all that’s horrible and frightening about living in sin. How good it is that now we, His church, have been changed from darkness to marvelous light! Ask: What responsibility does this give us toward those who are still in darkness?

Peter’s intention in this verse 9 was for the church to understand that we have a commission, and it’s to preach the most wonderful work that God has done, and that’s none other than Jesus dying for us on the cross to forgive our sins. This cannot be compared to anything in this life. There cannot be a Christian who doesn’t feel responsible for this task.

Otherwise, they would become selfish and lacking in the love of God.

Questions:

- What Bible verses do you know that speak about the mission of the church to proclaim the message of salvation?
- What marvelous works has God done in your life that motivate you to fulfill Christ's mission?

III. The Duties of God's People (1 Peter 2:11-25)

The church fulfills its mission in the midst of the society where it lives; therefore, Peter gave instructions to the people of God about how their behavior should be in a world contrary to God. James, who was contemporaneous with Peter, said, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead" (2:26). The people of God must demonstrate their faith through their works.

A. Before unbelievers (vv.11-12)

First, the apostle urged the church "to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul" (v.11). The world today has no restraint regarding fleshly desires; it's letting itself be carried away by its lowest passions, and to make matters worse, it seems to think it's okay. Moreover, it encourages and teaches others to do the same. But the church must make a difference and be visible to society.

Second, he encouraged them to maintain a good way of life among the Gentiles (v.12). Remember that the church has had to live in the midst of an idolatrous society; therefore, even though not doing or thinking the same as the current society may lead to problems, the behavior of the child of God should be to live according to God's designs and not according to the customs of society. The church shouldn't let the world influence its good practices and customs; rather, the church should impact with its good testimony and change society.

B. Before authorities (vv.13-17)

Peter told them that for the sake of the Lord, they should submit to every authority. *Ask: How do we understand this if political authorities are corrupt?* It's very common to see rulers stained by corruption and ambition. "For the sake of the Lord" (v.13) means being responsible, honest, and upright in civil life.

Regardless of who governs, we must be responsible, being a light to this world. The children of God should be the best citizens that exist. I remember that in the city where I lived as a child, the gospel of Christ had spread quite a bit, and you could find an evangelical Christian everywhere. Such was the influence of the church that even in some jobs, they preferred to hire Christians.

This indicated that they trusted more in a Christian than in any other, and it should always be so.

The church must fulfill God's purpose; show Christ to humanity through our upright and honest testimony while respecting the laws. *Ask: What should be the behavior of the church in the face of laws that go against the Word of God?* Peter said, "For the sake of the Lord" (v.13). This doesn't mean "above the Lord." In verse 17, he added: "Fear God." If there are laws that go against divine principles, the church must act with fear of God and live "as servants of God" (v.16b).

C. At work (vv.18-20)

Although Peter's context was slavery, today the church is called to be a living witness of Christ despite having difficult bosses. I know of cases where Christians suffered hardship at the beginning of their jobs, but after a while, their Christian testimony caused their bosses to change for the glory of God. A good attitude based on daily reliance on Christ is what can make a difference to see the power of God working in the hearts of wicked masters. The Beacon Bible Commentary clarifies the following: "What happens to a person isn't as important as how we react to them, for the reaction reveals their true character" (Nicholson, Roy. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume X. USA: CNP, n.d., p.292).

D. Christ, our greatest example (vv.21-25)

Peter ended this chapter speaking of the greatest role model, Jesus. Verse 21 says, "because Christ also suffered." This indicates that He set us an example of how to live in similar circumstances of suffering. Jesus didn't sin, didn't deceive, didn't respond with curses, didn't threaten, etc., but every injustice he suffered He entrusted to the one who judges justly, that is, God the Father.

Questions:

- According to verses 11 and 12, what are the two environments that, as a child of God, you need to be cautious about in the midst of unbelievers?
- In addition to bribery, what worldly practice could be a temptation for Christians not to be transparent?
- In the midst of such a challenging world, do you believe that a Christian should literally fulfill what 1 Peter 2:21-25 says? Discuss.

Conclusion

Glory to God for what we have achieved by the grace of Christ. We have an identity, but we also have a mission to fulfill in the midst of a stubborn and dark world. May we continue to be the light that shows sinners the path to salvation.



Behaving in a way that pleases God

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

Biblical passage for study: 1 Peter 3:1-17

Memory Verse: “For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” 1 Peter 3:12

Lesson Purpose: To challenge us to live in a way that is worthy of disciples following in Christ’s footsteps.

Introduction

We need to remind ourselves about the context in which 1 Peter was written. Although some Bible scholars find differences regarding the date, we can place it in the first century. This letter presents challenging behavior traits that, at the time, were intended to guide the conduct of those joining the body of Christ, the emerging church. This teaching may have been pleasing to some people, but also rejected by others. The teachings of the Lord Jesus Himself are always extremely challenging, especially for those who seek to preserve the traditions that have benefited them.

An example of the challenges expressed by Jesus is found in Matt. 5:43-45. For the Jewish people, loving their enemies was a teaching beyond their logic. They lived under oppression, so loving their enemies meant loving those who oppressed them. Jesus specified the value of that teaching: “that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (v.45). It’s important to consider this reference because it shows the purpose of adopting Jesus’ teachings in our behavior.

In the study passage for this lesson, we’ll find Jesus’ teachings applied to three areas of everyday life that, more than two millennia later, still guide the lives of some people, but are also a reason for non-compliance for others. The difference lies in how the biblical content is recognized. The study passage shows a characteristic described by Barclay as “reciprocal ethics.” It never places all the responsibility on one side. If the text talks about the duties of slaves, it also talks about the duties of masters. If it addresses the obligations of children, it also addresses... parents... wives... husbands” (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Editorial Clie, 2006, p.994). This lesson will help us underscore the conduct that pleases God and that the “righteous” adopt.

I. Christian behavior in marital relationships (1 Peter 3:1-7)

We will divide this section of the passage into three aspects: the recipients in general, and then the specific instructions for wives and husbands.

A. Are you a recipient of this teaching?

This segment about marriage is a continuation of 1 Peter 2:9, where the readers are described as the “chosen people, a royal priesthood...” The apostle expected that everyone who read his letter would be born-again Christians who acknowledge and accept Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Unfortunately, we have to recognize that marital life has been discredited by multiple manifestations of improper relationships, produced by the abuse of those who have more power over those who are weaker. This has sustained the idea that “submission” is inherently negative. Jesus had already taught about this in Matthew 20:25-26. Today, we find people who try to discredit the Word of God because it doesn’t satisfy their preferences, attempting to alter its content and mold it to their liking. On the contrary, studying the Word and understanding its content, guided by the Holy Spirit, helps us align ourselves with it humbly, rather than arrogantly trying to adapt the Word to our taste. Thus, this passage may be discredited by those who don’t want to accept it, but that doesn’t alter its value for its recipients.

B. The message for wives

The behavior that the apostle Peter communicated in this passage involves reciprocal ethics. But we shouldn’t forget that in the context in which the passage was written, reciprocity in marriage wasn’t practiced. Barclay illustrates it this way.

“In the Roman moral code, all obligations were for the wife, and all privileges for the husband. Christian ethics never grants a privilege without the corresponding obligation” (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: Editorial Clie, 2006, p.994). So, this wasn’t easy for society to comprehend.

Many Christian women had husbands who hadn’t accepted Jesus; therefore, maintaining favorable behavior to help them understand the “Christian” message was a form of testimony that would contribute to winning their husbands for Christ. The means would be the “purity and reverence” of their lives (1 Peter 3:2), ensuring that their beauty wasn’t emphasized externally but came from the heart.

Here is a description of Christian testimony: “... Christian life isn’t only the intellectual acceptance of a list of creeds or confessions; it needs to be manifested through concrete actions” (The Path of Truth, Book 12. CNP, 2020, p.173). It’s clear, then, that this teaching for women, who may not have had the reciprocity of an unbelieving husband, was aimed to win him over.

C. The message for husbands

The message was intended for those who, having accepted the Lord Jesus, were “... a chosen race, a royal priesthood...” (1 Peter 2:9); thus, they should have proper conduct. In reciprocal ethics, the apostle taught how husbands should behave toward their wives. He instructed them to be understanding and to honor women “as the weaker partner” (1 Peter 3:7), calling for a tender and delicate treatment—not demeaning, but rather recognizing them before God as co-heirs (v.7). Thus, in terms of their value before God, men and women are no different. We must recognize then, that the Lord’s instruction regarding the husband’s conduct toward the wife is reciprocal, and before God, they’re one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

We often hear stories of abuse. Many of them have fatal outcomes; such misfortune is framed in Jesus’ observation about human behavior when it exercises dominance over someone, especially if there are no effective forms of regulation and control. Therefore, abusers seek to isolate their victims to escape control. The apostle is calling to change this form of relationship, instructing husbands to live with their wives wisely, giving them honor. Violence in a relationship between people who have accepted Jesus Christ has no place; it’s not acceptable in any way, and whoever commits it’s not part of “... a chosen people...” (1 Peter 2:9). This must

be explicitly communicated to the new believer because their life could be marked by a pattern of domestic violence which wouldn’t be acceptable.

Finally, another benefit for the husband who has harmony with his wife is that they won’t have hindrance in their prayers (1 Peter 3:7); rather, as a couple, they can present their prayers and supplications before God.

Questions:

- How can we practice reciprocity in marriage today?
- How can we make practical the passage of 1 Peter 3:7 today?

II. Christian Conduct in Relation to Others (1 Peter 3:8-12)

In this passage, we identify teachings about how to be and not to be in the community if we want to live walking in Jesus’ footsteps.

A. How we ought to be?

Interpersonal relationships often become uncomfortable due to differences in thinking or taste. The apostle Peter, in his letter, instructs us on how we should act. The essential aspect is to be of the same mind (v.8). The apostle is underlining the value of unity. Unity is so significant that its effects occur both in desirable and undesirable purposes. An undesirable example can be read in Genesis 11:6. God expressed the attitude of the builders of the Tower of Babel, saying, “the people are one,” and, therefore, nothing would make them desist. An event that shows the value of unity, with the purpose of pleasing God, is in Acts 4:32. It describes the united feeling that the early church experienced with the coming of the Holy Spirit, in which the apostle Peter participated.

The importance of “being of the same mind” is expanded by Dr. David Busic in his book “The Way, the Truth, the Life,” regarding growth in “sanctifying grace.” He cites four steps. The fourth is explicit about the need to have the same mind: “Spiritual growth is a community effort” (Busic, David A., *Way, Truth, Life. Discipleship: The Path of Grace*. USA: CNP, 2021, p.103, digital version). Having the same mind is essential in the life of the church, promoting and stimulating spiritual growth.

B. How we ought not to be?

The apostle Peter expanded the teaching on Christian conduct by indicating that certain demostations of human nature shouldn’t be accepted by the believer. These undesirable behaviors become barriers that limit both the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the harmony that should exist among Christians.

So, he calls to not repay evil for evil or curse for curse (1 Peter 3:9). Doing so is the natural reaction of a life that hasn't been consecrated to God or has cooled and neglected its relationship with God. The apostle Peter supported his teaching with a reference passage: Psalm 34:12-16. This is a call to conduct that pleases God, and specifically, he pointed out aspects that displease God, such as being deceitful and associating with evil. On the other hand, he invites us to seek peace and pursue it. Finally, the apostle Peter issues a warning that encourages doing good and turning away from evil: "...but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Peter 3:12).

Questions:

- Do you consider verses 8 and 9 a reality in our church? Explain.
- How can we make a "community effort" to live according to verses 10 and 11?

III. Christian Conduct in the Face of Justice (1 Peter 3:13-17)

The apostle Peter began his ministry at a time when Jesus' followers still had space in the synagogues, even though they rejected the teaching about Jesus Christ there. As Jews, they had some acceptance within society. In fact, the original intention of the disciples was for the Jewish people to accept Jesus' salvation because it was for them. The Romans saw the followers of Jesus as just more Jews, and their differences were considered matters of their religion. They weren't called "Christians" until later (Acts 11:26).

A. The Benefits of Doing Good

The apostle had given instructions on the conduct that would reflect the image of Christ in the disciples, and now, he showed the benefits of that conduct. Remember Acts 4, where we read that Peter was preaching Jesus' message and doing deeds that benefited the needy, especially healing the sick. The Jewish authorities were upset by the impact of his preaching because many were believing in Jesus. So while they were preaching, they were captured and put in jail. In the interrogation, Peter explained that they did everything for Jesus, and he did it in such a way that Acts 4:13-14 recounts that the authorities marveled and they could do nothing against them.

However, being put in jail and presented before the authorities as wrongdoers was an improper act of the authorities. Peter found that behaving correctly, with a clear conscience, and expressing it with the guidance of the Holy Spirit provided enough support that nothing

could be done against them. This testimony of his life is what he shared in 1 Peter 3:13. The apostle Peter supported his teaching with his life experience.

B. In cases of being treated unjustly

God instructed the Jewish people about the application of justice. Deuteronomy 16:18-20 gives some warnings such as: "Do not pervert justice" (v.19), instead, "Follow justice and justice alone" (v.20). God, as Creator, knows the human heart, so He provides timely warnings to help us manage the free will which He has given us. Unfortunately, when Peter was before the council (Acts 4), that warning about justice had long been neglected. This implied that the recipients of his letter, that "chosen lineage," needed to understand that God might allow them to suffer some kind of harm, some injustice, "for the sake of righteousness" (1 Peter 3:14), but that wouldn't make them wrongdoers. Peter said, "you are blessed" (v.14). This isn't easy to assimilate unless we follow the instruction of the Word of God: to not be intimidated but to sanctify God in our hearts (vv.14-15). Ask: *How do we achieve this?*

Here are the instructions (vv.15-16):

- Prepare to present a defense.
- Present it with gentleness and reverence.
- Have a good conscience.

The apostle Peter concluded this part of his teaching by saying that it's better to suffer for doing good, if it's the will of God, than for doing evil (v.17). This final part is very significant because if the church conforms to what the world proposes, it may feel good but is spiritually dangerous. Satan, with his deceptions, suggests what might be more comfortable, but not what's right.

Questions:

- What is the benefit we have for doing good (v.13)?
- What is God's instruction in the face of injustice (v.15)?

Conclusion

The church of Christ is the only resource that God has provided to communicate His Word through our lives and example. This may well put us into conflict with societies' mores, and we must be prepared to present a defense with gentleness, knowing that "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous" (1 Peter 3:12).



Partakers of Christ's Sufferings

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Biblical passage for study: 1 Peter 4:1-19

Memory Verse: "The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray." 1 Peter 4:7

Lesson Purpose: To take the sufferings of Christ as an example and apply them to our lives when we have to endure hardship as God's children.

Introduction

Peter revisited the theme of the sufferings that Christ endured patiently and undeservedly in His flesh for our sins. He presented this to the believers as an example to follow, challenging his readers and listeners to adopt the same attitude, to face sufferings that would come to those who had left their old way of living with courage and patience.

I. Leave the Past Behind (1 Peter 4:1-6)

The persecution that new believers were experiencing was because they had separated themselves from sin. This created strong antagonism from non-Christians towards the new converts. Peter reminded them of the parallelism with Christ who "suffered in his body..." (v.1a). They would suffer because they had turned their backs on sin: "... whoever suffers in the body is done with sin" (v.1b; Romans 6:2-4).

A. Live to do the will of God (v.2b)

The apostle urged his listeners to live after their conversion according to God's will.

B. The need to abandon lusts, revelries, orgies, dissipation, and abominable idolatries (vv.2a, 3b)

Concupiscence is defined as "Illicit desire, especially 'sexual lust'" (Taylor, Richard S. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.138). Peter reminded them that in the time before they knew Christ, they were drawn by strong desires and appetites that led them to commit all kinds of sexual impurity. This sin is still present today and continues to assail the believer.

Peter listed vices that new believers previously practiced in their old way of life: lasciviousness is a sin that leads a person to practice all kinds of impurity. Peter referred to orgies, parties where, after getting drunk,

they engaged in unrestrained sexual acts; dissipation, alcoholic parties, drinking competitions. Abominable idolatries refer to the strange religious practices in the festivities of their idols. Regarding this, Adam Clarke says: "where they not only worshiped them but performed the most impure, obscene, and abominable rites" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, Volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.654).

The context in which Peter wrote his letter isn't unlike our present time. Christians face these and many other evils at every moment of their lives.

C. Endure rejection, awaiting the time of God's judgment (vv.4-6)

There are those who, when they have seen a friend or family member turning away from sin, initially are surprised because they remembered them engaging in unrestrained libertinage. However, shortly afterward, they start feeling uncomfortable. Christians are often misunderstood and mistreated because of their new way of living within the gospel. This is exactly what happened to the new believers to whom Peter wrote this letter.

Questions:

- What did the Lord deliver us from by having a new life in Him?
- What are the types of sufferings that Christians go through today?

II. Watch in prayer and make love your aim (1 Peter 4:7-9)

The apostle Peter observed that the end of all things was near; therefore, he used it as an incentive to encourage believers to maintain a vigilant and prudent (sober) mindset, enabling them to live holy lives amidst afflictions. Having a sober mind, Peter urged his listeners to practice three things:

A. Watch in Prayer (v.7b)

Peter was aware, from his own experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, of not heeding the Master's request to remain in prayer. Based on this experience, he now urged new believers to be watchful in prayer. Prayer is an essential aspect of the Christian's spiritual life. Today, there are many things that distract us from prayer. Living in a globalized world, where abundant information reaches us through social media and other communication channels, hours can be spent listening to news, advertisements, and comments — time that could be well used for prayer. Jesus Christ emphasized the need to maintain a vigilant attitude to resist temptations (Matthew 26:41). Through prayer, the Christian establishes communion with God.

B. Fervent Love (v.8b)

Given the circumstances, feelings of resentment toward detractors could arise. For this reason, Peter instructed his readers to have fervent love. In his first letter, he wrote, "love one another deeply, from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22), referring to God's law that Jesus Christ summarized: "Love the Lord your God... and... Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). The second part of the verse under study, "because love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8), alludes to the book of Proverbs: "... love covers all wrongs" (Proverbs 10:12). What is the meaning of this proverbial saying? Regarding this, Adam Clarke says, "a loving disposition tends to overlook the faults of others, to forgive received offenses, to excuse and overlook, as far as is consistent with truth, the transgressions of men" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, Volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.655). It was and continues to be an imperative for the believer of all times to maintain pure love toward people who still live in the darkness of sin and, at times, cause problems for the church of Christ.

C. Practice Hospitality (v.9)

In the days when Peter wrote this letter, there was already some persecution, and some Christians had been expelled from their homes, while others were traveling to spread the gospel to other places. However, they faced difficulties in finding accommodation, since immigrants had to rely on acquaintances, friends, and relatives for lodging. Keeping this in mind, the apostle urged believers to open the doors of their homes to host those who were suffering persecution; and he added, "without grumbling" (v.9) or murmuring. The writer of Hebrews reminded his readers that by receiving strangers into their homes, they "... have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Heb. 13:2). Therefore, like Peter's listeners, we must always be ready to share our food and assist those in need with a good disposition and joy.

Questions:

- Do you consider prayer important in the life of a believer? Why?
- Mention a Bible verse that has spoken to your life about the importance of prayer.

III. Minister According to the Gift we have Received (1 Peter 4:10-11)

A. Spiritual Gifts (v.10)

Given the situation they were facing, the church needed to develop godly gifts so that the spiritual life of each member of the congregation could be strengthened. Therefore, Peter informed his readers that each member of the Christian community had received gifts (abilities) from God. He urged them, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others" (v.10a).

Thus, the gifts were to be used for mutual benefit within the suffering Christian community. In the second part of the verse, Peter told his readers that they should act "as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (v.10b). Within the church, "no one should be content with one thing and his own gifts, but each one needs the help and support of his brother" (Hendriksen, William. New Testament Commentary. USA: Ed. Baker Book House, 1986, p.143). Everyone should strive to be a good steward of the talents God has given.

B. Speak God's Words (v.11a)

God's power works in the believer who speaks the very words of God. Any preacher or teacher of God's Word can testify to the Spirit's power dwelling in them, working when they faithfully give "living words" received from God (1 Thes. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11). John Wesley said, "He who doesn't instill practical holiness into believers doesn't speak as the oracles of God."

Peter urged the believer to put to work the talents God has granted: "... if anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides" (v.11b). Any service within the church should be done with the understanding that it all comes from God, from the strength He provides. In Greek, the verb "to give, to provide" points to someone who pays the cost of something. God, then, abundantly provides the Christian worker with the necessary strength to carry out the task. Since God covers every need, His name receives praise in all things. But all this is done through Jesus Christ. Paul taught this doctrine in the following words: "For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

Questions:

- Do you think it's important to develop the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to believers? Why?
- State with certainty the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given you. Briefly explain how you are developing them.

IV. Do Not Be Ashamed of Being a Christian (1 Peter 4:12-19)

A. Christian Suffering (vv.12-16)

During the course of the first century, Jews and Gentiles who had put their faith in Jesus Christ had to face persecution. Peter addressed them with words of encouragement, figuratively standing with them, saying, "Beloved, don't be surprised" (v.12). Jesus had warned that the unbelieving world hates His followers (John 15:18-19, 17:14). Therefore, Christians shouldn't be surprised when the time comes for them to be persecuted. The apostle Peter continued, saying, "the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you" (v.12). Just as gold is refined by fire, so the believer's faith is tested through suffering: "as though something strange were happening to you" (v.12). A Christian doesn't have to question God's providence when unexpected suffering comes. Nor should they blame God for not intervening in their favor. God has control over every situation and has the power to protect His children from suffering.

Verse 13 says, "but rejoice." Instead of considering suffering from a negative perspective, Christians should look to Jesus and rejoice in what they're about to experience. Also, the same verse 13 says, "rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (v.13). What a great privilege, what an honor for the Christian to be able to participate in the sufferings of Christ! And he called them, "... blessed" (v.14b). If a Christian suffers unjustly for the sake of the name of Jesus, they shouldn't be ashamed: "... none of you should suffer as a murderer, or thief, or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler" (v.15).

Peter mentioned three categories: the murderer, the thief, and the wrongdoer. He implied that for someone to be designated as such, they must be engaged in criminal activities punishable by law. He warned that a Christian must live such an exemplary life that they should never be brought to court as a criminal. The first part of verse 16 says, "... if you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed..." When a Christian undergoes persecution, they must have a clear conscience, allowing them to defend themselves without shame. When a believer encounters contempt, mockery, and disdain because of their faith, shame is often the cause for not testifying for Christ.

For this reason, Peter urged the reader to overcome shame. And in such a situation, the believer must take a position of worshiping God. The last part of verse 16 says, "glorify God." The counterpart of shame is praise. Feeling ashamed of Jesus makes a person a coward. Jesus Christ taught he will be ashamed of anyone who is ashamed of Him when he comes into his glory (Mark 8:38).

B. Without Fear of the Final Judgment (vv.17-19)

As we saw earlier, Peter wrote his epistle not to unbelievers but to the people of God who were experiencing suffering and difficulties. He encouraged them by letting them know, "... judgment begins with God's household..." (v.17); and "... what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?" (v.18). That is, God will begin His judgment with His own children to have a solid foundation for judging those who disobey and rebel against the gospel. Paul encouraged the Christians of Asia Minor with these words: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22).

Peter concluded this section of his letter by exhorting Christians suffering for the sake of the gospel to fulfill two duties: "... entrust their souls" and "... continue to do good" (v.19). The word Peter used, "entrust," from the Greek "*paratidemi*" (Vine, W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary. Colombia: Ed. Caribe, 1984, p.313), is the same one our Savior used on the cross when He said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). What a sublime example of completely surrendering our lives to the will of our blessed heavenly Father when we go through the most difficult situations in our lives. The last part of 1 Peter 4:19 says, "continue to do good." This is one of the recommendations that Peter used frequently in this epistle (2:15,20, 3:6,11,17). The apostle implied that the Christian who completely surrenders their life to Christ will have no obstacle to demonstrate benevolence through deeds of love and mercy toward their neighbor.

Questions:

- Mention two negative things a person does when ashamed of being a Christian.
- Mention two positive things a person does when not ashamed of being a Christian.

Conclusion

Today, just like in the time of the Apostle Peter, we must earnestly seek spiritual virtues. Even if we have to go through suffering, we should rejoice in suffering as Christ suffered and praise His holy name.



Useful Exhortations

Mary Prado (Peru)

Biblical passage for study: 1 Peter 5:1-11

Memory Verse: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." 1 Peter 5:10.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the importance of developing Christian attitudes in congregational life.

Introduction

Chapter 5 of 1 Peter is a model passage on pastoral care. Its great significance lies in the fact that it comes from an elder pastor who received the pastoral charge directly from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ, "the great shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20). In this lesson, we'll study this important chapter, extracting teachings applicable to pastoral work and the internal life of the church.

The apostle Peter, observing the needs of the church in his time, emphasized the importance of each pastor understanding the honor and great responsibility that comes with the call to care for God's flock. Similarly, those leading a congregation today must understand that this is a task requiring a correct attitude, starting with acknowledging that we're mere collaborators of the "Chief of shepherds" (1 Peter 5:4). As ministers of the Lord, we must show concern, fervent love, and a spirit of sacrifice for His church, just as Christ did. "For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I'm compelled to preach. Woe to me if I don't preach the gospel!" (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Ministers are entrusted with the care of those for whom Christ died, His beloved church purchased with the price of His blood.

I. To the pastors: care for the church of God (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Peter's first exhortation to the communities of believers he wrote to focuses directly on the elders of the church (v.1). The term "elder" here has a specific connotation. "It doesn't refer to the older people in the Church, but to the leaders of the community; that is, it's a position, not information about the age of that group of people" (Davids, Peter H. The First Epistle of Peter.

Spain: Editorial CLIE, 2004, p. 231).

Peter advised the elders to have an attitude of humility and solidarity, not considering themselves above others; for he considered himself as one of them: "I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder" (v.1). This is advice given from his own experience, supported by deeds and not just words: "...and as a witness of Christ's sufferings" (v.1). Peter's advice to pastors came from an experience of betrayal; hence, faithfulness in pastoral service was of utmost importance to him. Some important considerations about pastoral care are derived from this first part of the passage (vv.1-4):

A. It's explicit advice, not an option

"Be shepherds of God's flock that's under your care..." (v.2).

B. It's a labor of dedication

The word "shepherd" comes from the Greek *poimante*, meaning: to feed, nourish, and involves all the functions of pastoral work (Bible Outlines and Sermons, New Testament, Volume 12. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 2003, p.124).

C. It's a decision born of the heart and love

"...Not because you must, but because you are willing..." (v.2). Pastoral care involves a spirit of dedication, leading to a labor that cares for the congregation in all aspects of their needs. It should be done with joy and obedience to the Lord.

D. It goes beyond just preaching and praying for the congregation.

It involves the work of a shepherd: feeding, guiding, seeking, saving, protecting, restoring, rewarding, and maintaining the sheep.

E. Pastoral work must be motivated by love for souls.

It's a motivation that should arise as a secure response to God's call to one's heart. The desire to fulfill that call, not for the sake of obtaining material benefit: "not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve." (v.2).

There's a clear distinction between the salaried shepherd and the one who does the work out of vocation and love. The salaried focused shepherd doesn't care about what happens to the sheep; the one who isn't focused on the salary loves the sheep, cares for them, defends them from the attacks of predators. "The hired hand isn't the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep" (John 10:12-13).

This motivation is characterized by a spirit of service, seeking the well-being and growth of the church. "The elder or minister must watch over the flock not for personal gain or profit, but with eagerness and a willing spirit... No person should ever enter the ministry... as a profession as a means of livelihood...because people say they have the talent for it" (Bible Outlines and Sermons, New Testament, Volume 12. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 2003, p.125).

F. The pastor must serve with a spirit of humility

1 Peter 5:3 says, "not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." The pastor must always exercise their role remembering that they are a servant of the One who called them to care for and nourish His flock, the church of Christ. They are a servant of their Lord and has the duty to care for and guide by being an example to those they minister to, following the example of Christ in all things. "The pastor must never forget that he isn't the Prince of shepherds" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.309).

The basic hope for rewards of pastors should be in the One who called them: Jesus Christ. From Him will come the reward for their service and sacrifice (v.4). "The earthly compensation of the leader may be insignificant, but when the Prince of shepherds appears (cf. 4:13), he will have his imperishable reward (cf. 1:4-5), an incorruptible crown of glory, the bliss of glory, the main element of which is the life of God poured into the soul through Christ" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.309,

emphasis added).

Questions:

- What did Peter mean when he used the word "elder"?
- What is the basic role of pastoral care? Does it apply to our time?

II. To the Youth: Obedience and Humility (1 Peter 5:5)

The next exhortation is addressed to the youth. They also have a significant role within the congregational life: "In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble'" (v.5). This exhortation is extremely useful because youth is characterized by energy and often a lack of submission. Therefore, the apostle advised the submission of the young folk to the elders of the congregation, and everyone to submit to one another. "Humility produces a proper attitude toward one another and toward all Christian duties, however humble they may be" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.310).

Humility is the motivating and fundamental attitude for everyone in the congregation, from the leader to those being led. Humility is the opposite of pride and arrogance. Pride is an absence of humility and a lack of trust in the power and providence of God. Peter urged them to not oppose God but to serve with a humble and submissive attitude; meaning trusting in Him and not in our own strength.

There's a significant difference between the concept of humility in the world and that which the Word of God provides. Contrary to the world's understanding of humility as being insignificant, without character or value, the humility that characterizes a good Christian and those who minister before the Lord is the opposite. "When they think of humility, they imagine a kind of shy, weak, and sparing person. But this isn't what God wants to convey with humility. The humility demanded by God strengthens a person and makes them amazing and impressive" (Bible Outlines and Sermons, New Testament, Volume 12. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 2003, p.127).

In postmodern culture, where autonomy and individualism are privileged, a disposition of humility and submission to superiors undoubtedly goes against the current and is difficult for the young Christian to do.

However, let's remember that it's a manifestation of God's grace. That is, an attitude of obedience is required to be humble in today's world. Let's remember that this is the result of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us.

Questions:

- Why does it require great strength to be humble in the world we live in?
- In what practical ways do we show humility?

III. To Everyone: Humble Yourselves Before God, Be Sober, and Watch (1 Pet. 5:6-9)

Another series of brief exhortations, which can be considered general, i.e., for the entire congregation, appears in the central section of this passage (vv.6-9). These primarily concern our relationship with God. In the Christian life, communion with God is fundamental, and everything depends on it. The whole Christian experience must be enveloped in the sphere of personal devotion to God. It's in this intimate experience that we receive the resources of God's grace for our victory. Hence, the great importance of prayer and dependence on God (v.7).

But these exhortations also deal with our attitudes toward those around us. We are exhorted to be sober. Having sobriety implies firmness in the face of ethical challenges in life. Christian ethical convictions should be reflected in all our attitudes and actions. Sobriety has to do with moderation; being temperate without falling into excesses in life. It's related to the temperance to which we're called, which is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, we're urged to be vigilant; the enemy will take advantage of any weakness or failure to attack us (v.8). Speaking to the Corinthians, Paul exhorted them to be careful to do what's right and pleasing to God "in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we're not unaware of his schemes" (2 Cor. 2:11). It's necessary to watch and be prepared to stand firm in the face of life's adversities and the enemy's attacks (v.9).

Questions:

- Why is personal devotion to God so important?
- What does the exhortation to watch mean today?

IV. The Reward of the God of Grace (1 Peter 5:10-11)

God always rewards the faithfulness manifested in our perseverance through trials and suffering. The experience of sanctification, as a manifestation of divine grace, anticipates the perfection of glorified life.

"Another stimulus to resist the devil is that the God of all grace... calls us (10) to holiness, which is a preparation for the glory reserved for the conquerors. He is the Source and Giver of all the grace necessary for every occasion" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.312, emphasis added).

We must live in holiness while awaiting the promises of our Lord. It's through them that we'll access His glory (v.10). This is precisely what the last two verses of the passage indicate (vv.10-11). This part undoubtedly has a comforting purpose in the context of the enormous sufferings of the original readers of the letter.

However, it becomes highly relevant in our current reality in the midst of the world we live in, so convulsed by human needs and pain. Everything is possible through grace. It's through grace that we'll overcome the enemy and reach the goal set by God. "The goal of all this is that we may share in his eternal glory, for which holiness is a preparation (cf. Matthew 5:8, 28; Hebrews 12:14). And as it was in the experience of the Master, the path to glory passes through tribulations and the fires of persecution" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.312).

Sanctification cannot be experienced, and one cannot be fit for glory, without going through a process of maturity and growth in grace. We'll reach the goal not by our own strength but because we serve the God who can do all things, the "God of all grace" (v.10). He's the one who guards and protects us in His grace from everything that afflicts us and could serve as an obstacle to our perfection. It's through His Holy Spirit that we can have the necessary strength to overcome and serve God pleasingly. "He is the God of all grace (v.10), who provides abundant grace to keep us in affliction. He imparts to us all the strength and influences of the Spirit necessary to render acceptable service to God and man" (Nicholson, Roy S. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume 10. USA: CNP, n.d., p.314, emphasis added).

Conclusion

Every believer, both the ministers and the those under their care, are called to live a life that reflects the humility, love, and holiness of the One who calls us. Everything we do is by the grace of God. Therefore, we must glorify God with our attitudes and be willing to suffer and trust in the Lord, with full certainty of faith.



Beware of False Prophets

Walter Rodriguez (Uruguay)

Bible Study passages: 2 Peter 1:16-20, 2:1-3,10-22

Memory Verse: “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient” Ephesians 5:6.

Lesson Purpose: To have a clear understanding that a true Christian teacher teaches what the Bible says and lives out what’s taught.

Introduction

In our time, the low level of critical thinking in society has raised concerns among educators, sociologists, and psychologists. A notable evidence is the proliferation of fake news, especially the number of people who believe and spread them on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Critical thinking involves analyzing what’s said, who says it, and for what purpose, reasoning, and striving to be objective.

Bringing this phenomenon into Christianity, it’s evident that there has been a proliferation of teachers, if we can call them that, whose teachings lack biblical foundation. Nevertheless, many people believe them without examining them in the light of the Bible; they repeat and teach them invoking the authority of “so-and-so.” These ideas should be compared with the central teaching of the Word of God, our only rule of faith. This phenomenon isn’t new, but in these days, the number of such teachers and their followers seems to have increased.

This brief overview of what’s observed in our society sets the stage for the Second Epistle of Peter and its relevant teaching regarding false prophets. I recommend that everyone carefully read the biblical passages of this lesson. When reading, don’t think that it’s ancient history or written for another time. These warnings are for today. They enclose the challenge and invitation to read carefully with oneself in mind. And if Peter wrote for me, what’s he warning me about? We’ll try to answer this question, but we need to read the passages without haste and try to see if today we have false teachers among those who call themselves Christians. Here, Peter referred to prophecy as the proclamation of God’s message, not necessarily relate to future events.

I. False Prophets: In Christ, all the law and prophets are summarized (2 Peter 1:16-20)

Similar to the first letter, Peter also addressed Jewish believers and proselytes who knew the prophecies of the Old Testament regarding the coming of the promised Messiah, people who had received the good news of Jesus Christ.

In this letter, the apostle responded to a concern of that group; perhaps there were questions that doubted the truth of his statements or questioned his and the other apostles’ knowledge of Jesus and His teachings. These are elements inferred from the text because we don’t have that information.

His argument was that of an eyewitness: he assured them that they didn’t invent a story, but they were present when they saw and heard the miraculous declaration from God the Father, confirming that Christ represented “the prophetic message as something completely reliable” (v.19). He referred to the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain where Peter, John, James, and Jesus prayed (Matthew 17:1-5; Mark 9:2-7; Luke 9:28-35). There’s no stronger argument than that of an eyewitness about an event. Peter made sure to prove to them that the prophecies pointed to the Christ presented to them. Here, he emphasized the importance of paying attention to the Scriptures that announced the coming of the Messiah.

Ask: What relevance does this episode have for us today? The goal is to point out that in Christ and His teachings, all the law and the prophets are summarized. Jesus Himself said, “... ‘You shall love the Lord your God... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

This universally accepted statement deserves careful consideration when dealing with the topic of false teachers. We must ask ourselves and ask those who listen to us: What is the basis and source of our way of thinking? Is it Christ? Is it the Word studied, meditated, and understood, or is it a source outside of it? Am I clear that the teaching of Jesus Christ relates to all aspects of life, both in what we do, what we approve, what we disapprove, what we support, and what we reject? This means that our ideal model of life is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, His teachings, and His way of relating to the world.

Our Teacher teaches with His words, teachings, parables, and also with His behavior, with what He approved, with what He rejected, with what He condemned. “You have heard that it was said... But I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21-22,27-28,31-34,38-39) are words of Jesus that are repeated in the New Testament. From here stems the importance of knowing Jesus in the most complete way, to have Him as a model for life and for the development of the church, which is the body of Christ.

The reason for the church, both in its most general expression and in its local expression, is twofold: to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ (it is necessary to know and understand the ministry that the Lord carried out), and to be the “body” that establishes His presence in the world. Anything else that the church does is secondary.

When defining the church and the participation of each person in this community, it implies that the task of the congregation of believers is more than a religious act, more than a praise meeting, more than the pursuit of an experience. Christ lives in the church if He lives in the life of each of us. “In the New Testament, true spirituality is that which is expressed with all of life and not with a part, not in a fragmented or parcelled-out manner... It’s taking on a new lifestyle” (Tinao, Daniel. *The New Man and Spirituality*, Encounter and Dialogue, No. 6. Argentina: A.S.I.T. publication, 1988, p.33). When identifying false teachers today, it’s very important to be clear about these concepts.

Questions:

- In what sense is Jesus “the most reliable prophetic word” (v.19)?
- What does the task of the believers in the congregation imply?

II. False Prophets: Beware! Within Christian Churches, there were, are, and will be false teachers (2 Peter 2:1-3)

Peter warned, “But there were also false prophets among the people” (v.1), referring to what Jeremiah 23:9-40, Ezekiel 2:1-8, and Micah 3:11 said, among many other passages on the topic in ancient times. He added, “... just as there will be false teachers among you...” (2 Peter 2:1). When he wrote these verses, the apostle wasn’t concerned about other religions, although they existed. Instead, he focused on ideas and doctrines that deviated from the truth within the community of faith—false teachers who presented themselves as authoritative but hid dark purposes: secretly introducing “destructive heresies” (v.1).

These unethical false teachers sought to seduce believers to satisfy their own desires and, additionally, gain financial benefits for themselves. Peter spoke of “destructive heresies” and “depraved conduct” (vv.1-2). The Living Bible (TLB) puts it this way: “They will cleverly tell their lies about God ... and teach that there’s nothing wrong with sexual sin” (vv.1-2), which brought a bad reputation to the gospel. Then he added, “in their greed these teachers will exploit you with fabricated stories...” (v.3); strong words to refer to those “teachers” who seek to grab the money of gullible congregants.

The mere fact that the Lord has preserved these passages for us makes us think about the relevance of the warning. There were, are, and will be merchants of the gospel. However, there are many categories of false teachers whose activity doesn’t respond solely to economic benefit. For example, those described by Ezekiel: “... Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! ... Even though the LORD hasn’t sent them, they say, ‘The LORD declares,’ and expect him to fulfill their words” (Ezekiel 13:3,6). The order is reversed; God didn’t send the message, they made it up. False teachers are people who deviate from the teachings of the Bible, whether they claim to have new revelations, “follow their own spirit” (Ezekiel 13:3), or manipulate the biblical text to support something that benefits them.

The Lord Jesus Christ taught, “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they’re ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). Then He added, “By their fruits you’ll recognize them...” (Matthew 7:16); and repeated, “Thus, by their fruits, you’ll recognize them” (Matthew 7:20).

Paul told the Ephesians, “ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore, don’t be partners with them” (Ephesians 5:6-7).

Then, he wrote to the Philippians, “For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:18-19). In his farewell speech in Miletus to the elders of the church, he said, “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and won’t spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:29-30).

Peter joined the voices of the Lord and other disciples to alert both believers and leaders about the danger of listening to other messages that aren’t in line with the teaching in the Word. These voices reach us when we have access to all kinds of “messages” that seem pious, and many sound authoritative. They come from outside the church, but worse, when they come from within it.

The call is to be wise, to examine everything in the light of our guide, the Bible. “There’s also a warning against overly credulous attitudes toward those in official positions. Those who hold positions of authority are deserving of our... support as long as they’re loyal to God and His Word. But Deuteronomy, the guide for the laity, makes it clear that even those whose office exists can fall short in their responsibility (Aaron Dt. 9:20-21). If the leader departs from God’s revealed will, his authority must be rejected” (Ford, Jack and Deasley, A. R. G. Beacon Bible Commentary, vol. 1. USA: CNP, 1990, p.558).

Questions:

- Besides Peter, who else warned about false teachers in the New Testament?
- What did Jesus teach about false teachers?

III. False Prophets: How to Recognize Them? (2 Peter 2:10-22)

Peter identified a series of characteristics exhibited by false teachers. It’s crucial to read this passage carefully. Many of these traits can be seen in false teachers today. The apostle pointed out various immoralities: licentiousness, abuses, greed, deceit, adultery, arrogance, pretense, sensuality, and commercialization of faith. In the past, as in the present, these types of offenses cause scandal and shame for the gospel.

It shouldn’t be assumed that there are categories of condemnable behaviors for false teachers. All deserve the same social condemnation from the family of faith. Beware of those with deceitful words and/or claiming to have received the “Word of God,” but their message and life show that God didn’t speak to them. Any kind of abuse of the weaker or the distracted with confusing words and/or tricks is fraud, a trap, immorality, and deserves the same level of social condemnation in the community of faith.

The events of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in the 21st century have exposed the lying messages of spiritual authority and power that these false teachers proclaimed in this situation. Let’s add those who promised security and success to those who put themselves under their “apostolic cover.” Where have all those promises gone? What has been their supposed spiritual authority over the disease?

When serving God ceases to be a vocation, a divine calling to serve people on behalf of the commitment made to God, and becomes a career, either administrative and/or professional, that brings an individual a certain “status” within the community of believers, or can bring hierarchy, power, authority, economic benefits of various kinds, fame, and prestige, it loses legitimacy. When serving God becomes an opportunity to proclaim one’s own ideas by taking advantage of the situation, this service loses legitimacy. What isn’t legitimate is false.

A detail that the text emphasizes is that the greater responsibility lies with the one who deceives and lies; although a negligent mind that doesn’t examine and repeats false teachings will receive what it deserves. Verse 20 says, “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they’re worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.”

Questions:

- Mention at least three characteristics that we should identify in a false teacher and three characteristics of a true Christian teacher.
- What is the responsibility of the believer who listens to a false prophet?

Conclusion

True teachers are people who don’t deviate from the teachings of the Bible and live according to them. For this reason, all Christians must pay attention and follow only those who teach in line with the Word of God.



Getting Ready for His Coming

Romina Miño (Argentina)

Biblical passage for study: 2 Peter 3:1-18

Memory Verse: “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation...” 2 Peter 3:14-15a.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that having confidence in the Second Coming of Christ will allow us to live with hope and remain prepared for that moment.

Introduction

Jesus will return. This statement provokes varied reactions and responses from people. Not only do Christians have questions about the end times, what awaits us, what will happen to humanity and the earth, but there are also various feelings surrounding this topic: fear, alarm, resignation, hope, anxiety, curiosity, indifference, mockery, etc.

Ask: How should we live in the present with hope? How can we wait with courage and patience when the environment seems to be heading towards total chaos? Is it truly important to know details of this phenomenon or to have the conviction that it will happen sooner or later? Is this topic relevant to my Christian life? Unbelievers ask: What happened to the promise of His coming? Believers wonder: When will it happen?

In the days of the early church, Peter had to teach on this topic because there were false teachers who sought to confuse and cast doubt on this truth. Peter denounced the misuse of Scriptures (2 Peter 3:15-16) and their prophecies (2 Peter 1:19-21) by the heretics. They presented themselves as teachers, were members of the congregations themselves, and enjoyed respect as such (2 Peter 2:1). Hence, he issued a strong warning on the subject accompanied by solid arguments that form a brilliant apologetic. “Apologetics” (in Greek: ‘speaking in defense’) is the science that presents the evidence and foundations of things or systems... Christian apologetics is the art of defending or explaining the Christian faith to non-believers” (Taylor, Richard S. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1984, p.59).

In this lesson, we’ll explore some central aspects that arise from this promise that’s true, Jesus will return! And it has implications for our Christian life.

I. While we wait, we remember (2 Pet. 3:1-10)

Peter mentioned that his intention in writing was to refresh their memory, to remind them of the words of the prophets and the command of the Lord (vv.1-2). These were valuable matters they couldn’t forget! Having an active memory would stimulate them to think soundly. Peter wanted to awaken them by reminding them of the truths they had already learned. He assumed that the foundations of Christian teaching had already been laid, which in itself contained the answer to the error of the heretics. His task was to remind them of the truth they had already received.

He also warned them about scoffers who would confront them in their deepest convictions, people who would mock the truth to pursue their own desires. These were the Epicureans, who denied the certainty of divine judgment, basing their belief on the delay of judgment on the wicked. They also argued that God didn’t govern the world or history, but that events in the world happened by chance.

“To remember is to bring something from the past into the mind.” In this sense, Peter was emphatic and concrete about what they should consider. They should remember:

The Lord not only has different times (v.8), but also a different way of measuring and calculating them, which truly distances us from any attempt at speculation or enclosing His work in human logic.

A. The Lord is patient (v.9). What some may take as delay translates into such great love that He’s willing to do what no one likes to do: “wait.” It’s not forced waiting; it’s planned and intentional waiting. Simply because He wants His purpose to be fulfilled; that everyone has the opportunity to repent.

B. The Lord is faithful (v.10). There are several reasons to affirm this: the first is that the Lord isn't like us. By essence, by His attributes, He doesn't lie (Numbers 23:19). What the Lord has determined, He will do. His Word says it, and His deeds confirm it.

C. The Lord will come (v.10). This passage presents an interesting tension—certainty and uncertainty, security and questions. Jesus will come, but like a thief. This image indicates that we don't know when. Nevertheless, we have enough information about it; we know that it will happen and how. This statement is accompanied by fulfilled prophecies and all the experiences lived.

Questions:

- Mention the four characteristics that we need to remember about our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Which of these characteristics do you need to keep more present in your life? Share.

II. While we wait, we continue to live (2 Peter 3:11-13)

A. Living in holiness (vv.11-12)

The Word of God says: "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat" (vv.11-12).

The life God commands us to live is a life of holiness: "For it's written: 'Be holy, because I'm holy'" (1 Peter 1:16). And this is the result of constant obedience caused by the filling of the Holy Spirit. Through Him, we have the possibility to live each day with such devotion that it leads us from admiration to imitation of the One who is our greatest inspiration: Jesus Christ. This is what the Bible refers to as "holy and godly lives" (2 Peter 3:11). Simply put, living like Jesus, seeking to please Him in all aspects of our lives.

Ask: How do we live our sexuality; how do we manage our finances; how do we raise our children; how do we manage our time; how do we live in our relationships, etc.? The answer to this question should lead us to glorify God in everything. Because that's what we were created for, to walk as He walked and glorify Him in everything.

We can recall what holiness meant for Wesley: "It's a habitual disposition of the soul which, in the sacred writings, is termed holiness; and which directly implies being cleansed from sin... and being endued with those virtues which were in Christ Jesus... Basically, Wesley declared that holiness is a condition of the person in which, on the one hand, the cleansing from sin is evident, and on the other hand, the dynamic presence of the love of God is evidenced" (Baldeón, Edgar. *Doctrine of Holiness I - Student Book*. Guatemala: CNP, 2011, p.17).

B. Living with expectations (v.13)

"But in keeping with his promise we're looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (v.13). Despite the destructive forces of divine judgment, the Christian's hope is the renewal of creation, not its annihilation. Just as the ancient world was destroyed by the flood and gave rise to the present world, so the present world will undergo divine judgment, but from it will arise the new creation. The promises to which Peter referred are specifically those of Isaiah 65:17 and 66:22. The hope of the renewal of creation was alive in Jewish thought and in the theology of the Lord's church (Romans 8:19-21; Revelation 21:5) (Green, Eugenio. *American Hispanic Bible Commentary*. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1993, p.447).

It's challenging to live without expecting anything. Expecting not in the temporal sense but in the sense of expecting with anticipation. Expecting God's work in our lives to fulfill His purpose. And most importantly, we're expecting according to His promises, which are true and fulfilled. This guarantees that we don't hope in vain, that we'll not be disappointed. Have you ever worn/had something new... clothes, a car, a house? The feeling is great. Imagine the feeling that knowing of a new place where you'll dwell for eternity, and moreover, it will be filled with the justice of God. Truly, this is wonderful!

Questions:

- How should we live while waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord?
- Take a few minutes to meditate on your way of life, and present to the Lord those areas of your life where you, your surroundings, or the Lord find something to reprove. Ask for forgiveness and remember that you have His power to live blamelessly.

III. While we wait, we must be prepared (2 Peter 3:14-18)

How should we live in this expectation?

A. Be Diligent (vv.14-15)

2 Peter 3:14 says: “So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” The expression “spotless and blameless” refer to something we cannot do alone. The Lord cleanses us, completes us, and perfects us. We must desire that work in our lives if we haven’t experienced it yet. The point is to maintain that purity, preserve that wonderful work, do everything possible. What happens inside us is reflected in our behavior, in the external. But is good behavior, pious conduct, and Christian duty enough?

According to the passage, we need something more; to be found at peace with Him. This refers to something much deeper; it’s a relational matter. Without debts, without guilt, accepted, forgiven, enjoying His grace, loved, and in communion with Him. The Word of God says: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). Peace with God means that our great debt for sin has already been canceled, and God sees us as righteous (Romans 3:22; Colossians 2:14). We’re no longer enemies but beloved children (1 John 3:2) (<https://www.gotquestions.org/peace-with-God.html>).

The Living Bible version of 2 Peter 3:14 says: “Dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen and for him to come, try hard to live without sinning; and be at peace with everyone so that he will be pleased with you when he returns.”

Here’s something interesting. Life with God must be evident, but the one who evaluates, looks, the one who approves my life, is God. We should be concerned about how we stand before His eyes. Because when we lose sight of this, we begin to live to please people and institutions, and we fall into the error of being at peace living according to human parameters and not according to the principles of the Lord.

B. Be Alert (vv.16-17)

Peter’s request was that, having been warned, they remain alert, vigilant, so as not to be deceived, not to fall, not to lose the firm foundation (v.17). There are a considerable number of passages in Scripture where we’re exhorted to pay attention, to be alert, on guard, etc.

Here are a few:

- “Be on guard! Be alert! You don’t know when that time will come” (Mark 13:33).
- “So be on your guard; I have told you everything ahead of time” (Mark 13:23).
- “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we don’t drift away: (Hebrews 2:1).

We need to be alert; we can exhort, correct those who are misguided and confused, false teachers. But if they persist in error, we must not coexist with them since they harm the church of Christ. We must take care, guard ourselves. If we’re warned, we must act. Being on guard means presenting a battle, to knock down every argument, being prepared and not fearing.

C. Keep Growing (v.18)

Peter concluded his brief epistle in the same way he began, urging his readers to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, knowing Him more and more (v.18). This is the most important step to refute false teachers. We cannot afford to neglect this vital aspect. To grow, we have to nourish ourselves; a body that doesn’t grow isn’t eating well, and a body that doesn’t eat becomes sick, and a sick body dies. The same happens in our spiritual life; if we’re poorly nourished, we’re more exposed, weaker to face daily challenges, sufferings, temptations, pains, false teachings.

If we stay busy growing in our relationship with God and strengthening our faith, it’s possible that the previous points, living in holiness, and caring for our stability, will naturally follow. Because knowing and experiencing more and more of our God leads us to the rest. And above all, it prevents us from yielding and falling to the subtle deceptions of false teachers.

Questions:

- Why should we be alert and prepared?
- In what way should we wait?

Conclusion

Remember, live fully, and wait. Remembering the Word of the Lord brings security to live the present in the best way and wait for the future with hope. After studying this passage, we can say that what we keep in memory will bring conviction for the present, the delay of God is love, and the end is the beginning. The important thing is to be prepared.

The Ten Commandments

Fourth Quarter

The First Commandment

No graven images

His name is worthy of honor

What a good rest!

Honor your father and mother

You shall not kill

Meaning and consequences of adultery

Do not steal

Always speak the truth

You shall not covet!

The great commandment: God is one

Loving God with all our being

Love your neighbor



The First Commandment

Dorothy Bullón (Costa Rica)

Bible Study passages: Exodus 19; Deuteronomy 5:6-7

Memory Verse: "I'm the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Deuteronomy 5:6-7).

Lesson Purpose: To discover what this first commandment meant for the people of God and to see its implications for us today.

Introduction

With this lesson, we begin an extremely important series on the Ten Commandments. "Obedience" is one of the key words in the Bible, from Genesis 2 where the first couple disobeyed God, to Revelation (1:3) where it calls us to hear and heed the Word of God. The Ten Commandments still serve as the foundation of God's moral law today. They're shared by Christians, Jews, and Muslims. God wrote them on stone tablets and gave them to Moses to share with all the Israelites shortly after they left captivity in Egypt (Exodus 20:1-26). Moses reiterated them 40 years later in Deuteronomy 5:1-22 as the Israelites approached the promised land.

I. The context (Exodus 19)

In this introduction, we'll study the context in detail, and I invite you to review Exodus 19. A large number of people escaped forced labor in Egypt after witnessing the phenomenal ten plagues that God inflicted on the Egyptians. God opened the Red Sea for them, and they reached the Sinai Peninsula. After three months, they found themselves at the foot of Mount Sinai (Horeb, in Deuteronomy).

In Exodus 19, we witness a theophany (an appearance of God) in which the people audibly heard God's voice. We can see Moses, now eighty years old, acting as a mediator between God and the people, going up and down the mountain, delivering God's message to the people. In this chapter, God made a covenant, an alliance, with His people. It was a moment of great importance.

After hearing God's message from the mountaintop, Moses came down and communicated it to the people: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you'll be my treasured possession. Although

the whole earth is mine, you'll be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (vv. 4-6).

They were called to obey, to be holy, and to be a missionary people, "priests," to share God's message with other nations (cf. 1 Peter 2:9). In Exodus 19:8, the people responded, "All that the LORD has spoken we'll do..." Moses explained to them that in three days, God would reveal Himself to them, and they needed to be prepared. They had to wash their clothes (v. 10); they shouldn't have sexual relations during these days (v. 15). They had to set a boundary at the foot of the mountain so that no one would pass, and they shouldn't even touch the boundary, or they would die (v. 12).

We can imagine the people washing and drying their clothes in the desert bushes, discussing: What's going to happen? What's this God like? What will He tell us? When they woke up on the third day, "On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled" (v. 16). "Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently" (v. 18). There was a combination of an earthquake, electrical storm with fog, and a volcano erupting all at once.

Then something incredible happened. From the mountain, God spoke the Ten Commandments in a terrible, audible voice (Exodus 20:1). "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we'll listen. But don't have God speak to us or we'll die."

Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (Exodus 20:18-20; see also Deuteronomy 5:1-5).

The people were terrified and filled with fear, but Moses displayed the right attitude: fear and respect for God. “The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21). This elderly man ascended the mountain again with hurried steps to receive more revelations from God. Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge...”

God seldom spoke with an audible voice (see Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3:17 and the Transfiguration in Matthew 17:5). John Wesley wrote: “In Exodus 20:1, God spoke all these words: The law of the Ten Commandments is a law made by God... God has many ways to speak to the children of men through His spirit, conscience, providence... but He never spoke as when He gave the Ten Commandments, so we must listen with the greatest attention” (<https://www.the-ten-commandments.org/ten-commandments-john-wesley.html>).

Before going into the details of the first commandment, we must also look at the context of Deuteronomy. They were about to enter the promised land after spending 40 years in the desert. Moses, at 120 years of age, reminded them of the covenant God made with them when they came out of Egypt. In chapter 5, Moses repeated the Ten Commandments, emphasizing the importance of their obedience.

As we study the commandments in the coming weeks, let’s note that the first four commandments are about loving God, and the last six are about loving others. This is summarized by Jesus in Matthew 22:37-39 and Luke 10:27.

Questions:

- What were the things that the people of God had to do before their encounter with Him?
- How do we prepare today for our encounter with God?

II. The First Commandment (Deut. 5:6-7)

Let’s look at this first commandment in three parts:

A. “I am the LORD your God” (v. 6a)

When God presented Himself to Moses in the burning bush, Moses asked for His name: “... Moses said to God, ... ‘if they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Exodus 3:13-14). Hebrews 13:8 says, “Jesus Christ

is the same yesterday, today, and forever.” In Hebrew, His name is represented by four letters: YHWH, which need vowels to be added. In the King James Version (KJV), it’s “Jehovah,” and in other versions, “Yahweh” or “the LORD” (NIV). He is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; the eternal God who has always existed; the omnipresent and omnipotent Creator God.

In this first commandment, God declares who He is, but at the same time, He adds: “I am... your God” (Deuteronomy 5:6a). In the Middle East of that time, every people had their particular gods. The Lord had a special relationship with the people of Israel. Many times, He revealed His omnipotence to them: He brought them out of Egypt with signs and wonders, with a “mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 4:34). The Lord is the only God: “You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:35).

B. “...who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (v. 6b)

Many times, God reminded them of the marvelous way He delivered them from Egypt. At the end of his life, Joshua exhorted the people to be faithful: “It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled” (Joshua 24:17). They had the testimony, the lived experience of being a people who emerged from much tribulation and suffering, not because of anything they did, but because God acted in compassion on their behalf. We can also remember how God has blessed and guided us in the past, giving us confidence to face any situation that arises today.

C. “You shall have no other gods before Me” (v. 7)

This is the first commandment of the Decalogue, and it forms the basis for the others. If you fail in this, you fail in the rest, as it pertains to our relationship with God. Most of the Ten Commandments are presented in the negative form, directed at each individual: “You shall not.” It’s a prohibition against practicing polytheism. Both Egypt, where they spent 400 years, and Canaan, the promised land, were cultures with many deities that were supposed to bring fertility and prosperity to the land, animals, and families as long as the people kept them appeased. In biblical history, God’s people broke this commandment time and time again.

Shortly after receiving these commandments, Aaron made a golden calf for them. When Moses descended from the mountain and saw the calf, he broke the tablets, ground the calf into powder, and addressed Aaron, saying, “What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?” (Exodus 32:21).

In centuries to come, God's people repeatedly worshiped Baal and Astarte and offered their children to be burned as sacrifices to the god Molech (2 Kings 16:3, 21:6; Jeremiah 7:30-31). They burned incense in the high places and brought images of false gods into the temple in Jerusalem. All the kings of Israel who ruled over the ten northern tribes of Palestine were idolatrous. God sent the Assyrians to punish them for their unfaithfulness. A few kings from David's line were God-fearing, but the rest repeatedly broke this commandment. Consequently, they had to endure 70 years of captivity in Babylon.

The Shema we find in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 frames this commandment positively: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Jesus called this “the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38).

What God wants from us is our love. Many times, we think that God demands other things like our money, time, effort, will, our submission, etc., but what God really wants is our love. David Guzik comments: “When we truly love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, then everything else is freely given to the Lord. If we give the Lord everything else—money, time, effort, will, etc.—without giving Him our love, it's all in vain, and perhaps, wasted” (<https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/deuteronomy-6>).

The first commandment is the foundation for the others. King David broke a good part of the commandments: adultery, lies, theft, and murder, as he ordered the killing of Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, but he never broke the first commandment. For this reason, he acknowledged his sin and repented. God described David as a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

Obedience to God brings blessings. Deuteronomy 28:1 says, “If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations on earth.” Jesus said, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we'll come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23).”

Questions:

- What does the name of God mean?
- What's the significance of this first commandment for us today?

III. Implications for us today

The first commandment is still highly relevant today. God has given us ample evidence that He is truly God, and there's no other apart from Him. God created the Earth and everything in it (Genesis 1-2; Isaiah 40:12); therefore, it makes sense to worship Him. The first commandment reminds us of the greatness of God and how we should respond.

We break the first commandment when we don't put God first in our lives. It's not just about pagan gods and false religions. “Other gods” can be anything: possessions, desires, goals, or even people that we treat as more important than God. Anything we prioritize, place at the top, serve, and worship represents the sin of disobeying this commandment.

Jesus expressed that we cannot serve God and the god of materialism at the same time: “No one can serve two masters. Either you'll hate the one and love the other, or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). In Matt. 6:33, He said, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” Rom. 12:2 states, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you'll be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Ask yourself: in our world and in our congregations, what are the gods that take the place of God? What does it mean to put God first in our lives? How should we worship Him in our worship services and in our daily lives during the week?

Questions:

- What might be “the other gods” we serve instead of God?
- Describe what it means to put God in the first place in our lives.

Conclusion

God exhorts us to learn, keep, and practice His commandments. First and foremost, we should offer our lives to the Lord as part of our worship to the Creator God who loved us so much that He gave His Son to redeem us. If we love God with all our being, we'll joyfully obey the other commandments.



No graven images

Leticia Cano (Guatemala)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:8-10

Memory Verse: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” Deuteronomy 5:8

Lesson Purpose: To understand that idolatry, in all its forms, displeases God, and worship, honor, glory, and praise in our lives belong solely to Him.

Introduction

What would you think if the person you love dedicates time, affection, gifts, care, and attention to someone else but not to you? Wouldn't it offend you? Idolatry is a sin against the holiness and dignity of God, which humanity has practiced since ancient times. In the Bible, we find God's commandment: “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below” (Deuteronomy 5:8).

I. Biblical Explanation of the Commandment

The verses in this lesson constitute the repetition of God's law given by Moses to the new generation of the people of Israel, as it was first given to their parents (Exodus 20) who died in the wilderness. The nation of Israel reflects the attitude of fallen humanity, negligently forgetting God's will and neglecting the teaching of life principles to their children.

A. Understanding the Commandment

God's law was given to Israel, a people whose founder came from Ur of the Chaldeans, where worship of the goddess Moon, Tammuz, planets, stars, among others, was prevalent. This people also spent 400 years as slaves in Egypt, a culture that practiced the worship of different deities. After being liberated, they headed to Canaan, a land where people worshiped many gods. While Moses received the tablets of the law from God, the people and their leadership made a golden calf to worship, greatly displeasing the Lord (Exodus 32; Acts 7:40-41).

These are the background details of the commandment. God knows the nature of fallen humanity, guided by its foolish heart and darkened understanding, rendering worship to anything other than God (Romans 1:23).

Therefore, the imperative “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything ...” (Deuteronomy 5:8) is a clear prohibition. The Hebrew word *pesel* literally means “idol”. Practically, it's carving or sculpting an idol for the purpose of worship (https://www.logosklogos.com/strong_hebrew/6459). God says, “You shall not make for yourself [*pesel*]...” (Deuteronomy 5:8); in other words, you shall not make for yourself an “idol.” The commandment is a God-issued order that doesn't allow discussion or exceptions.

1. Neither carved image nor likeness.

People seek justifications to disobey God's law, but the command is “neither image nor likeness.” We shouldn't make, create, or fashion any figure that pretends to represent God for veneration or worship. However, this commandment was broken countless times.

2. No image of created thing or object.

No *temunah*, which means “appearance... figure, likeness” (https://www.logosklogos.com/strong_hebrew/8544). There's nothing in the universe that can be compared to God, the Creator. On the contrary, many ancient cultures have made representations of animated and inanimate beings and paid tribute to them as gods. But the Lord's command is clear, precise, and emphatic: it doesn't say some, but none.

3. You shall not bow down, nor serve them.

The Hebrew term *shakjá* refers to bowing down with the purpose of “worship, kneeling... give worship, bow, humble oneself, incline, prostrate, render, reverence” (https://www.logosklogos.com/strong_hebrew/7812).

4.The Lord expressed this prohibition clearly in different ways; don't do it...

Despite this, people seem not to understand. In biblical and universal history, we find information about the practices of peoples and nations that created idols, and often, the rituals were related to immorality, cruelty, and death, in their effort to please a god (a product of their imagination) appeased by such offerings and sacrifices.

But that was a significant reason why the Canaanites were expelled from that land. Rituals, inclination, and service for idolatrous worship purposes were strictly prohibited. However, the biblical text shows us how the people of Israel repeatedly disobeyed God (Judges 17-21), adopting the idols of neighboring peoples, or carving and casting images that they believed represented God, for which they suffered the consequences of their horrendous offense against the holiness of the Lord. But there were also individuals who honored God with their loyalty and obedience.

Gideon destroyed his father's idols, obeying a command from the Lord (Judges 6:25-28). We can also recall in a later period (the exile of 70 years) the friends of the prophet Daniel who didn't bow down to the statue made by King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 3). Nor did the Jew Mordecai, cousin of Queen Esther, kneel before Haman, minister of King Ahasuerus (Esther 3:2). They knew the commandment well and didn't hesitate to obey it, although they faced serious problems because of it.

B. God is Strong and Jealous

The Lord described Himself as the "jealous God" (Deuteronomy 5:9). Humanity as a whole could never confront God and overcome Him. He reminds us of this so that we don't challenge His commandments and understand that we must surrender to Him in sincere worship and love, not out of fear. Let's listen to the following: "...praise, honor, and worship belong only to God because only He is worthy of it. Therefore, God is rightly jealous when that worship, praise, honor, or devotion is given to idols" (<https://www.gotquestions.org/Espanol/Dios-celoso.html>).

Jealousy among people arises from inner corruption, insecurity, or fear, but "God's jealousy has nothing to do with human pettiness. God isn't jealous of some 'other' [as if] he could be equal to him, but he demands exclusive worship from man, whom he has created in

his image; this translates into jealousy of the 'other gods' (Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Dt. 6:14 ff)" (<https://www.biblia.work/diccionarios/celos>). God affirmed His command years later through the prophet Isaiah: "I'm the LORD; that's my name! I won't yield my glory to another or my praise to idols'" (Isaiah 42:8; see also Isaiah 44:9-20).

To understand, to some extent, the jealousy of God, perhaps the closest comparison is the jealousy we can feel for our spouse; for we don't want to share their love with anyone else. God is strong and no one can resist or rebel against His power without facing the warned consequences (Deuteronomy 8:19).

1.The punishment of idolatry. The wickedness of individuals has overwhelming consequences. According to the Lord's Word, children and grandchildren will suffer the effects or consequences of the sin of their ancestors. If parents are idolaters, they will teach their generations accordingly. They will learn and repeat the behavior pattern, for which they will also receive punishment for despising God and His commandments (Deuteronomy 5:9). The disobedience of many biblical figures to the commandment of not making or serving idols brought much pain and destruction, not only to their family, but also to their nation. Such was the case with Solomon (1 Kings 11), Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:28-30), Ahaz (2 Chronicles 28), Manasseh (2 Kings 21), and other kings who led the people into idolatry, provoking God's wrath.

2.The reward of obedience. Obedience to God and His commandments has the virtue of blessing our descendants from generation to generation. Therefore, it's good to leave a legacy of blessing to our descendants through obedience to God. That blessing will extend to a thousand generations, as the divine promise affirms (Deuteronomy 7:9).

After the nation of Israel was destroyed, and the survivors were in exile for 70 years, Judaism became more careful with the commandment not to make or worship images or sculptures. During the time of the Greek and Roman empires, they were known as iconoclasts for their opposition and destruction of the invaders' idols, some events of which are found in the intertestamental period, as well as their radical practice of monotheism.

Questions:

- For whom was the commandment reiterated in Deuteronomy 5:8-10?
- Why do you think it was necessary to repeat the commandment?

II. The Commandment and History

Throughout various cultures in human history, sculpture and artistic iconography have developed for decorative purposes, but often with religious intent for worship. Thus, we find such practices in Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and other cultures where representations of various gods were made for worship.

A. The Early Church

In the New Testament, there's no evidence that the Christian church transgressed the commandment. However, early missionaries did face social groups that practiced idolatry, as documented in the Acts of the Apostles (14:11, 17:16, 19:28).

B. The Persecuted Church and the Commandment

Due to imperial persecutions against early Christianity, Christians were forced to hide in the Roman catacombs. There, they crudely depicted biblical stories like the Good Shepherd, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the slaughtered Lamb, and others. This form of art is known as paleo Christian art, characterized by its rudimentary drawings. There's no evidence that these drawings were used as objects of worship at that time; rather, they served as a method to narrate gospel stories. "Additionally, it's important to note the strong Jewish iconoclastic tradition that influenced early Christian writings, staunchly rejecting any veneration of images, as such worship could lead to idolatry" (<https://akropolisistoria.wordpress.com/2016/03/22/origen-iconografia-cristiana/>).

C. The Medieval Church and the Commandment

With the recognition of Christianity as the official religion, Christian pictorial and sculptural art gained protection. Initially, it was practiced to communicate the gospel to illiterate masses who couldn't read the Bible. "The Fathers, seeing that not everyone knows how to read or has time for it, approved the description of these facts through images to serve as brief commentaries" (Gonzales, Justo. *History of Christianity*. USA: Editorial Unilit, 1994, p.291).

In different eras, the church experienced controversy between those advocating for images in temples and those who disagreed. Over time, the practice shifted from narration to veneration, extending beyond drawings or statues of early Christians (such as Jesus and his mother Mary) to include relics (bones of martyrs and saints). Relics became objects of worship, serving as mediators to obtain favors from God, as extensively detailed in the National Geographic article titled "Relics: Faith and Business in the Middle Ages" (https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/reliquias-fe-y-negocio-edad-media_8589). However, some argue that it's not worship but mere veneration (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arldW5DEfC4>).

Questions:

- What have we learned from the past that serves as a lesson for our lives?
- In the present, how is the Lord's commandment not to create idols being broken?

III. Applying this Commandment to the Life of the Church in its Current Context

The Word of God instructs us, saying: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen" (1 John 5:21). However, contemporary Christianity has also challenged God by breaking His commandment. Many don't have a physical image or statue to reverence, but anything (person or thing) that takes the place of God or comes before Him is idolatry. Humanity has placed itself in a position it doesn't deserve, prioritizing its own will over God's. Materialism, self-indulgence, forbidden relationships, work, money, power, fame, etc., have become idols.

Some groups claiming to be Christians contribute to hedonism by teaching erroneous concepts, as if God exists to serve humans rather than humans existing to worship God. They emphasize the pursuit of temporary goods while neglecting to teach the need to worship God with a life of holiness and obedience to His commandments. How many Christians lose communion with God in their pursuit of social status or material possessions? They also lose their families and ultimately, lose themselves.

Col. 3:5 warns us that greed is idolatry. The desire to possess things solely for the pleasure of having them, without sharing, leads us to lose what truly matters.

People of all ages worship self-image; for money and power, they're willing to transgress God's law.

Others surrender to entertainment, neglecting their responsibilities, accumulating debts, and forgetting more important things such as their relationship with God and the people around them. They seem more concerned with connecting with hundreds of distant or unreal friends at the cost of suppressing their communion with the strong and jealous God who commanded: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below" (Deuteronomy 5:8).

In Revelation, we find this stubbornness leading to condemnation for those who dare to offend God by practicing idolatry: "The rest of mankind who weren't killed by these plagues still didn't repent of the work of their hands; they didn't stop worshiping demons, and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone and wood—idols that cannot see or hear or walk" (Rev. 9:20).

The Word also admonishes us: "For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Peter 4:3).

Let's stop offending God; rather, let's turn away from all kinds of sin. Let us consecrate our lives to please Him, offering our obedience, service, and worship to Him alone.

Questions:

- How do you plan to apply what we have learned regarding idolatry?
- What changes do you intend to make in your daily life to avoid breaking the Lord's commandment?

Conclusion

Israel, as a nation, wasn't the only one to break the commandment by replacing the presence of God with things or people that neither represent nor truly embody Him. Exile was a harsh teacher that instructed them rigorously. We need to identify and tear down the idols (people or things) that we may have erected, giving God the honor that only He deserves, thus honoring the Lord's commandment, avoiding punishment for breaking it, and inheriting His blessing for future generations.



His Name is Worthy of Honor

Nery Pérez (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:11

Memory Verse: "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens" Psalm 8:1.

Lesson Purpose: To learn to honor God's name and not take His name in vain.

Introduction

We were all eighth-grade students. We were happy on the excursion we took to a natural warm sulfur-scented pool. It flowed directly from a mountain, and part of the pool entered a cave. It was a very beautiful and relaxing place. It so happened that all the children were swimming with the teachers who were watching over us. Then, some children came out of the cave and said there was a monster inside. "Really?" we all said.

They claimed there was a monster in the cave. One child loudly exclaimed when we didn't believe him, "For God and for my holy mother, there's a monster in there!" Faced with such a confident statement and oath, one of the teachers went to check inside the cave. And indeed, as we thought, there was nothing inside. However, several children had made the same statement. They had "sworn" by God and even by their mother that a monstrous being was inside.

On another occasion, I heard about a lady who, in her eagerness to be believed, said, "I swear by my deceased mother's life that what I'm saying is true." Swearing and mentioning God's name is as common as saying "Hello." In our days, consciously or unconsciously, in our conversations or everyday expressions, we tend to say things like "Oh my God!", "Blessed Lord," "Holy God," "Holy Father," "Jesus, Jesus." Most of the time, it's like saying "Wow" or "Gee whiz." Perhaps our expressions are somewhat disguised.

So, it's time to examine our conversational habits. To swear falsely, as the children did, is inappropriate. Mentioning God's name as a simple exclamation of surprise or emotion is also inappropriate. But when a person intentionally lies and invokes God as a witness, it's

worse. Many people often say, "I had the money to pay him, God is my witness, but it got stolen." [untrue]. Or they say, "My love, it's not what it looks like. We were just talking in this hotel room, but nothing happened. I swear to God; He's my witness" [untrue]. They also say, "As God is my witness, I wanted to tithe this month, but I lost the envelope with the money I had set aside" [untrue].

Swearing, lying, expressions of hypocrisy using God's name as a backup. What audacity, what infamy, what sin! How common are these behaviors among us? What we're considering in this lesson isn't advice; it's a commandment: "You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord won't hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Deut. 5:11). The third commandment is as valid as the entire Word of God.

I. The name of God is to be respected.

One of God's attributes is holiness. This sets Him apart from us human beings. We must accept it, believe it, and live in accordance with this reality. Psalm 8:1 says, "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" The Lord's Prayer says, "... hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9b). Regarding the verse we're studying in this lesson, Deuteronomy 5:11, the reader should know that the book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, is generally believed to have been written by Moses.

Taking the name "Deuteronomy" from the Septuagint, which is the Old Testament in Greek, its name means "second law" or "repetition of the law." After the people of Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and before entering the promised land, Moses reiterated the Ten Commandments and other instructions, especially for the new generation that hadn't heard or were very young when the law of God was first given.

We should also consider that in the first and second commandments, God Himself made such a declaration, as in Exodus 33:19 when He said, "... And the LORD said, '...I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence.'" God Himself was saying that He would proclaim His name to Moses.

In Psalm 54:1, it says, "Save me, O God, by your name, and vindicate me by your might." In other words, the name of God is the power of God. This makes His name something sublime, special, unique, and divine.

For the Jews, a person's name had much significance; it was more than just a label to identify a person. A person's name described their character and nature. Remember Jacob, Isaac's son, whose name meant "supplanter"; and he was such until God changed his life, character, and his name, making him "Israel" (Genesis 32:28). When Moses asked the Lord for His name, He answered, "... I AM WHO I AM... I AM has sent me to you" (Exodus 3:14). The Lord's eternal presence, the eternity of the Lord; He is the one who is, was, and is to come; the same yesterday, today, and forever. The name of God, I AM, isn't so much a description of God but a declaration of His autonomous existence and eternal immutability.

What is God's name? It's YAHVEH. However, we know other names to address our loving God. Some other one or two-word names include: Elohim (Almighty Creator), El Elyon (The Most High), El Roi (the God who sees me), Jehovah Sabaoth (The Lord of hosts), Jehovah Jireh (The Lord will provide), Jehovah Nissi (The Lord is my banner), Jehovah Rafa (The Lord heals), El Shaddai (Almighty God) (<https://www.gotquestions.org/names-of-God.html>); and we could mention others. But it's clear that the name of God is worthy of respect. God's name describes Himself.

The name YAHVEH was considered so sacred by the Hebrews that they didn't pronounce it; instead, they referred to Him as Lord (Adonai). The mere name of the Lord Jesus Christ is powerful in making demons flee. Remember when He said, "... In my name, they will drive out demons..." (Mark 16:17, emphasis added). In Psalm 75:1, it says, "...we praise you, for your Name is near; people tell of your wonderful deeds.

Elsewhere, David said to give worship and the glory due to God's name (Psalm 29:2). Given all this evidence, there's no doubt that the name of God is worthy of all reverence and worship; therefore, it shouldn't be dishonored.

Questions:

- What comes to your mind when we say that we should respect God's name?
- If we say that God's name describes His character and His essence, could you mention some traits of God's character?

II. The Name of God is Not to Be Used in Vain

When my mother gave an order, like doing the dishes or cleaning the kitchen, and I didn't do it, she used to say, "In what language do you want me to tell you?" Obviously, we only spoke Spanish, but it was a way of telling me that her instructions had been clear. Similarly, in Leviticus 19:12, God says, "Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I'm the LORD."

The Lord made sure His people received the instructions clearly, and more than once. The commandment says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain..." (Deuteronomy 5:11a). What does it mean to take the name of the Lord, our God, in vain? Taking God's name in vain is treating the divine name with superficiality and levity. Taking something in vain is treating it disrespectfully, depriving it of its true importance. Therefore, taking the name of the Lord in vain is degrading or despising His person.

God's name is taken in vain in vulgar language environments, and this is worse because it's used in contexts of insults, vulgarity, or irreverence. This may sound like blasphemy, but blasphemy isn't the only way we can take God's name in vain. Anyone who casually uses God's name in their daily speech may be breaking the third commandment.

Questions:

- Could you say in your words what it means to take God's name in vain? Explain.
- Do you remember anyone who swore in the name of God when what they said was a lie? Share what your impressions were on that occasion.

III. The Name of God is Righteousness

The second part of the third commandment says, "... for the Lord won't hold anyone guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Deuteronomy 5:11b). Many people, when using God's name in vain, do so when they often swear, whether what they express is true or not.

God doesn't want us to swear by anything of this world (Matthew 5:34-37). Lying, swearing falsely, is also known as perjury. If perjury is punished by earthly law, how much more will the Lord not take it as an offense to His name.

The problem is that sometimes swearing and invoking the name of God is done with the intent to lie. That's abhorrent; it provokes the wrath of God. Many people lie very easily. They have an "art" for deception and falsehood; they invent stories and fabricate evils. The problem here is that there's a division or inconsistency between what one is and what one does, between what one says and one's actions. Even when we're in conversations with our friends or church brothers and sisters, we must be careful that our words don't lead us into gossip, slander, or vanity (Ecclesiastes 5:2), but to be responsible for every word that comes out of our mouths (Matthew 12:36).

The Lord won't hold us guiltless if we use His name to back our actions, whether they're just or unjust, because the Lord said, "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No' be 'No'" (Matthew 5:37). However, we often wrongly attribute human designs to God. To avoid causing reproach to the Lord through our behavior, we must demonstrate respect, truthfulness, and responsibility with our actions.

When the Scripture says that God won't hold anyone guiltless who takes His name in vain, it means that we cannot deceive or impress Him with our words. He knows us and knows in advance what we'll do. The third commandment can be broken by swearing by the name of God or swearing falsely, but also when one offends or blasphemes against God.

Let's look at an example in the Bible. Here is the story paraphrased: a man of Egyptian father and Israelite mother had a quarrel in the camp with an Israelite. But in the dispute, this man insulted and cursed the name of the Lord. So, they brought him before Moses, especially because he was a foreigner. And Moses asked the Lord for instructions on how to proceed in the face of such blasphemy against God. He told them, "Take the blasphemer outside the camp. All those who heard him are to lay their hands on his head, and the entire assembly is to stone him. Say to the Israelites: 'Anyone who curses their God will be held responsible, anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD is to be put to death'" (Leviticus 24:14-16). How merciful the Lord has been to all of us, doesn't it seem so?

How many times have we deserved a similar punishment? But here we are, still with the opportunity to repent and not repeat our irreverence.

Questions:

- What do you think of the story of Leviticus 24:14?
- Do you believe that God had mercy on us?
- With what attitudes do we currently despise the name of God?

Conclusion

Taking God's name in vain, lying, swearing falsely, and blaspheming is a violation of God's third commandment. Could it be that when we pray in the name of God, and when we call ourselves children of God but are disobedient, we're also dishonoring His name and inadequately representing our Lord? Make the firm determination today to honor the Lord with your lips and your life, and let us say like David: "Give to Jehovah the glory due to his name" (Psalm 29:2a).



What a Good Rest!

Josué Villatoro (Mexico)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Memory Verse: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” Deuteronomy 5:15.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the original meaning of the commandment to observe the Sabbath day, comprehend its implications for the people of Israel when they received it, and analyze the various ways we can observe it in our present reality.

Introduction

The fourth commandment, that of keeping the Sabbath day, should be viewed as something to be done rather than as a prohibition or a statement of what shouldn't be done. This may be one of the most controversial commandments we have and one of the most contentious in the Christian world. Its interpretation and observance have even caused divisions in churches, led to the formation of certain denominations or movements, and raised a variety of questions about it: Is it valid for us today in the 21st century? Is it my fundamental duty to do nothing on Saturdays? What can or cannot be done on the weekend?

I. What Did God Mean?

A. What Does “Sabbath Day” Mean?

First and foremost, we need to define some concepts. Perhaps the most important of these is the “Sabbath day.” The term “Sabbath day” is equivalent to Saturday. The concept of “Saturday” for the Hebrew culture was different from what it represents for us today. In our understanding, Saturday is a day of the week that falls between Friday and Sunday, and for most of us, it's a day of rest, leisure, house cleaning, going for a walk, playing soccer, watching cartoons in the morning, etc. However, the original meaning for the primary recipients was something different.

The word “Saturday” comes from the Hebrew word *shabat*, which literally means “rest” (Darro, Daniel. *Comentario Bíblico Mundo Hispano*, Volume 3, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1998, p.301). Thus, a *shabat* can actually be any day of the week, as long as one uses that day for rest. Many of us use Saturday as a day of rest, but perhaps

there are other people whose day of rest is on Tuesday or Thursday. In reality, the name of the day of the week we use for rest isn't very relevant according to the original meaning of *shabat*. What is truly important is to take the rest that God commands us to observe seriously.

B. Comparison Between Deuteronomy 5:12-16 and Exodus 20:8-11

The most well-known version of the Ten Commandments is found in Exodus 20:3-17. However, our study passage is in Deuteronomy 5:6-21 (which encompasses all the commandments). While in some cases, the commandments are presented symmetrically in both versions, this particular one (the fourth commandment) has some differences worth studying:

Exodus 20:8 starts with the verb “Remember”: *zakár* in its original Hebrew form, which means to bring something to memory or mark something to be recognized (https://unpuebloparael.blogspot.com/2021/10/el-extranjero-dentro-de-tus-puertas_24.html). Deuteronomy 5:12 uses “Observe”: *shamar* in its original Hebrew form, which means to encircle, protect, treasure, or celebrate (https://unpuebloparael.blogspot.com/2021/10/el-extranjero-dentro-de-tus-puertas_24.html).

At the end of the first statement of the commandment, Deuteronomy 5:12b adds the note “I, the Lord your God, have commanded you.” This is a clear example of Deuteronomy's purpose, which is to reaffirm the commandments and laws given by God to His people through Moses as they left the land of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea. The commandments in Exodus were given by God at the beginning of the Israelites' journey to the promised land.

However, the constant disobedience, rebellion, and repeated breaking of these same laws had made their journey a true ordeal.

Now in Deuteronomy, on the threshold of the promised land after forty years of wandering, God reminded them of the same laws given at the beginning, hoping that with the knowledge of the consequences of disobedience, the new generation of Israel would choose to obey and put them into practice.

When listing the beings subject to this commandment, the Deuteronomic version adds: “nor your ox, nor your donkey,” and closes by saying: “so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well” (Deuteronomy 5:14). This is a clear reference to the social aspect of the commandment in Deuteronomy. The right to rest isn’t exclusive to a segment of society, to those who have more. On the contrary, it’s egalitarian for all, particularly for those less fortunate, such as animals or slaves. In addition to everything, the commandment emphasizes the dignity of the lives of all beings created by God.

In Exodus, the reason the people should remember the Sabbath day is theological: “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that’s in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11). In other words, according to the legal code of Exodus, the people were to have a Sabbath on the seventh day of the week to emulate the action that God Himself had performed during the creation process (Genesis 2:2-3).

In Deuteronomy, the motivation is different. The reason the people should observe the Sabbath day is historical and related to social justice: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:15).

Observing the Sabbath day, obedience to God’s shabat, would be a constant reminder that in the past, the people were slaves in Egypt, and there was no rest for them. On the contrary, the beginning of their liberation process was marked by an increased burden of their work obligations (Exodus 5:6-14). However, after gaining their freedom, the people received from God the blessing of being able to rest, to have a day each week to cease their labors and engage in activities that bring them closer to Him, allow them to be with their families, and let them recreate.

In addition to the historical reasons, there’s also an element of social justice. The members of the people of Israel knew what it meant to be slaves; they experienced

firsthand the pain, suffering, and mistreatment they endured for years. Observing the Sabbath day meant that even the people who were now in their service, their own servants, or even slaves, could enjoy a rest that would restore their human dignity and enable them to live justly.

Latin American Bible scholar Edesio Sánchez summarizes it as follows: “For Deuteronomy, the reason for keeping the Sabbath goes from natural reasons to historical ones. It’s the liberation from slavery in Egypt and not the creation that motivates the observance of this day... Thus, Deuteronomy breaks with all the ‘Egypt’s’ and all the myths and ideologies that dictate slavery and work for the many, and rest only for a few. Moreover, this commandment is presented as the heart of everything that Yahweh wanted to convey in the covenant He made with the Hebrew people” (Sánchez Cetina, Edesio. *Comentario Bíblico Latinoamericano, Deuteronomy*. Argentina: Ediciones Kairos, 2002, p.153).

Questions:

- What is the fundamental difference between the fourth commandment recorded in Exodus and the one recorded in Deuteronomy?
- Why is the liberation from slavery in Egypt the reason for keeping the Sabbath day?

II. What Does God Ask of Us Today?

When analyzing the context of the commandment to keep the Sabbath day and its significance for the people of Israel, we may wonder if that meaning is still relevant for us today and if we should still take it into account. Here are some practical considerations for obeying this divine command:

A. Legalistic Observation of the Saturday Sabbath

Some fundamentalist groups believe that, due to the biblical instruction to observe the Sabbath day (or Saturday), followers of God must take that day of the current week, Saturday, and no other day, to rest, worship, and dedicate the day to the Lord. This idea, although widespread, comes from an error in the interpretation of the Hebrew text. “The reason is that the Hebrew root *šbat* is often translated, in general, relating to the idea of resting or ceasing after an activity that produces fatigue. Due to this translation, the conclusion is reached that Saturday means axiomatically a ‘day of rest,’ a day tending to inactivity.” (Quiroga, Raúl. *Revisando el Sabbat como Día de Reposo*. Argentina: Davar Logos, 2010, p.111).

The spirit behind the letter of this commandment is the need and blessing of rest, which goes beyond the mere observance of a particular day. If your work doesn't allow you to rest on Saturday or Sunday, that's okay. Use the day that works for you to rest, dedicate time to the Lord, meditate on His Word, enjoy your family, and have leisure time.

B. Rest from Work

Although it may seem obvious, it's essential to remember this principle: God provides us with the blessing of rest. The people of Israel, once slaves, now had the opportunity given by God Himself to take a break, to breathe. This is a fundamental principle for us today, especially in a society that idolizes busyness, full schedules, and long working hours. It's a society where bills must be paid, and a higher standard of living is desired by all, and excessive work is the path to achieving it. We're no longer in Egypt, but sometimes we enslave ourselves. Rest is essential for holistic human health. God knows this and gives us the blessing of rest.

C. Invitation to Work

While the point we're addressing is about rest, the commandment also provides us with a basic principle: work is necessary. The rest of one day a week is justified because on the other six days, people performed actions that allowed them to do good for others, be productive in their society, meet their basic needs, and contribute to the community's growth. Here, there's a warning for Christians today: work is also a blessing from God. Many present-day Christians have unfortunately interpreted that they don't need to work because they live by faith, and God will supply all their needs. However, from the beginning, the Lord Himself tells His people that they must work to be worthy of rest, not to live in perpetual rest.

D. Rest from Church Activities on Sunday

Many Christians today are hardworking individuals, business owners, entrepreneurs, employees who work, as mentioned in the previous point, six days a week, perhaps from Monday to Saturday. Sunday, a day they have consecrated to gather with the church and worship, instead of being a day of rest and reflection, has become another day of work for them. They must wake up early to arrive before the worship service time to rehearse or prepare things; they're Sunday school teachers, and in some cases, they're members of churches with different worship services throughout the day, from morning until night, and they participate in all of them. There's no rest for these individuals! If you spend your

time working from Monday to Saturday and dedicate your entire Sunday to serving the church, you aren't following this commandment. God provides the blessing but also the command to rest. Don't get me wrong, I'm not telling you to stop gathering or serving. I'm saying that, in accordance with the commandment, you should review your schedule and make changes because rest is an essential part of life.

E. Rest for Those Beneath Us

The commandment in Deuteronomy, as we studied, has a social justice implication. If you're a person who employs others, they also need to rest. God's mandate for you is that, just as you need rest, your employees need it as well. Providing them with a fair, paid day of rest and offering them dignified vacations are part of your Christian commitment and obedience to the commandment. Also, the observance of this commandment compels us to reject all forms of modern slavery, oppression, child labor, poorly paid jobs, and other practices of modern slavery.

F. Respect for Animal Life and the Environment

The biblical text instructs the people to give rest to pack animals, and later, this command extends to the land (Leviticus 25:1-17). Our observance of the commandment to rest also compels us to provide rest to natural resources, the environment, and all forms of life that exist and coexist on this planet.

Questions:

- In addition to the examples given, how else do you think you can observe the fourth commandment today, considering your own reality, context, work, family, etc.?
- Do you think that excessive service to the church can sometimes become a burden of work rather than a blessing? How can we improve this?

Conclusion

The fourth commandment, like all the others, is as relevant today as it was when God gave the laws to His people. Its observance, rather than being legalistic and rigid, is about being thankful and appreciating all that God has done for us and making use of the wonderful gift He has given us to rest from our labors. Instead of using the commandment to condemn some or support others, let's use it to always set aside time for rest, dedicate time to the Lord, enjoy His blessings, serve Him, and bring justice to this earth.



Honor Your Father and Mother

David Balcázar Medina (Peru)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:16

Memory Verse: “Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 5:16.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that it’s God’s command for children to honor their parents, to analyze if we’re truly doing it, and consequently, to affirm or decide to do so.

Introduction

Do you honor your father and mother? The fifth commandment that God communicated to the Israelites at Mount Sinai addresses His will on this matter. The four previous commandments are about how humans should behave with God, but this commandment is the first one about how humans should conduct themselves toward their fellow beings, starting with the most basic relationship: parents.

It becomes especially relevant when observing how today’s society, in general, minimizes the role of parents with their children. This “attitude” of society has led to a decrease in children’s honor towards their parents, reaching extremes where it seems that children no longer honor their parents, but rather, it’s the sole duty of parents to honor their children.

In this lesson, we’ll highlight the significance of this fifth commandment by considering aspects that emphasize its importance, analyzing the relevant biblical text, and how this commandment can be applied to practical life.

I. Importance of the Fifth Commandment

Let’s examine some aspects that highlight the importance of this commandment:

A. It’s the first one related to the relationship with other human beings

As previously mentioned, this commandment opens a special section dedicated to the relationship with one’s neighbor. The Ten Commandments can be classified under two main headings: loving God and loving one’s neighbor, and concerning love for one’s neighbor, the first to be loved are the parents. Therefore, in the context of the relationship with one’s neighbor, honoring one’s parents is presented first, indicating its importance. What good would it be to honor other people and be “very good with others” if you don’t first honor your parents?

B. It’s the first commandment with a promise

As Paul put it in one of his letters: “Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise)” (Ephesians 6:2). This commandment offers a reward to those who recognize the value and place of their parents in their daily lives, as established by the Lord. This commandment is so special that it not only makes a requirement but also offers a reward for its fulfillment. This shows how much the Lord is pleased when children honor their parents. We can conclude that whoever “honors his father and mother is pleasing the Lord.” We now proceed to the analysis of the biblical text that serves as the basis for the study of this lesson.

Questions:

- What benefits do the fulfillment of the fifth commandment bring to the family?
- What benefits do the fulfillment of the fifth commandment bring to society?

II. Analyzing the Biblical Text (Deut. 5:16)

1. Honoring them: Honor is generally defined as “great respect” or “high esteem” to someone or something (<https://www.google.com/search?q=definition+of+Honour>). This definition illustrates how parents are honored, including respecting, exalting, and honoring them. Based on these expressions, we can establish these practical ways of how to honor parents.

2. Respecting Them: Children are called to speak and respond to their parents with respect. A Christian child shouldn’t raise their voice, respond with arrogance, or insult their parents. In Matthew 15:4, Jesus quoted the Old Testament: “Honor your father and mother” and “Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.”

This was the punishment in the Old Covenant for disrespecting parents. Now, it's not the same; there's no physical death, but there's spiritual death since this is a sin.

3. Obeying Them: In various parts of the Bible, we read about the duty of children to obey their parents. Eph. 6:1-3 is one of the most well-known passages on this subject. In the Old Testament, as previously mentioned, the law indicated that the punishment for a disobedient child was death (Deut. 21:18-21). This offense was considered so serious! The apostle Paul also mentioned that one of the characteristics of men "without natural affection" in the last days would be disobedience to parents (2 Tim. 3:1-2). Therefore, it's God's will that children obey their parents, and it's part of the honor they must give them.

4. Maintaining a Good Reputation Through our Actions: When people see what we do, what do they say about our parents? This is another way to honor your parents. Let people speak well of your parents because of the good deeds you do. This is a practical way to honor your parents when they're alive or even when they're not. When people see we have a good testimony, and are doing good, they will congratulate our parents, who will be honored, even if they don't know them.

5. Providing for Them When They Cannot Provide for Themselves. The apostle Paul pointed out that it's the responsibility of children (and even grandchildren) to support their widowed mother (or grandmother), not the church (1 Tim. 5:4a). He also indicated that children should learn "to show godliness at home and repay their parents" because this is good and acceptable before God (1 Tim. 5:4b).

Parents, with few exceptions, have cared for their children when they were babies. They protected them because they were defenseless, they fed them (their mother breastfed them), bought their clothes, etc. Now, if the father or mother becomes helpless or needy, and the children are alive, it's their responsibility to repay their parents, taking care of them patiently, just as they did.

6. "...Your father and your mother..." The biblical passage is specific in stating whom you should honor. Here are some considerations: It's not only about honoring the father but also the mother. This is important to emphasize, especially in societies where male chauvinism prevails. The writer of Proverbs, inspired by the Holy Spirit, stated: "Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and don't forsake your mother's teaching" (Proverbs 1:8). Both the father and mother should be honored, respected, and obeyed.

This text also reaffirms how a family should be constituted, specifically stating: "...your father and your mother..." It doesn't say: your two fathers (males) or your two mothers (females); but "your father and your mother." It's God's will that children have a male father and a female mother, and they should honor them. This is important to emphasize in a sinful society that's developing confusing patterns, as is the case today.

7. "...As the Lord your God has commanded you..." Here, honoring parents is a command from God; it's not a suggestion, a request, or an alternative. The Lord has commanded us in His Ten Commandments to honor our fathers and mothers, and it's reaffirmed in various passages. It should be highlighted that it pleases God when children honor their parents. But children who don't honor their parents are gravely sinning against God.

8. "...That your days may be long..." This is the first of two aspects of the promise related to this commandment, as indicated by the apostle Paul. The fulfillment of this promise can be considered in two senses:

- A collective fulfillment: This sense seems to be more evident in Exodus 20:12. A society in which children honor their parents will be a more enduring society that will enjoy God's blessing. In contrast, when children in a society are disobedient and don't honor their parents, social ills abound, leading to chaos and destruction.
- An individual fulfillment: This sense is also noticeable in Exodus 20, but more clearly in Deuteronomy 5:16 and Ephesians 6:3. It's a beautiful promise, and God keeps His promises. Someone might ask, "Can you give me an example of a person in whom this has happened?" Many examples can be considered, but why not decide that your life will be an example of it? Honor your parents and enjoy a long life on Earth.

Anyway, it's good to consider that there are other commandments of God that people must consider when considering this promise, as can be seen in Proverbs 3:1-2.

9. "...And that it may go well with you on the earth that the Lord your God is giving you." This aspect of the promise is highlighted in Deuteronomy 5:16 and Ephesians 6:1-3. A society in which children honor their parents has a much better future than one where this doesn't happen. Likewise, on an individual level, a child who honors their father and mother generally fares much better than one who does not.

It's said "generally" because, as mentioned in the previous point, there are other aspects to consider to achieve this promise, as seen in Joshua 1:8.

God Himself promised it, and He keeps His promises. He has established His laws for humanity, and if humanity follows them, they will achieve good results. He is the Creator, and He knows best how to act. The Lord knows (and has taught) that children who honor their parents will prosper. Put it to the test!

Questions:

- In what ways do you honor, or have honored, your father and mother?
- What are the consequences for those who disobey their father or mother?

III. Practical Applications of the Fifth Commandment

A. The church should teach this great truth without fear.

We need to preach this commandment in the pulpits and Sunday school classes because, as already studied, the fulfillment of this commandment is highly pleasing to the Lord, and its violation leads to a state of spiritual death and even, one might say, a curse on society. The church has the great responsibility to instill in the minds of believers the importance of this fifth commandment.

B. We should teach this commandment to young people.

What should be done if a young man or a young lady attends the church and is involved in various ministries but isn't honoring their parents? What if there are constant complaints to the church that their room is very messy, they don't contribute to the cleanliness and care of their home, or their parents are helpless and in need, without help, while they claim to be "serving the Lord"? The failure to honor this commandment cannot be justified by saying that they're "serving the Lord." In the time of the Lord Jesus Christ, there was a similar situation to the one being described. There were Jews who, with the interpretation of the Pharisees and scribes, said, "It's Corban," meaning they offered to God everything they could help their parents with. They then considered that they no longer had to help or honor their parents (Mark 7:11-12). The Lord rebuked them and said they invalidated God's law with their traditions (Mark 7:13). Under no circumstances can this commandment of God be invalidated, and those who don't fulfill it are sinning and should be admonished.

C. Carry out awareness campaigns in society

We need to teach about the importance of complying with this Christian commandment in collaboration with institutions that promote values. We should promote this fifth commandment and its importance for better coexistence in society in schools, clubs, and elsewhere. However, this promotion shouldn't only target children but also parents because there are parents who don't fulfill their parental duties or teach their children the reality and relevance of this commandment. With appropriate promotion, very beneficial results could be achieved for families, schools, societies, and the country in general.

D. Children must honor their parents

Finally, the best application is to put the commandment into practice, with children genuinely honoring their parents, respecting them, obeying them, giving them a good reputation, and being concerned about helping or supporting them when their parents are in need.

Ask: Until what age should children honor their parents? The answer is that the Bible doesn't indicate an age limit. Some may think that they no longer have to honor their parents after turning 18; this isn't biblical. Children have the responsibility to honor their parents as long as their parents are alive. Certainly, the stages and ways change, but the fulfillment of this commandment continues while parents are alive. Even after the parents have passed away, the living children should continue to honor them by living in a manner worthy of the memory of their father and mother.

Questions:

- In what ways does your church promote the fulfillment of the fifth commandment?
- What actions should be taken if a person serves in the church but doesn't honor their parents?

Conclusion

Honoring parents by respecting them, obeying them, and supporting them when they need it is pleasing to the Lord, so much so that it offers a reward to those who fulfill it: a long life on Earth and great well-being. It's essential to promote this commandment and, above all, for Christians to live it out. In this way, they will please God, glorify the name of Christ, and be a blessing to their society.

You shall not Kill

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Bible Study passages: Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17

Memory Verse: “You shall not murder” Deuteronomy 5:17.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the biblical meaning of the commandment “You shall not murder” and its application to the current church.

Introduction

When studying the Decalogue, we must understand that “the Ten Commandments, or the Ten Words, are fundamental principles for the life and ethics of the Old Testament, and they form the basis for Israel’s legislation” (Collective authors. Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary. USA: Mundo Hispano Ed., 1998, p.169). The sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” is part of this Decalogue.

It’s not only a divine commandment, but different countries also include it in their judicial laws. There’s a prohibition against taking another person’s life, committing homicide, as conveyed in the biblical text of Deuteronomy 5:17. Not only does the Bible prohibit it, but social laws also do, unlike other commandments that only remain as divine mandates. For believers, this commandment seems to be one of the easiest to follow because its violation by believers isn’t common. But I invite you to understand its meaning in the biblical world and for the contemporary church.

I. The meaning of the commandment (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; I John 3:15)

It’s essential to take an exegetical look at this commandment in both testaments to allow for a comprehensive understanding.

A. Explanation of the commandment in the Old Testament

When analyzing this commandment, it’s important to understand that God was in the process of forming a nation, and the establishment of laws wasn’t exclusively in the religious realm but also had social implications. God gave commandments related to the relational formation of an entire society, and the law against murder was part of this process. “Israel believed that life was a gift from God, and no one should premeditatedly take it. Life was

sacred, and only God had the right to determine between life and death.

Man shouldn’t usurp God’s prerogative. Life was mysterious (see Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11) and was the product of creation: So, God created man in his own image... male and female he created them (Gen. 1:27)” (Collective authors. Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary. USA: Mundo Hispano Ed., 1998, pp.182-183). God was forming a concept of respect for human life within His people Israel; therefore, no person had the right to take another’s life. In Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17, the meaning of both texts refers to intentionally taking a life; that is, the commandment isn’t to commit homicide.

It’s interesting how this commandment has its peculiarities in the life of the Jewish context: “This commandment prohibits murder but not the death penalty, since the law itself stipulated the death penalty. War was also allowed since the soldier acts as an agent of the state” (Hoff, Pablo. El Pentateuco. USA: Vida Ed., 1978, p.144). In other words, death was allowed if the person was found guilty, and after a legal process, the death penalty was determined. It was also allowed for soldiers to kill in wartime. This is described by the Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary: “Despite the sacred nature of life, the prohibition doesn’t exclude all cases of taking it. The Old Testament indicates the death penalty for civil and religious offenses (see Exodus 21:12, 15–17, 23; Gen. 9:6), and under certain circumstances, war is viewed favorably (see Deut. 20). Unfortunately, in the selfish world, it’s necessary to maintain public order and the rights of society. However, the sixth commandment takes the matter of life or death out of individual decision and places it in the hands of the community or covenant people” (Collective authors. Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary, volume 3. USA: Mundo Hispano Ed., 1998, p.183).

B. Explanation of the commandment in the New Testament

In the New Testament, Jesus deepened the commandment “You shall not murder” and gave it a broader connotation in Matthew 5:21-25. Jesus’ teaching was based on the idea that what a person thinks is as important as what they do; that is, before God, not only is the one who commits murder guilty but also the one who is angry with a brother or sister. According to Jesus’ teaching, it’s not enough to admit that a person has never committed murder; it goes beyond that, suggesting that it’s also essential never to have thought about it, never to have had the desire to commit it. Jesus is giving importance to thoughts, internal desires, alongside actions. In the New Covenant He is establishing, it’s not enough not to do it; thinking or feeling it makes a person guilty before God.

The world we live in is only interested in actions, not what we think. However, Jesus was teaching that a good person is one who has reached the point of not desiring to do what God forbids. If we observe this text, it doesn’t only refer to one commandment but several, placing vital importance on inner life, not just what we externalize or execute. Although in the Old Testament it was wrong before God to commit murder, in the New Testament, it’s suggested not even to think about it and to maintain a lifestyle of forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. The offering is worthless if there’s no reconciliation with one’s brother in the inner life. In the New Testament, the command not to commit murder is maintained, but it’s more preventive: the need to maintain a life of reconciliation with the brother or sister is emphasized. This would prevent major problems, and relational life continues to be encouraged.

Barclay explains it as follows: “In ancient times, murder was condemned, and that will always be condemnable. But I tell you that not only external actions deserve judgment; the most intimate thoughts are also under God’s scrutiny and judgment. Endless anger is bad; contemptuous speech is worse, and careless and malicious gossip that destroys a person’s good name is the worst of all. The one who is a slave to anger, who speaks in a tone of contempt, who destroys another’s good name may never have committed actual murder, but they have in their heart” (Barclay, William. *New Testament Commentary*, volume I. Spain: Clie Ed., 1995, p.74).

Although the commandment in the Old Testament was to take a life literally, in the New Testament, the same norm is maintained, but it’s more inclusive. It conceptualizes not only the “ending of a person’s life” as an act, but also expresses and condemns murder with certain derogatory actions toward others. The apostle John says: “Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him” (1 John 3:15). Interpreting this text, we note that there’s a clear distinction between what the commandment was meant for.

Questions:

- How was the commandment “You shall not murder” considered in the Old Testament?
- Explain the meaning that Jesus gave to the commandment “You shall not murder.”
- How do you apply the words of 1 John 3:15 to your life?

II. The meaning of the commandment for the church today (Revelation 21:8, 22:15)

It’s very common in our current societies for people to kill others for various reasons. In fact, crimes have increased considerably, and ending someone’s life has become a daily occurrence. News echoes stories of individuals killed by gangs, personal issues, or within families. However, the commandment “You shall not kill” remains valid both literally and spiritually for believers of the New Covenant, for the contemporary church. God doesn’t approve of murderers; they will face condemnation unless they repent (Revelation 21:8, 22:15). Nevertheless, believers often think that this commandment is easy to follow and may not pay attention to the various ways it can manifest in everyday life. Let’s analyze some of these instances.

A. Traffic accidents.

The commandment “You shall not murder” should be interpreted based on the “intent” of the person. For example, if you are driving, something unexpected happens, and you are involved in a traffic accident in which someone unfortunately dies, this is considered non-intentional. While there may be legal consequences, it’s not considered a violation of divine laws. The application of the commandment is exclusively based on intentionality; in other words, someone died in the accident, but it was never the desire or intention.

B. Induced abortion.

It's unlikely that Christians would engage in cases of physical murder, although there have been some instances. However, abortions among Christian women are increasing, with some believers supporting its legalization. But abortion, intentionally ending a person's life, is a violation of the commandment "You shall not kill." The unborn child has life, and intentionally taking it is a sin. While countries are debating its legalization, the church considers it unbiblical, and supporting or performing it is a sin, a violation of God's law. In this case, it may be legal, but God doesn't approve of it in His Word. The Church of the Nazarene believes the following: "We oppose induced abortion by any means, whether for personal convenience or population control" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.42). Although we understand that if a person undergoes an abortion and repents, God's mercy and forgiveness can reach them (1 John 1:9).

C. Defense of one's family.

Every effort should be made to avoid problems with others. However, there may be cases where people break into your home, putting your life and your family's safety at risk. In such situations, believers are obliged to defend their family from the assailant. This defense should always aim to resolve the situation without intending the death of another person. Calling competent authorities or using other alternatives that don't violate Christian conduct is encouraged.

D. Capital punishment.

In some countries, capital punishment has been legalized for specific reasons. Believers should oppose the legalization of this practice. We acknowledge that, under no circumstances, do we have the authority to determine taking another person's life. We believe in repentance, the transformation that can occur in people's lives through forgiveness and the powerful blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

E. Euthanasia.

As Nazarenes, we believe the following: "We believe that euthanasia (intentionally ending the life of a person suffering from a fatal or debilitating and incurable illness, but not constituting an immediate threat to life, with the purpose of ending suffering) is incompatible with the Christian faith. This applies to cases where the person

suffering from the fatal illness requests or consents to euthanasia (voluntary euthanasia) and when the person suffering from the fatal illness lacks the mental capacity to consent (involuntary euthanasia). We believe that the historical rejection of euthanasia by the Christian church is confirmed by Christian convictions derived from the Bible and central to the church's confession of its faith in Christ Jesus as Lord" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.44).

F. Allowing death.

On this matter, the Church of the Nazarene states: "When human death is imminent, we believe that, within the practice and Christian faith, artificial life support systems can be withdrawn, or the patient can choose not to undergo them. This applies to cases of people in a persistent vegetative state and those whose life extension by the application of extraordinary means offers no reasonable hope of returning to health. We believe that when death is imminent, there's no requirement in the Christian faith to artificially postpone the process of death. As Christians, we trust in God's faithfulness and have hope in eternal life. This makes it possible for Christians to accept death as an expression of faith in Christ, who conquered death for us and took away its victory" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, pp.44-45).

Questions:

- How does the commandment "You shall not kill" apply to believers in the current church?
- What does the Church of the Nazarene believe about abortion, euthanasia, and allowing death?

Conclusion

As we have analyzed, the commandment "You shall not kill" has its meaning in the biblical world. While in the Old Testament it was allowed to end another person's life under certain conditions, the New Testament urges us to live it differently, affirming that no person has the authority to take another's life. It also helps us understand the love we must show towards others. It's about being the church that brings peace, loves, forgives, reconciles, overcomes all barriers of hatred, and keeps both thoughts and actions in harmony with the Word of God.



Meaning and Consequences of Adultery

A. Denis Espinoza S. (Nicaragua)

Bible Study passages: Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:18, 22:22

Memory Verse: "But a man who commits adultery has no sense; whoever does so destroys himself" Proverbs 6:32.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that adultery is a sin that carries significant consequences.
To understand that adultery is a sin that carries significant consequences.

Introduction

The Decalogue dictated by God and recorded in Exodus 20 establishes the seventh commandment: "You shall not commit adultery" (v.14). Though expressed briefly, it's full of profound meaning and warnings for the ancient people of Israel at the beginning of their existence as the nation of God, and by extension, for the Church of Jesus Christ throughout all times. This is a moral and spiritual norm of high value for family life in general and marital life in particular. It's a command that, beyond its prohibitive character, acts preventively against sexual immorality in general and is oriented to protect the sanctity of marriage.

I. Detailed Biblical Explanation of the Commandment

A. The Old Testament

It's from the foundation and organization of the Hebrew nation that adultery is specifically mentioned. Moses was the preeminent legislator of that nation whom God used to liberate His people, lead them through the desert to the promised land, and establish the organizational and legislative foundations for the life of the nation. He received precise instructions from the Lord. Thus, God gave them His holy law, which included precepts for religious and civil life. In the religious sphere, He gave them the norms to follow about how to offer sacrifices and celebrate annual feasts. In civil matters, He established moral and civic principles that regulated their family, social, and community relationships, including those related to adultery.

I. Respect for the neighbor's wife.

The married woman, and even the one engaged to be married, was untouchable. Any man who approached them for sexual relations incurred adultery. In Leviticus 18:20, it's written: "Do not have sexual relations with your neighbor's wife and defile yourself with her."

2. Capital punishment for adultery

Hebrew legislation established the death penalty for adultery. Two situations are described where adultery occurred, and as a consequence, death should be applied.

- With a married woman (Lev. 20:10). It's presumed that the reported sexual relationship was a premeditated and voluntary act on both parts; therefore, the sentence and punishment applied to both. The Israelite legislator established: "If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (v.10; cf. Deut. 22:22). It was understood that such a relationship occurred with the consent of the woman, and therefore, both were guilty of the sin of adultery. Textually it says: "both the man who slept with her and the woman must die" (Deut. 22:22). The purpose of capital punishment was to "purge the evil from Israel."
- With the betrothed virgin (Deuteronomy 22:23-26). Two situations are presented here:
 - i). The betrothed virgin who is seduced in the city and doesn't cry out for help. It's presumed that she yielded to seduction and collaborated with her seducer; in this case, both were to be stoned to death. The reasons for this punishment are clearly expressed. In the case of the betrothed virgin, since she didn't cry out for help (v.24), thus compromising her virginity. In the case of the man, because he "humiliated the wife of his neighbor" (v.24). It's interesting to note that according to Mosaic law, the betrothed or engaged woman was considered the wife of the man she was betrothed to.
 - ii). The betrothed virgin who is violated in the field and cries out for help. It was assumed that she was a victim of rape, and therefore, she was exempt from guilt and not executed.

Meanwhile the rapist was guilty and had to be executed.

B. New Testament

The general teaching of the New Testament is that the seventh commandment is applicable in our era and serves as a pattern to be followed and respected by all who wish to preserve the purity of marriage. The mentions of this commandment in the New Testament don't minimize or modify the essence of the purpose for which God established it; on the contrary, it deepens it, providing a broader sense, interpretation, and application than the Old Testament did.

I. In the heart.

Jesus taught that the sin of adultery originates in the person's heart; it comes from the depths of one's being: "... out of the heart come... adulteries," Jesus said, and "defile the man" (Matt. 15:19-20). "In the Scriptures, the condition of the heart is the most important matter. This is the inner man that God sees, with its mental panorama, imagination, affections, basic motives, and goals. When this inner being is evil, it's the source of all evil in life and behavior" (Earle, Ralph. Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume Four, Gospel of Matthew. USA: CNP, 1985, p.153). The Apostle Paul taught that adultery is a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:19).

2. Coveting.

Jesus took the prohibition of adultery to a deeper level. He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28). "Without a doubt, our Lord uses the verb here in the sense of coveting under the influence of impure desire. In many cases, what constitutes the goodness or badness of an action is the desire or deep aspiration of the soul. If someone eagerly desires to commit an evil, he is fully guilty of the evil of that action before the God who scrutinizes and judges the heart" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, Volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1974, p.13). The Lord taught that mere bad intention and internal desire are sufficient for adultery to be present.

3. Forgiveness.

The good news in the Word of God is that the adulterer can be forgiven. God's grace covers this sin, but it doesn't give license to continue sinning. The most well-known episode is the case of the adulterous woman (John 8:3-11). Although the real purpose of the scribes and Pharisees was to test and trap Jesus for later accusation (v.6), Jesus taught the greatness of God's forgiveness. He forgave her without downplaying the gravity of her sin and without giving her license to continue sinning: "...

Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more," (v.11).

There was a marked difference between the religious leaders of the Jews, and the Lord Jesus. Those came laden with merciless legalism and ill intentions, while the Redeemer showed compassion and mercy but also firmness. From Him, we learn that every adulterer is redeemable and can be restored by the Lord and the church. Adulterers can be forgiven and become part of the congregation of God.

Questions:

- What does the validity of the Seventh Commandment mean for the Church?
- Explain the expansion of interpretation and application that Jesus gave to the Seventh Commandment

II. How to Apply the Commandment to the Church in our Current Context

It's important for the church to be aware that the seventh commandment of the Decalogue is still valid today, and continues to be a guide for establishing healthy relationships in marital and family life. Adultery is a sin that brings with it a long list of consequences and damages. With this practice, the husband or wife is deceived and betrayed, holy vows made in the presence of God during the marriage celebration are violated, physical harm is done to the spouse, emotional disorders occur in the couple and children, family finances are affected, socially there's criticism and accusation, and, of course, the testimony of the church is greatly damaged.

The protagonist of adultery will experience public shame and carry the mistrust of their partner for a long time. Adultery doesn't come alone; it's generally accompanied by lies, hypocrisy, anger, violence within the family, conflicts, accusations, discussions, prolonged periods of depression, anxiety, guilt, lack of peace, and remorse. Therefore, the church needs to develop a pastoral approach for both the adulterer and the victims. "In the Bible, adultery is considered a grave sin. The Ten Commandments explicitly prohibit it, and under Mosaic law, those who committed adultery were to die. It's a serious sin because it betrays trust, violates and destroys the most sacred human relationship, and has devastating effects on home and society in general" (Taylor, Richard. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1984, p.33).

A. Preventive Actions

The church's pastoral approach to adultery should focus on prevention. This sin can be prevented and countered with concrete actions such as the following:

I. Cultivating love:

The cultivation of love, as we already know, is the greatest and most important basis for good marriages (1 Cor. 13:13). This cultivation of love involves nurturing intimate relationships between spouses. Generally, a man or woman who is satisfied sexually and treated with love at home doesn't need to seek fleeting and temporary pleasure elsewhere. Sexual mismatch is dangerous for both the man and the woman. Proper sexual adjustment within marriage, seasoned with love, is an antidote to adultery.

2. Communication:

Fluid communication is a pillar and strength for the life of the couple, as well as for the entire family. When spouses communicate, they have trust and share all matters concerning their marital life, addressing problems without ambiguity or fear. Communication in a couple isn't a finished product; it's something that can and should be improved every day. Listening attentively to the other person is crucial for the success of the relationship, as it shows genuine interest in what they say, think, and feel. It's also pertinent to promote and practice dialogue.

3. Communion with God:

Since God is the center of the lives of spouses, it will greatly help them to remain faithful to each other. Simple things like praying together, reading the Word of God, and going to church together to worship God in the beauty of His holiness will strengthen the bonds of love and understanding in the couple, safeguarding them from the evil of adultery.

B. Healing Actions

The pastoral desire of the church is that adultery doesn't occur at any point. But when, unfortunately, it has already happened, it will be necessary to act, to take healing actions such as the following:

1. Forgiveness:

Assure the adulterous person that their sin can be forgiven. That God, in Christ, made sufficient provision covering this sin. While adulterers "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9), it's not our place to judge or condemn them because God judges them (Heb. 13:4). Our mission is to offer them a helping hand, but without minimizing the sin. Our attitude should be like that of Jesus of Nazareth in the case of the woman caught in the very act of adultery: "... Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). Tell them that the blessedness of forgiveness for their transgression is within their reach (Psalm 32:1).

2. Restoration:

"Restoration is to return something or someone to its former condition. Psalm 80 is a prayer by which the people of God request a restoration to their former

glory" (80:3,7,19) (Lockward, Alonso. New Bible Dictionary. USA: Editorial Unilit, 1999, p.880). The apostle Paul set the pattern for the restoration of the Christian who has fallen victim to sin; he urged those who consider themselves spiritual to restore them with a spirit of gentleness. He also encouraged bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:1-2). "The apostle teaches them to be compassionate and gentle with anyone who, having been caught in the violence of temptation, falls into sin; and to bear one another's burdens" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, Volume III, New Testament, Galatians. USA: CNP, 1974, p.477).

3. The Principle of Opportunity:

This principle, found in procedural criminal laws of many countries, aims to provide an exit and alternative solutions to the perpetrator of an offense or a crime in accordance with the law. Such a principle is applicable both at the church and family levels; by which we must provide space and opportunity for adulterous individuals, with the purpose of starting anew. It may be a long and painful process, but ultimately necessary and obligatory for healing.

4. Pastoral care:

The church needs to offer pastoral care to accompany and restore individuals who have committed adultery, and this should also include the victims. Helping the man or woman to stay away from all contact with that sin; as the Bible says: confessing it and turning away to obtain mercy (Proverbs 28:13). We can receive God's mercy, as well as merciful forgiveness from the family, and the church.

Questions:

- What do you understand about pastoral care towards adulterers and victims?
- How can we cultivate love between spouses to prevent adultery?
- If adultery is already a fact, how can we help the perpetrator and the victims, in order to achieve restoration?

Conclusion:

Committing adultery is an attack on the sanctity of marriage, violating the covenant established by God for the well-being of humanity. Since we know that this sin brings a series of unpleasant consequences for the perpetrator, the victim, the family, the church, and society, it's healthy and very necessary to undertake preventive actions that help avoid it. But when someone has fallen victim to this sin, healing actions must be taken. This is possible with the grace and power of God, and a conscious and intentional study of the Scriptures.



Do Not Steal

Eudo Prado (Colombia)

Bible Study passages: Deuteronomy 5:19; Romans 13:7-10; Ephesians 4:28

Memory Verse: “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.

Lesson Purpose: To understand the practical implications of the commandment not to steal.

Introduction

The eighth commandment of God's law prohibits any unjust appropriation of someone else's property. Throughout history, various punishments, including the death penalty, have been applied to this crime. Today in some countries, theft is punished with the inhumane practice of amputating a hand and a foot, in addition to financial compensation. In certain African villages, thieves are burned alive by the citizens, and in some South American places, indigenous communities punish them with lashes and other severe reprimands. However, despite the harshest penalties for this crime, it continues to be one of society's pressing evils. This is because the root of evil lies in the human heart itself (Matthew 15:19).

Through this lesson, we'll examine the meaning of the commandment not to steal, the treatment prescribed by God's law, and the contemporary applications we can draw from it through the general teaching of the Word of God.

I. The Eighth Commandment and Its Meaning (Deuteronomy 5:19)

The eighth commandment is one of the key rules within the law that God prescribed to Israel, known as the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. These laws were given to Moses on Mount Sinai just three months after they left slavery in Egypt (Exodus 19:1, 20). Forty years later, as they approached the land of Canaan and in the days before the conquest, Moses reminded them of these commandments (Deuteronomy 1:3). Our study text is framed within this occasion, Deuteronomy 5:19.

A. What does the commandment entail?

Undoubtedly, the practices of theft and robbery were already social evils in ancient cultures, a sinful distortion

of human coexistence, and of course, the people of God were no exception (Matthew 15:19). Stealing is defined as “the action or offense of taking another person's property without permission or legal right and without intending to return it”

Robbery is defined as the action of taking property unlawfully from a person or place by force or threat of force” (<https://www.google.com/search>). Deuteronomy 5:19 includes the prohibition of both practices. Edesio Sánchez tells us: “In its universal application, the commandment aims to protect individual and family property as a divine gift. This protection was egalitarian and shielded people, even kings, from usury, commercial corruption, or extortion (2 Sam. 12:1-5; 1 Kings 21:1-19; Micah 3:1-3). The commandment also sought to make the people of God a community of brothers and sisters where no one became rich or poor due to usury, commercial corruption, or extortion (Deuteronomy 24:12-15; Amos 2:6-8; 5:11; 8:4-6; Exodus 22:25; Isaiah 3:14)” (Sánchez, Ibero-American Bible Commentary, Deuteronomy. Argentina: Ediciones Kairós, 2002, pp.172-173).

In other words, the purpose of the eighth commandment was to promote justice in human relationships under the fundamental norm of respecting other people's property.

B. Application of the commandment in the biblical context

The Mosaic law contemplated several forms of violation of the eighth commandment. The misappropriation of land is mentioned, for example: “When you come to the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a precious possession, never steal land from another by changing the property boundaries that your ancestors established” (Deuteronomy 19:14 NLT).

It also refers to the kidnapping of people and slave trafficking, considered a serious violation of the commandment, so much so that it was punishable by death (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7). This kidnapping and trafficking of people was a very common practice of the various peoples that coexisted with Israel at the time when the commandment was given (Genesis 14:12-16, 37:26-28). The death penalty for those who committed this crime indicates the high value of human life according to the Word of God.

Cheating in business dealings, purposely keeping borrowed goods or lost items, and paying unfair wages were considered practices akin to theft (Leviticus 6:2-4; Deuteronomy 24:14-15, 25:13-16). In the case of the theft of cattle and sheep, whose breeding was a vital practice for the subsistence of the Hebrew family, the damage was ordered to be compensated with the payment of a significantly higher number of animals; and if he had nothing to pay, the thief had to be sold as a servant (Exodus 22:1-4).

The violation of the eighth commandment also meant bringing a curse on the thief and his family (Deuteronomy 27:17; Zechariah 5: 3-4).

Despite Israel having such extensive legislation on the practice of theft, we find that this was one of the most repeated sins, and the main cause of social inequality and the moral ruin of the nation at various times (Job 24:2; Isaiah 1:23; Jeremiah 7:9; Hosea 4:2; Amos 8:5).

In the New Testament, a clear example of violation of this commandment can be seen in the office of the tax collector. Let's remember the case of Zacchaeus, who was the leader of the group of tax collectors in Jericho (Luke 19:1-10). "The tax collector could squeeze people beyond what the Romans asked for; Then he paid them what they demanded and pocketed the rest (Lk 3,13; 19,1-9)" (Malina, Bruce J. *El Mundo del Nuevo Testamento*. Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1995, p.131) .

Jesus mentioned the commandment not to steal among the precepts of God's law that his disciples must keep (Matthew 19:18), and which are summarized in the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:39; Romans 13 :9; Galatians 5:14). Theft is also mentioned in the epistles as a practice inconsistent with the Christian's holy lifestyle (1 Corinthians 6:10; Ephesians 4:28, 5:4).

Questions:

- What is the purpose of the eighth commandment?
- What were some forms of violation of the commandment not to steal in biblical times, and what were the imposed punishments?

II. Contemporary Applications of the Eighth Commandment (Romans 13:7-10; Ephesians 4:28)

Nowadays, the crime of theft is prevalent with high rates in all our societies, and is one of the main social issues, especially in countries experiencing underdevelopment. There are many subtle forms of this crime that people engage in, often with the self-justification of their actions. However, the Word of God instructs us to be cautious in our behavior to avoid falling into such practices that go against God's will.

A. Examples of Violations of the Commandment

Some forms of subtle violation of the eighth commandment can be observed today. In some countries, during violent social protests, people destroy private and public property, break windows and doors, and engage in looting businesses. In other cases, people refuse to pay public services, claiming that the service providers overcharge, and they find ways to continue enjoying the services illegally. Some individuals commit tax fraud, arguing that the amounts aren't significant and, therefore, don't harm the state's economy. They may also claim that there's much political corruption, and therefore, the government doesn't deserve citizens' contributions. Another scene is when someone finds a lost object, knowing they can return it to its owner, but deliberately keeps it.

In Romans 13:7-10, Paul warned against some of these practices and others that don't align with the Christian lifestyle. In the case of the Roman Christians, some may have tried to justify their failure to fulfill certain civic duties, such as paying taxes to authorities, citing the prevailing political situation. While acknowledging that there was unjust exercise of political power by many rulers at that time, Paul was emphatic and clear in linking these duties to obedience to God's commandments and the biblical maxim of "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Romans 13:9-10).

As Christians, we must be consistent, aligning our conduct in society with the high moral values of the kingdom of God. Jesus set the supreme example regarding fulfilling civic duties. With the well-known response, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25), he indicated the need to fulfill duties toward others, just as duties toward God are fulfilled. On another occasion, even though he hinted at some disagreement, he paid the annual temple tax to the Jewish temple (Matthew 17:24-27).

B. Giving Instead of Taking

Some practices inconsistent with the eighth commandment might persist in the lives of new Christians as they obey deeply ingrained patterns of behavior. This was the case, for example, with some Corinthian Christians, as 1 Corinthians 6:8 points out: “Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters.” Paul addressed this clearly in Ephesians 4:28, where we read: “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer...” This expression is framed in the passage that runs from verse 17 to the end of this chapter, discussing the characteristics of the new life in Christ. “This passage assumes a rejection of the Gentile way of life, not of the Gentiles as people... The statements that Paul makes here are both a rejection of the dominant lifestyle in the society of his recipients and a call for them to repudiate such values” (Snodgrass, Klyne. *Ephesians, Application Commentary*. S/p: Zondervan, n/d, p.396). Ephesians 4:28 might refer to deceptive practices in the buying and selling of goods, embezzlement of money in the management of resources entrusted by others, or demanding gifts or money for the performance of a role.

In any case, any form of gaining profits or benefits that’s inconsistent with Christian ethics must be eradicated from our lives once we come to Christ. Instead, in the second part of the text, the apostle exhorted us to seek honest work, keeping in mind one of the primary purposes of fair gain according to Christian doctrine: sharing with those in need.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and a deeply generous man toward the needy throughout his life, expressed some important phrases regarding the use

of money that can also serve as guiding principles in this matter. The first one is: “Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can” (<https://www.gnjumc.org/earn-all-you-can-save-all-you-can-and-give-all-you-can>). The second is similar: “Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can” (<https://manchesterumc.org/allthegood>).

C. Contentment: A Key Attitude

Finally, the Christian perspective on wealth and worldly possessions is an important factor to consider. Paul mentioned “contentment” as the disposition that allows us to view material goods with God’s will in mind. The apostle gave an eloquent example of his own life on how he handled material needs within the prisons for the sake of the gospel (Philippians 4:10-20). Christian contentment frees us from attitudes like greed, the eagerness for material things, deceiving others for personal gain, and falling into the sin of theft. As Paul also wrote to the young minister Timothy: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we’ll be content with that” (1 Timothy 6:6-8).

Questions:

- What are some forms of violation of the eighth commandment in the present day?
- How does honest work, as a practice grounded in Christian values, oppose the sinful practice of theft?
- How does the Christian disposition of contentment help us avoid sinful actions like theft?

Conclusion

Is it possible for a person, even if they don’t commit theft openly, to be violating the eighth commandment in other ways? Indeed, yes. Dishonesty in business, not paying taxes, keeping a lost object, etc., can be subtle forms of theft. As Christians, God calls us to abandon such patterns from our old lives and replace them with new attitudes resulting from Christian sanctification.



Always Speak the Truth

Natalia Pesado (USA)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:20

Memory Verse: “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor” Deuteronomy 5:20.

Lesson Purpose: To understand God’s unequivocal call to love the truth and steer clear of falsehood.

Introduction

In the dictionary, the word “lie” is defined as “A statement that a person makes consciously knowing it’s not true” (Oxford Languages Definitions). In the dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy, a lie is defined as an “Expression or manifestation contrary to what’s known, thought, or felt.” Some synonyms for the word “to lie” include: deception, fraud, falsehood, farce, and deceit. We have some slang words in English for telling lies: Fibbing, Cheating, Telling “porkies”, Trickster etc.

The reality is that lying is an action that has existed since the beginning of creation and continues to occur across the Earth today. In today’s lesson, we’ll take a closer look at the commandment God gave to His people to teach them to avoid this behavior, to help them steer clear of the serious personal and social consequences lies can cause, and thus live a life of truth and honesty, which are vital aspects of the holiness God desires for His sons and daughters.

I. God’s Desire for Our Spiritual Life

The study passage for today is one of the specific Ten Commandments God gave to His people after their liberation from slavery in Egypt. At the beginning of this new stage of social independence, God desired to guide them to live wisely and orderly to promote their well-being. This commandment is simple and straightforward in its grammar and meaning.

Theologically speaking, we can consider the great value God places on truth by including this virtue in the Ten Commandments He gave to His people at that special moment. To expand the biblical context about truth, we must consider some passages from the Word that help

us understand why God asks His people not to lie.

Starting with reviewing the history of the first humans, we can see the temptation to tell a lie after a person has erred or committed a sin. The passage in Genesis 4:9 recounts a personal conversation God had with Cain, the son of Adam and Eve. We can see there was a particular closeness as God approached to speak with Cain, and he recognized God’s voice. The verse says, “And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ And he said, ‘I don’t know; am I my brother’s keeper?’” Unfortunately in the preceding verse (see Genesis 4:8), we read that Cain had planned and executed the murder of his brother. In the following chapters, we read about the severe consequences Cain had to face for his choices, and sadly, Abel’s life couldn’t be restored.

Also, in the New Testament, we receive advice from the apostle Peter. In 1 Peter 3:10, we’re reminded: “... Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech.” The passage is quoting the advice found in Psalm 34, titled “The Lord, a Provider and Deliverer,” which says, “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit” (v. 13).

Despite the psalm containing this admonition for the Jewish people and their spiritual leaders, the Gospels tell us that, unfortunately, they didn’t follow this biblical advice, nor did they understand God’s great command against lying. In Matthew 26:59-60, we’re told the story of Jesus in His final hours on Earth, facing a trial before the Jewish council, where it says: “The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they didn’t find any, though many false witnesses came forward.”

We see that Jesus Himself faced people who chose to lie against Him. And the story reminds us once again of the serious consequences of the false testimony these people expressed since their lies resulted in the unjust sentence of Jesus leading to His death by crucifixion.

In John 8:44, the Lord made clear the source of lies by warning: "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there's no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies." Sadly, we can see that the battle against the Master was waged between the Savior of humanity and His great enemy. On the contrary, in John 14:6, we can read with great comfort the clear and affirming words of the good Master: "Jesus said to him, 'I'm the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'"

Finally, we can see that even after Jesus' death, believers can fall into the temptation to lie. In Acts 5:1-11, we learn about a traumatic incident in the lives of the early Christians. A couple of believers, Ananias and Sapphira, agreed to lie to the church about their offering. The Word says that Ananias' lie resulted in his immediate death, and his wife Sapphira also lied moments later. We see in Acts 5:8-9 it says, "Peter asked her, 'Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?' 'Yes,' she said, 'that is the price.'" She immediately fell down dead.

We have reviewed several passages throughout the Bible that teach us about the consequences of the sin of lying. We can pray to God to guide us to avoid it and to always choose the truth.

Questions:

- What other word could be added to the definition of truth?
- How can we teach younger ones to live a life of honesty?

II. God's Desire for Our Personal Life

A key to obeying God's good directions is to seek to accompany obedience with a good understanding of His laws. We can trust that when God asks something of us, it's for our good and for the good of those around us. God is a God who infinitely loves His children and wants to guide them in every aspect of their lives so that they can enjoy peace, joy, emotional well-being, and good relationships with others.

Therefore, we must reflect on the serious consequences that lying produces in a person's life and in their social relationships.

In our personal lives, telling lies produces emotional stress that may be mild at the beginning, but can increase and develop into a serious psychological and emotional problem, such as the disorder of compulsive lying. Initially, telling a lie may be an option that a person sees as an escape from a negative consequence. For example, a child who ate cookies that his mother forbade might be tempted to lie when asked about the cookies to avoid facing his mother's anger or receiving a consequence. Telling a lie automatically puts the person in a stressful situation, as the brain begins to experience anxiety about when the truth will be revealed. The person who lies also feels concern about maintaining the credibility of the lie, having to ensure that other details align. In the example of the child who ate the cookies, he might consider lying about whether he was in the kitchen or playing outside. The reality is that keeping such a secret requires a lot of psychological effort and causes emotional exhaustion.

Similarly, personal self-esteem also suffers when a person chooses to lie because our consciences inherently value the truth and unconsciously make us as liars feel guilty. As a result, we feel less valuable, have less admiration for ourselves, and experience a sense of self-degradation.

By considering all the consequences of suffering and emotional stress that lies produce internally, we can find motivation to seek God in prayer and ask Him, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to work in our minds and hearts to love the truth as much as He does, and to help us commit to always choosing to tell the truth. We must recognize that changing a habit, especially if it's deeply rooted in a person's behavior, can be a process that requires time, commitment, and much effort.

Being realistic, one can also experience the reality of God's power working in their personal life: perhaps, God helps us recognize situations where a "white lie" was chosen and produces the desire not to leave the situation like that but to clarify the truth. We can trust God completely and have the assurance and certainty that this habit can be completely changed. It can be taken one day at a time, and we can celebrate every occasion when the truth triumphs.

The Word of God offers much guidance to help us love the truth and avoid the serious consequences of lying. In Proverbs 12:22, we're warned: "The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy." And in Psalm 15:2-3, we read the requirements for dwelling on the holy mountain of God: "The one whose walk is blameless, who does what's righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others."

Questions:

- Would you say that you love truth in your life? If not, how can you improve?
- Is there any exercise or discipline that can help you practice truth more?

III. God's Desire for Our Social Life

As we meditate on the previous point, lying brings serious consequences for a person's internal life, causing great psychological stress, low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion. Consequently, we can deduce that a person who suffers in this way will also have their interpersonal relationships affected, whether with a spouse, children (whether minors or adults), parents, school or work colleagues, neighbors, or other believers in the church.

God desires us to understand that lying not only affects others around us but also hinders us from fulfilling the great commandment: "So, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

Reasonably, we can accept that being lied to can produce very negative emotions, such as anger and frustration, distrust and suspicion, sadness, disillusionment, insecurity, hopelessness, etc. Therefore, with compassion and empathy, we can prevent others from going through these experiences. Lying also has serious consequences in the social relationships of the person who uses it. We must consider that, in reality, lying isn't a true solution to the problem.

Life experience teaches us that lying may initially avoid a person's anger, but the situation doesn't end there. The truth always comes to light "sooner or later," and the discovered lie causes even more anger and new

distrust in the person who received the lie. As a result, the person who lies automatically loses credibility, and in that relationship, a significant obstacle such as distrust is created.

We must ask God for wisdom to avoid falling into the lie that the enemy tries to make us believe: that it's better to cover up mistakes and sins rather than being honest and seeking restoration. Luke 12:2 can help us discern this lie from the enemy and face situations always with the truth as soon as possible, as we read: "There's nothing concealed that won't be disclosed, or hidden that won't be made known."

Finally, we can consider the legal and societal environment and see that, because of lies, it becomes necessary to have detectives and police, judges and courts, security cameras, and identity verification systems, whether on the Internet, in banks, airports, etc. In reality, the list is endless when analyzing all the work lies create in our society. We can imagine how different humanity would be if lies didn't exist and people always chose truth and honesty. As we saw earlier, the Bible says that Satan is the father of lies, and we see that as such, the consequences are serious, such as physical and socioemotional death. On the contrary, our Lord God loves the truth and invites us, His beloved children, to also always love the truth, no matter the cost.

Questions:

- What is your reaction regarding the consequences caused by lies?
- What do you think can help people who have the habit of lying?

Conclusion

We must decide to dedicate our lives to honor the truth and always defend it. We can make our own the prayer of an exemplary psalmist, who suffered serious consequences for deceiving but didn't hesitate to approach God for restoration. We can pray to God every day: "Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25:4-5).



Thou shalt not covet

Joel Castro (Spain)

Biblical passage for study: Deuteronomy 5:21

Memory Verse: "Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Colossians 3:2.

Lesson Purpose: To teach about the evil of covetousness and its different forms of how one can transgress God's tenth commandment.

Introduction

How many have heard the classic fable of the man who had a hen that laid golden eggs? Perhaps when we were children we didn't grasp its teaching, but it's such a vivid illustration of greed. This poor farmer, from one moment to another, came to possess a hen that laid a golden egg every day. But his impatience, combined with greed, led him to want to discover the gold mine at once and find more treasure in less time. So, he grabbed the hen and sacrificed it, hoping to discover the gold quarry inside it. However, he only found that the hen was just like those that don't lay extraordinary eggs. Unfortunately, this poor man deprived himself of his great fortune.

The world, detached from God's true purposes, lives in the same way as the farmer in our story. Greed is that uncontrolled desire to have what one's neighbor has; Greed is that excessive ambition that's seen in all ages, in all standards and in all conditions of the human being. The worst of all is that this carnal work leads to ruin for humanity.

Even though the commandment not to covet has been legislated by God for thousands of years, the demand for it continues to sound. And on this day, it will be the subject of our Bible study.

I. The nature of greed

According to the commandment given to Moses (Deuteronomy 5:21), greed is defined as that uncontrolled carnal desire to have what one's neighbor has; it could be the spouse, the house, the land, the servants, the ox, the donkey, or anything else. It's a very bad desire to increase any material acquisition or gain. Greed produces ambition and excessive eagerness to the point that the desire to get richer isn't motivated by pure intentions; instead, it's driven by the carnality of having more than others. But the problem isn't in the desire to want more, because

progressing or growing in any area of life isn't bad; the problem with greed lies in its forms.

The greedy person doesn't understand limits, for spiritual blindness makes them act with ill intentions and tyranny. Greed never has enough; it always wants more. The purpose of greed goes against honesty, fairness, and justice. It seeks out people's selfish interests. Hence, there are economic strata in society: some have, others don't; some have excess, and others lack enough; some throw away, and others pick up. This inequality is very tangible in many facets of society. Education, psychology, sociology, and other sciences in their research study the reasons for greed, and even want to find the solution to the consequences of this terrible evil. However, they cannot because it has to do with the human heart, and as long as people remain distant from God, things will always go from bad to worse.

Questions:

- How would you define greed?
- How do you explain greed in relation to the desire for progress?

II. Examples of greed

Through many characters, the Bible illustrates practical examples of this evil, describing it in such a way that the reader and student of the Word can understand it to avoid its consequences. Let's look at some of these examples:

A. The first act of greed (Genesis 3)

This greedy act caused sin not only to enter the world, but caused it to take root in the human heart. It has always been taught that Adam and Eve sinned through disobedience, but their disobedience was fueled by the temptation of greed. The devil is very cunning.

He knows how to confuse desires to lead them to his territory, creating attraction, pleasure, and need. To Adam and Eve, he said, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" (Genesis 3:1). Later, Eve saw that "... the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave to her husband..." (Genesis 3:6).

The forbidden fruit was the means by which they coveted the intention of being like God, something impossible because God is unique. This diabolical strategy remains present in the children of God. Temptations come wrapped in what seems good, pleasant, and covetable to achieve their goal. You must understand that everything that tempts your desires toward excess or carnal ambition is a sure trap of greed.

B. Greed in leadership (Numbers 16)

We already know that Moses had a tough time leading the people of Israel through the desert to the promised land. He faced many enemies, many difficulties, and also the weaknesses of the Israelite people. Moses was humble and meek, but some Levite leaders wanted to take advantage of him by coveting his leadership, a leadership he hadn't coveted but had assumed in obedience to God.

However, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram didn't see it that way. They were leaders too, but they wanted more. Moses told them, "... Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community ... to stand before the community and minister to them?" (Numbers 16:9). But the greed of these families went further; They asked Moses, "... Isn't it enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness? (Numbers 16:13). And although Moses tried to settle it amicably, the cancer of greed in these men grew and God caused the earth to swallow them (Numbers 16:31-35). We must beware of allowing greed through our carnal desires to go against the leader whom God has raised in his congregation.

In the Old Testament, we can observe greed for the throne several times in the history of the royal houses. In David's generation, this evil manifested repeatedly with Absalom, Adonijah, Athaliah, etc. (2 Samuel 17; 1 Kings 1:5-27, 2 Kings 11). Similarly, albeit covertly, today we see it manifested in political corruption, where high-ranking officials want to be in power for life, and unfortunately, we often find greedy leaders in the church.

C. Material Greed (Joshua 7)

The people of Israel had already crossed the Jordan River under Joshua's leadership. Everything was going well; Jericho, with its strong walls, had been destroyed. However, in the next city, called Ai, Joshua's army suffered a severe defeat. What happened? Why did they face a cruel defeat against a very small nation like Ai? Joshua sought God's answer, and the Lord said, "Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions" (Joshua 7:11). Later, Achan had to confess his sin; out of greed, he took a Babylonian garment, silver, and gold and hid them in his tent (Joshua 7:21). Because of this sinful act, God was angry with the people. Achan died, stoned according to the law (Joshua 7:25).

Today's world is very consumerist and materialistic, but the Church of Christ must understand that its focus should be on heavenly things, not earthly ones (Colossians 3:1-2). The devil will try to take advantage of our appetite for material things.

How many Christians have lost their faith by following the trends of this world? Let's be cautious and strengthen our faith, because material things won't satisfy our souls.

D. Sexual Greed (2 Samuel 12)

Before ascending to the throne, David was known as a warrior. From a young age, he learned the art of using a sling, and as a shepherd, he had risked his life defending his sheep from bears and lions. The pinnacle of his warrior career was when he unexpectedly defeated Goliath. In all his exploits, David always glorified God and attributed the glory and honors of his victories to Him. However, once he became king, he trusted in himself. "In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army... But David remained in Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11:1). While strolling on the palace roof, he saw a woman from afar who filled his eyes with lust. He coveted his neighbor's wife, found her pleasing, and took her. This act brought sad and fatal consequences for King David.

Christian life is full of activities and spiritual responsibilities. Christians must deal with temptations of sensuality, eroticism, and all worldly passions of the opposite sex and, in some cases, even the same sex. Fornication and adultery are deep pits where many warriors of faith have fallen because they coveted the delights of Eros (carnal passions).

The writer James warned: “but each person is tempted when they’re dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed” (James 1:14).

Desires are the greedy desires of carnality. For this reason, the apostle Peter spoke of the heart accustomed to greed: “With eyes full of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they’re experts in greed—an accursed brood!” (2 Peter 2:14). The devil won’t rest. That’s why James encourages us to continue to be alert with the following command: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

E. Worldly Greed (2 Timothy 4:10)

Temptation is an invitation to evil, and greed is the transportation to sin. Normally, we see a child holding hands with their father when walking down the street. But in the midst of the crowd and stores promoting their various products, the child, attracted by something that caught their attention, let go of their father’s hand and ran after what they want. As a result, we find a lost child and a worried father.

This illustrates how many Christians have strayed into the world; now they’re lost in worldly desires, and the heavenly Father waits like the prodigal son’s father for their return. Paul said of Demas, “for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me...” (2 Timothy 4:10). The world is very attractive. John said that in the world there are “...the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life...” (1 John 2:16). Worldly greed comes through the flesh, the eyes, and all the vanities of life.

Young people, as they grow and discover their world, can be an easy prey to the deceptive greed of the world. Therefore, John also admonishes us not to love the world or the things in the world (1 John 2:15). Additionally, James stated firmly: “... don’t you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God?” (James 4:4). We can be in this world, but we’re not of this world. The world and its greedy desires will pass away, but whoever does the will of God will remain forever (1 John 2:17).

Questions:

- Among the five examples of greed mentioned, with which do you feel a spiritual struggle in your walk with Christ?
- What will you do to overcome this struggle?
- What do you understand from Colossians 3:1-2?

III. Warning to the Greedy

Nothing justifies the decisions of the greedy, and they must know that both morally and spiritually, they have been deceived and enslaved by their greed. The following biblical passages describe God’s thoughts against the greedy: greed chokes the Word and makes it unfruitful (Mark 4:19); it plunges people into destruction and perdition and leads them astray from the faith (1 Timothy 6:9-10); finally, it will cause them to lose their lives (Proverbs 1:19). The child of God must learn to be detached from all greed.

For this, we can follow the example of three spiritually inspiring people: Daniel, Job, and Jacob. Daniel didn’t covet the delicacies of the Babylonian nation; he remained loyal to his principles and preferred to fear God rather than be deceived by the worldly ambition of the foreign nation (Daniel 1:8). Another example is Job, who, despite having acquired great wealth recorded in the Bible, his faith was tested as he lost everything. In his faithfulness, “Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (Job 1:20b-21). Job knew how to live with abundance, but also in moments of scarcity; what mattered to him was to have God in his being without coveting earthly things.

Lastly, we find Jacob who, after coveting the birthright by deceiving his brother Esau, repented of his greed, sought forgiveness from his brother, and sought to trust fully in God (Genesis 32, 33).

Questions:

- According to the Word of God, what consequences does greed bring?
- Do you believe that one can still be like Daniel, Job, or Jacob?
- Who among them inspires you to live in victory over greed, and why?

Conclusion

Greed is rooted in the human heart, feeding egocentrism and revealing an unsatisfied inner need. Even sanctified Christians can fall prey to this evil. Whenever the heart doesn’t allow the Holy Spirit to control it, it will always be a bit morally blind. It won’t know what it truly needs for a balanced, content, and happy life which causes no harm.



The Great Commandment: God is One

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Biblical passage for study: Mark 12:28-29

Memory Verse: "...Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" Mark 12:29.

Lesson Purpose: Understand the uniqueness/unity of God in biblical history and its application in the life of the church today.

Introduction

Since ancient times, God dictated laws and commandments that should govern the life of His people. Although they were numerous and varied, Jesus summarized the entire law in Mark 12:28-29, known as the great commandment. This great commandment contains an expression that will be the focus of today's class: God is one. This refers to the uniqueness/unity of God.

1. *What does it mean that God is one?*
2. *How can we interpret it in the light of the Old and New Testaments?*
3. *How do we conceptualize the oneness and unity of God?*
4. *What practical importance do Jesus' words have for the life of the current church?*

You can start the class with these questions to encourage an interesting debate and enriching interaction among the students. Now let's provide answers to these questions:

I. Detailed Biblical Explanation of the Commandment (Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 45:18b; Matthew 28:19; Mark 12:28-29)

Attempting to explain the implicit content in this great commandment, "God is one," means delving into the understanding of the nature of God. The uniqueness/unity of God was something with which the Jewish people had always defined well. In all the literature received from them, God is portrayed as one, making them distinct from the nations and peoples around them who based their faith on a polytheistic theology. Undoubtedly, acknowledging that God is one touches on the doctrine of the Trinity, discussed for centuries by different church councils and still under discussion today.

A. The Uniqueness/Unity of God in Hebrew Thought

This text in Mark 12:28-29 is based on Deut. 6:4-5, considered the creed of Judaism, the Shema of Israel. It's undoubtedly a monotheistic confession, and one of the most important in Judaism. It declares that there's no other God but one. This conviction, though seemingly normal for the current church, was challenging for the people of Israel amid a polytheistic context where belief in many gods was common. Among the Canaanite peoples, there were many Baals. In fact, there were Baals for different localities. But the faith of the people of Israel was that their God, Jehovah or the Lord (NIV), is different: He is one. He is unique. Other gods don't exist. "I'm the Lord, and there's no other" (Isaiah 45:18b). Pagan nations tried to appease the anger of supposedly evil gods through various forms of sacrifices; however, Israel worshipped the Lord, a holy and kind God, just and good, the God who had liberated them from slavery.

The importance given by the nation of Israel to this monotheistic creed led them to implement various ways to impress it on the minds of their people, in their children, and to pass it on from generation to generation. Consider what this commentary says about it: "The Jewish community in the post-exilic period took this commandment literally. The Shema and other biblical passages were written on small scrolls and placed in memorial boxes and tied to the arms during prayer time. These boxes are called tephilim or... [phylacteries] (Matt. 23:5). Other boxes were placed on the doorposts of homes. These boxes are called mezuzah" (Collective of authors. Mundo Hispano Biblical Commentary, volume 3. USA: Mundo Hispano Publishing, 1998, p.306).

B. The Uniqueness/Unity of God in First-Century Christian Thought

The first-century Christian church embraced the monotheistic creed of Judaism, but with some variations, since a significant majority of Jews never believed in Jesus or the Holy Spirit as God—something that's incorporated into New Testament literature, specifically in Jesus' words with the baptismal formula (Matthew 28:19).

Understanding the existence of one God and simultaneously comprehending that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are God posed a challenge from ancient times to the present day. There's only one God; this was the theology that the New Testament writers left in biblical texts, and that the church, in general, has believed for centuries. However, the New Testament enriched the theology of the existence that "God is one" and is also a "triune God," declaring the understanding of the three persons of the Trinity in the same essence of the being called God. The Christian church has considered that there's only one true God, but under this trinitarian doctrinal conviction

C. Biblical-Theological Analysis of the Oneness/Unity of God

One of the concepts of oneness can be considered as the property of being non-multipliable, not compatible with another being of the same rank. Under this premise, we can affirm that there aren't two beings absolutely perfect; this makes God unique. Oneness, therefore, opposes polytheism. These biblical texts declare this truth: "This is what the LORD says, Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I'm the first and I'm the last; apart from me there's no God" (Isaiah 44:6). "I'm the LORD, and there's no other; apart from me there's no God. I will strengthen you, though you haven't acknowledged me..." (Isaiah 45:5).

"The oneness of God means that the divine nature of His unity is individual and indivisible (Isaiah 45:5; Mark 12:29-32). He is Unique (Ex. 15:11; Zec. 14:9; Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29). God doesn't consist of parts and, as such, is indivisible. God is Spirit and not susceptible to division. The unity of God allows personal distinctions of the divine nature. Unity implies that the three persons of the Trinity aren't separate essences within the divine essence" (Anonymous. Systematic Theology I. USA: Ed. American Mission Teams, 2003, p.41).

According to what the Bible says, God reveals Himself clearly in the diversity of His being, nature, and essence

as the only true God; therefore, there's no other God. He doesn't share, multiply, or divide His authority (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39, 6:4; I Kings 8:60, Isaiah 46:9; John 17:3; Romans 3:30). "The biblical doctrine of the unity of God avoids the error of Unitarianism (which rejects the trinity of God) and Polytheism (that God is multiple or many gods).

Unitarianism sees God as a simple unit, so Jesus Christ cannot be the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit cannot be a divine person. This belief concludes that God, being one, can only be one thing and therefore becomes a rigid unit. This belief limits God. Polytheism typically reduces human understanding of God to a frivolous and insignificant level and mundane capabilities (Romans 1:23). Polytheism denies everything that the Scriptures teach fully about the one true God" (Anonymous. Systematic Theology I. USA: Ed. American Mission Teams, 2003, p.41).

Not fully understanding the concepts of oneness/unity of God has caused some sects and churches not to accept this biblical doctrine that teaches about the being of God, something that's clearly demonstrated.

Questions:

- On which Old Testament passage is the scripture in Mark 12:28-29 based?
- What does this passage tell us today?

II. How to Apply this Command to the Life of the Church in its Current Context? (John 17:20-22; Acts 17:28-29; I Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:5-6)

What meaning or relevance does the understanding that God is one have for the life of each believer and the faith community? The answer to this question provides us with the importance of the oneness/unity of God in the daily life of the believer regarding their relationship with God and their fellow believers.

A. God: The Only One Worthy of Worship

Worshiping the Lord as the only God poses the great challenge of demanding complete loyalty from the Church of Christ, and it also requires each disciple of Christ to surrender unreservedly to the demands of the New Covenant laws in which we minister.

The church must be aware that its worship cannot go to anyone other than God. It's not about a spectacle that tries to meet human expectations, nor, as happens in many churches that try to empower pastors, apostles, singers, leaders to receive glory and inflate their egos.

This can be bordering on idolatry. It's about genuine worship, with all the heart, that's received as a fragrant aroma by our God. He must be the center of all our worship!

B. God: The Only One in the Life of Each Believer

Believers must live day by day centered on their relationship with God, understanding that He must be the only one in our lives, that outside of God, we desire nothing in this world. Therefore, nothing can hinder or obstruct intimate communion with God. Recognizing Him as such provides us with the confidence to turn exclusively to Him for all our spiritual, emotional, material, and psychological needs.

Understanding the oneness/unity of God helps the believer in a healthy Christian life:

I. Remove all idolatry and promote a unique and genuine relationship with God.

As believers, we have understood that idols are nothing, and only God is worthy of our worship; however, idolatry was common in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul was emphatic about this issue and said, "So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There's no God but one'" (1 Corinthians 8:4).

In the current lives of believers in different churches, it's very rare for cases to occur where a believer continues to worship gods of metal, wood, etc. But there tends to be a modern idolatry, with gods different from those commonly known, and we must understand that anything that occupies the first place in our lives that's not God can be considered idolatrous. The excessive pursuit of money, children, family, work, etc. can take the place that belongs only to God, and we must be careful in how we handle everything that God has given us. Every believer who fully understands the oneness/unity of God has removed every obstacle that may interfere with their intimacy with God and the flow of the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives.

Ancient peoples turned to each god to help them with their needs; however, believers have the only God to whom we turn and in whom we live, as the Bible says: "For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'For we're also His offspring.' Therefore, since we're the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold

or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising" (Acts 17:28-29).

2. Build unity in the life of the church.

Understanding that there's only one God removes all idolatrous thinking, as mentioned earlier, but it also leaves us the teaching of that trinitarian unity that Jesus spoke to us about and showed us by His example: "My prayer isn't for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I'm in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we're one..." (John 17:20-22).

This understanding of the Word invites us not only to comprehend the nature of our God and His triune being, but also exhorts us to live in that relational unity as a church, which is somewhat lacking in some faith communities. We must observe how God is one, and we're to be one with other believers, and in turn, all are to be one with our God. These words of unity carry vital significance for spiritual health and testimony to the world by the church. It's impossible to testify to the unity of God if we don't live it with other believers. The essence of the church lies precisely in this understanding. Paul expressed it as follows: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:5-6).

One God working in all and in all possible divine ways, fostering the unity of His body, His church, displaying that unity through His very essence, and desiring that the church can live it daily. But sometimes, it seems impossible when so many divisions are observed among churches and believers.

Questions:

- What importance is there in God being the only one deserving the worship of His people?
- How do I apply this truth to my daily life?
- How can we demonstrate to society the oneness/unity of God?

Conclusion:

Let's always value the high significance of understanding that our God is one and triune, that His oneness/unity reveals His essence. Therefore, this understanding helps us remove all idolatry from our lives and allows us to live in harmony with God and His people.



Loving God with all our being

Jonathan Melgarejo (USA)

Bible Study passages: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 22:37-38; Mark 12:28-30; Luke 10:27

Memory Verse: “And love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...” Mark 12:30.

Lesson Purpose: To understand that love for God is the foundation on which our relationship with Him rests and requires the totality of our being.

Introduction

We widely use the word “love” in all cultures and languages. Poets, philosophers, musicians, and writers of all times have written, reflected, and sung about love. As believers, we recognize the centrality of this virtue in the biblical message. The Scriptures present an abundant variety of references to love, not only as a Christian virtue, but especially as the very essence of God (1 John 4:8).

Clearly, the theme of God’s love for humanity is the thread that runs through the entire Bible, revealing a God who, in accordance with His own nature, sent Himself in Jesus Christ as evidence of that love (Romans 5:8). Therefore, one of Jesus’ central teachings to His disciples was that the distinctive mark of every believer was to love God and their neighbors, even their enemies (Matthew 5:43-44; John 15:12).

Jesus’ teaching, known as the great commandment, is found in two of the Synoptic Gospels: in Matthew 22 and in Mark 12. It’s interesting that in both cases, it’s chronologically placed in the final stage of the Lord’s ministry, after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem that occurred during the last week of His public ministry. Those final days were intense and marked by many dialogues with the Pharisees and scribes of His time.

In fact, the context of Jesus’ teaching on this great commandment is framed within a series of dialogues consisting of challenging questions from the religious leaders (Matthew 22:35-36) and the Lord’s wisdom-filled responses. The placement of the biblical text in the final days of the Lord isn’t incidental, but becomes a prelude to the greater teaching on love that He would leave us at the cross of Calvary, which is the foundation for obedience to that commandment.

In the Gospel of Luke, the same question from the religious leaders in the final days of Jesus doesn’t appear, but there’s a mention of this commandment in the narration of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:27), in response to a question from the interpreters of the law.

I. The great commandment in the Pentateuch (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

On that occasion, the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Jesus with hostile questions. The first question was about the tribute (Matthew 22:15-22), the second, about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-33), and the third, which seemed to be asked with better intentions, was about the following: “What is the great commandment in the law?” (v.36).

In his answer, Jesus referred to the first part of one of the central teachings of the Old Testament called the Shema (“Hear” in Hebrew), which was recited daily by the Jews and is found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, which says: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 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. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

According to Bible scholars, the Jewish Shema has been recognized as the affirmation “of the highest theological and moral value in the Old Testament and in the history of religions” (Criado, Rafael. *La Sagrada Escritura*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1967, p.805).

In this classic prayer in the Jewish community, we discover that instruction on obedience to God's law constitutes the foundation of the institution of the family in Hebrew culture and their declaration of faith. In these terms, the role of the Hebrew father was crucial for the education of his children (Sanner, Elwood. Exploring Christian Education. USA: CNP, 1978, p.39). This responsibility wasn't only limited to the oral transmission of the Shema but also to the incorporation of these principles into every aspect of family life. After the vigorous monotheistic confession about the person of God ("The Lord our God... the Lord is one" Deuteronomy 6:4) and the commandment to love that God with all that we are (v.5), an inexcusable demand is placed on the Jewish parent. Firstly, this commandment should be on their heart (v.6). That is, the teaching of God's Word clearly establishes that the way to train children is to personally appropriate this scriptural precept and then transmit it through example. Subsequently, in the passage from Deuteronomy, pedagogical instruction on how to teach the Shema is also included. The expression "impress them on your children" (v.7).

The intention of repeating this prayer in the family context didn't imply a purely mechanistic and memoristic desire. Rather, it was a desire to model daily life with divine commandments in daily routines. Therefore, the importance of teaching should be in every place ("when you sit at home, when you walk along the road" v.7a) and at all times ("when you lie down, and when you get up" v.7b).

Perhaps, the Pharisees expected to hear from Jesus a response about one of the approximately 600 commandments they were well acquainted with and could challenge in light of the teachings of the Torah. But the Lord's answer referred to this central teaching of the Jewish faith, showing that this commandment aimed at faithful obedience to God.

Questions:

- What implications did the Shema have in the life of the Jewish people?
- What aspects of the Shema captivate your attention the most? Do they have any application for our days?

II. The Most Important Commandment (Matthew 22:37-38; Mark 12:28-30; Luke 10:27; I John 4:19)

There's a difference between the Gospel passages where Jesus refers to this great commandment that we're called to obey. Only in Mark and Luke is the phrase "with all your strength" included (Mark 12:30;

Luke 10:27). However, this statement aligns with what's mentioned in the Shema of Deuteronomy. What does this commandment mean?

1. When we talk about a commandment, it seems like a precept where there's no option but to simply comply. It becomes a practice devoid of gratitude, worship, and meaning. However, love for God isn't just an obligation, but the genuine response of the human being to the person of the only God.

2. Loving God isn't a human initiative, but the natural response to the divine love that has been poured into us. The apostle John mentioned it in his letter: "We love because He first loved us" (I John 4:19). Dr. Hahn, a distinguished New Testament professor, accurately pointed out: "The only appropriate response for Israel - and also for us - is to love God completely" (Hahn, Roger. Matthew, A Commentary for Bible Students. USA: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007, p.266).

3. In Jesus' statement, there's a correspondence between the God who is one and the call to His worshippers to love Him in a total, integral way. An indivisible love corresponds to a unique God.

4. The word "all" repeated four times insists on the perfection and intensity of the commitment of love as an obedient and permanent response to God's commandments. The term "all" is inclusive and doesn't admit any exceptions for any dimension of human life. This implies that it's not possible to love the Father only partially or in sections.

5. Another observation in the biblical text is that the call to love God includes the entirety of human life at once; this means the heart, soul, mind, and strength. All of these dimensions of life need to be included in our devotion and love for God. Note that the four areas of human life are connected with the conjunction "and," showing the importance of keeping all these areas cohesive in our love for God.

Questions:

- Is loving God simply an obligation that we have to fulfill? Discuss.
- What does the use of the term "all" four times in the Lord's teaching signify?

III. Loving God with the Totality of Our Being (Matthew 22:37-38; Mark 12:28-30; Luke 10:27)

The human being is an indivisible being that needs to express love for God in all dimensions of life. Jesus' response to the Pharisees revealed this truth that goes beyond a verbal and poetic declaration of love.

As Earle mentioned: “the word translated as love is *agapao*, which means more than affection or emotion (expressed by *phileo*)” (Earle, Ralph. *Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume VI. The Gospel According to Matthew. USA: CNP, 1983, p.208*). The Message (MSG) Translation translates Jesus’ words as follows: “The first in importance is, ‘Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so, love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There’s no other commandment that ranks with these.”

It’s difficult to distinguish precisely what each of these dimensions refers to, but what remains clear is that we’re called to love God with the totality of our being and with all our faculties, as a response to His lordship.

1. “With all your heart”

It’s significant that both evangelists (Matthew and Mark) begin their narratives with this statement because the heart is the center where our decisions and affections originate. It’s where our free will is exercised, and therefore, it’s relevant that our will uses its capacity and freedom to choose and surrender in love to God, not merely fulfilling an obligation. The will opposes the emotions that typically have governed our feelings regarding love.

2. “With all your soul”

Biblical scholars don’t agree on a single meaning referred to the soul. Some (like Arndt and Gingrich, cited in Earle) have defined it as “the seat and center of life that transcends the earthly” (Earle, Ralph. *Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume VI. The Gospel According to Matthew. USA: CNP, 1983, p.208*). Our soul, as the center of our desires engraved with the seal of eternity, needs to long for the presence of God because it finds rest only in Him.

3. “With all your mind”

Loving God with all the mind involves directing all our thoughts and intelligence in the perspective of that love. The apostle Paul advised the Philippian brothers and sisters with the following words: “ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” (Philippians 4:8). To love God completely, we need to know more and more about God in such a way that our minds are permanently aligned with His perfect will.

4. “With all your strength”

This dimension is related to the dedication of our entire body and everything we do, so that it becomes an expression of love for God. Jesus prioritized total love for God above all things because if we have truly decided to consecrate our heart, soul, mind, and strength in acknowledgment of His lordship and in response to His love, we’ll joyfully surrender everything else. This totality of the human being involved in love for God is reflected in the psalmist’s proclamation regarding his devotion to God: “Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name” (Psalm 103:1).

This commandment is deeply linked to the perfect love that’s the distinctive mark of the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer. For Wesleyans, perfect love expresses the essential content of Christian perfection. It’s the perfection or complete character of love. Loving others “is not a mandate to be perfect as God in every aspect but in only one: our love must be complete and universal as God’s is. Our love isn’t perfect unless it includes the enemy as well as the friend, for only then is it like God’s love” (Taylor, Richard. *Exploring Christian Holiness, Volume 3. Theological Foundations. USA: CNP, 1999, p.162*).

In his classic devotional, Baillie wrote this prayer, showing the need and urgency of our response to that divine love: “Oh God, I love You: To You, who are Yourself, love; To You who, out of love, created me and who, out of love, continue to sustain me; To You who loved me so much that You sent Your Son to suffer and die so that I could live with You; To You who have commanded me to show my love by loving my neighbor for the sake of You” (Baillie, John. *Private Prayer Diary. Mexico: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1979, p.100*).

Questions:

- What does it mean that we’re called to love God with the totality of our being? Why is it not possible to just love God?
- What are some practical examples of what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength?

Conclusion

Jesus’ teaching on the most important commandment isn’t solely tied to the obligatory fulfillment of a precept; it’s an invitation to surrender our entire being in response to God’s love and in acknowledgment of His lordship over our lives. Because God is one, we love Him with our entire being, without divisions. The God who has loved us completely expects from His people a complete love.



Love Your Neighbor

Natalia Pesado (USA)

Bible Study passages: Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31

Memory Verse: “The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There’s no commandment greater than these.” Mark 12:31.

Lesson Purpose: To understand God’s unequivocal call to brotherly love.

Introduction

During his time on Earth, Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching his followers life lessons and helping them to understand better the kingdom of God. Many of his parables are studied with great care and transform our perspective in seconds just by hearing them. One of his great teachings involves the words he used to summarize divine commandments.

Reading today’s study passage, we see that from the beginning of Mark 12, the chapter details several lessons the Master was sharing. He had taught them about corrupt leaders, taxes, and resurrection. Verse 28 tells us that “One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, ‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’”

Jesus’ humility never failed him, always guiding him to give God the first place. But the Master’s teaching didn’t end there; he challenged his disciples to understand that honoring God unquestionably includes honoring other human beings as well. We can say that they’re two sides of the same coin; perfect love doesn’t separate the love for God from the love for others.

In today’s lesson, we’ll study in detail the second part of the great commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31).

I. Learning to love

The first word of this commandment (“Love”) is a verb that indicates dynamic action. The verb “to love” is used with various meanings in our current society and can even take on very varied connotations across different cultures. The Oxford dictionary defines “love” as “Feeling love for someone or something”; it even includes the use of the verb to refer to sexual activity

(<https://www.google.com/search?q=meaning+of+love>).

We see that the feeling of love can be directed toward an inanimate object, such as pizza or a piece of jewelry. In contrast, the biblical meaning expresses love as a more spiritual experience, and we can deduce that this perspective is what Jesus had in mind when sharing the great commandment in Mark 12:31. In the Encyclopedia of Bible and Theology, we read that the Hebrew word “*hesed* indicates the mercy and favor of God” (<https://www.biblia.work/diccionarios/hesed/>). The referenced dictionary explains that it’s a “Key term in the Hebrew Bible (where it appears more than a hundred times) and all of Israelite thought. It implies affective closeness and has two fundamental meanings.

(1) Mercy, that is, free benevolence, in line with forgiveness.

(2) Loyalty, that is, firmness in fulfilling commitments.

Both meanings are often implied and overlap, although one or the other may predominate. It’s usually a fundamental attribute of God.” This term appears in Genesis 24:27; Exodus 34:6 (<https://www.biblia.work/diccionarios/hesed/>).

Hesed can be described as God’s love that’s “consistent, always faithful, relentless, constantly seeking/pursuing, luxurious, extravagant, unrestrained, and furious” (<https://hesed.com/hesed/>). “Consistent” can include characteristics like resilient, permanent, dense, pure, firm, compact, solid, coherent, durable, and stable. Imagine these words describing the qualities of God’s love; for example, a firm love... a durable love... a coherent love. “Relentless” can mean that it doesn’t soften or ease, doesn’t temper, doesn’t calm or appease, is inflexible, unyielding, doesn’t stop or cease. “Luxurious” indicates a love full of luxury, richness, abundance, excessive, with grandeur.

“Extravagant” shows a love out of the ordinary, a rarity, for being excessively original, beyond what’s known or ordinary. “Unrestrained” describes a love without moderation, without measure, passionate and unlimited. Finally, “furious” represents a terrible, emotion-filled, and intense love.

We can take a moment to reflect on these qualities that true love of God includes, and recognize that it may take a long time to develop and perfect these qualities in our lives. However, by acknowledging that God is the only true source of this love, we can confidently approach Him and ask Him to pour His love over our life, mind, and heart. We can be sure that what God desires most is to share His love with us, for us to receive it and experience it fully. He created us for that communion that does us so much good and that our soul so eagerly desires.

By receiving that perfect love from God, we can truly understand what it means to love. Once again, the only way we learn to love is by being loved by the perfect love of God. After this process, we’re equipped to put into practice the rest of Jesus’ words. Therefore, we must ask the Father to teach us more about this pure and unparalleled love, and help us experience it so that we can then apply it as this commandment calls us to do.

Questions:

- In what ways can I practice the love that God gives me?
- How can we teach younger individuals to live a life experiencing God’s love?

II. Recognizing our Neighbor

The second part of today’s memory verse says, “your neighbor.” The key to obeying this Master’s rule is to consider who our neighbor is. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), we can understand that a neighbor is any human being around us, even those in other parts of the world, not just people in our family, church, or denomination, people in our neighborhood, or people in our work or study environment. God includes all human beings in His love, and in the same way, we should as well.

To recognize our neighbor, we must take the time to pay attention to those around us and their needs. One characteristic of our current society is the significant development of technology and media. Today, the vast majority of people have access to some technological

device, perhaps a phone, tablet, or computer, and the majority of cities have some internet connection. However, sociologists have found that people today seem to suffer from greater disconnection and loneliness than before. Perhaps, due to the abundance of technological devices and the change in the pace of life, people spend less time with family and friends and become distant. Also, it’s sad to recognize that in online interactions, social media communication is sometimes hostile, aggressive, and dehumanized. People may say things on social media that they might not say in face-to-face situations. Despite having so many possibilities to communicate, humans have lost a certain ability to connect emotionally with others around them, and social insensitivity has developed.

By listening to the words of Jesus, we see that the call includes fighting against this current of contemporary society of individualism and selfishness and striving to value being with, witnessing, appreciating, and experiencing the people we encounter.

Some practical ways to do this include: listening carefully to the greetings and conversation that someone may offer us; also trying to understand their perspective and expressed emotions, as well as grasping any expressed need or difficulty. By being sensitive, we can perceive what the other person is experiencing emotionally, and from there, we can feel compassion and be moved to act on their behalf.

We can read the example of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:33, which tells us, “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him.” And even the example of our Master Jesus: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). And “Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him” (Matthew 20:34).

To fulfill this second part of this commandment, we can also rely on God’s help, praying for Him to give us the focus, discipline, and sensitivity to recognize our neighbor in any circumstance, and to act on their behalf, just as the Master did.

Questions:

- Reflecting on yourself, would you say that you are sensitive to others? If not, how do you think you can develop that quality?

- Is there any exercise or discipline that helps you pay attention to others? Share.

III. Understanding our Needs

The third part of the commandment we study today says, “as yourself” (Mark 12:31). A question that may arise is this: why did Jesus include this little part? Why doesn’t it say, “Love your neighbor as God loves you”? However, the Master’s answer was very clear: “as yourself.” To understand this part, we can consider, then, how should I love myself?

Common sense would tell us that the answer to this question shouldn’t be so difficult to reach; that the “I” or the “ego” should help us to self-love instinctively. Each of us can say that we’re pleased when we feel loved in practical ways, such as someone giving us words of praise, helping us with a difficult task, or doing us a favor to avoid effort or save time. Perhaps it also feels nice when someone shows us physical affection with a brotherly hug or a caress; maybe, also when someone gives us a gift in which they invested effort or money. And finally, maybe even when someone dedicates their attention and time to us, making us feel that we’re very important, interesting, valuable, and appreciated by that person (<https://psicologiamente.com/pareja/5-lenguajes-del-amor>).

Therefore, Jesus tells us to consider what makes us feel good and loved, and do the same for others (Matthew 7:12). Unfortunately, we must consider that the effects of sin have even damaged our perspective of ourselves, and sometimes, we’re distant from the love of God and therefore don’t have love to give ourselves and don’t take care of ourselves.

Many people estranged from God have low self-esteem, falling into practices that harm both the physical body and the emotional mind and spirit, such as drug use, lack of discipline in terms of food, time and/or money management, handling emotions of bitterness, depression, anxiety, lack of rest, problems in interpersonal relationships, lack of physical exercise or rest, etc. We see that by losing sight of how God sees us, we can easily fall into the trap of thinking that we don’t deserve to make the effort to take care of ourselves.

It’s for this reason that we can carefully consider the words of the Master and ask ourselves: how should I love myself? How does God want me to love/take care of myself? To be able to give pure, healthy, free love to others, we must also be clear that we must love ourselves, and this includes every aspect of personal care, such as caring for the mind (for example being careful about what I think and what I allow to enter my mind, whether through music, entertainment, news, social media, friendships, and other social relationships, etc.), caring for the body (for example physical exercise, a healthy diet, enough hours of sleep, and enough personal and family relaxation activities), and caring for the soul (such as prayer, reading the Word, worshiping God with praise or writing a journal, fasting, reflection, participating in church meetings and ministries, etc.).

God loves us so much that He wants us to live life to the fullest; and for this, we must also do our part to provide the care that our being needs.

At the end of this lesson, we can ask God in prayer to guide us this week to consider the aspects that we can intentionally put into practice to learn to love as He loves, to recognize the people around us and their needs, and to understand in what ways we can improve our personal care. God is so faithful that He’s always available to help us focus and to give us the strength and courage necessary. Let’s start together this adventure of faith by intentionally living out this commandment that Jesus shared with us in His own words.

Questions:

- What is your reaction to the idea that we should prioritize taking care of ourselves too?
- What do you think about the guidelines for taking care of the body, mind, and spiritual soul?

Conclusion

The great commandment is of utmost importance, and by studying and considering it carefully, we can understand that to live it effectively every day, we must focus on God, on others, and on ourselves. By putting each aspect in its proper place, our life leads to a very healthy and beneficial balance for us and for the people around us, and it turns out that we give glory to God because we live in the purpose He designed for us.

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