

Sermons on Mark-Robert Morgan

Mark 1:16-17 E Is For Evangelism

Today we are coming to the end of our July series of messages on the simple ABCs of the Christian faith. We've looked at Assurance, Baptism, Church, Devotions; and today's topic is Evangelism. The very word evangelism is wonderful. The prefix, ev, means good. And the stem word is angel. If you look closely, you see it in the spelling: ev-angel-ism. The word angel literally means message or messenger. So the word evangelism means the spreading or the sharing of the Good Message or the Good News, and the word evangelist refers to anyone who shares the Good News with someone else. And who is to do that? The answer is given in Mark 1: 16-17:

And as He walked by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. Then Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."
They immediately left their nets and followed Him (NKJV).

There are several things that impress me about this.

First, notice there are not two commands here, but only one. There is one command and one promise. Jesus did not say, "Follow me and fish for men." He said, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men." The act of following is something I can do. I can get behind someone else and walk in their footsteps. I can follow Christ. But as far as being a fisher of men on my own, I can't do that. That intimidates me. That seems beyond my comfort zone and skill level. Jesus didn't command me to fish for men, only to follow Him. But as I do so, He has promised to make me to become His fisherman. I like the way Lorne Sanny put it when he said that fishing for men and women is our responsibility.

Response-ability. That is, the response is to come from us and the ability is to come from Him. The response coming from us is to follow Him!—and the ability coming from Him is: And I will make you to become fishers of men![1]

I'm thankful Jesus spoke these words as He did. Think of how it worked out for those first disciples. When Jesus met them on the shores of Galilee, they were a long way from being evangelists. They were simply unlettered fledging men who were slowly growing in their awareness of who the Lord Jesus really was. We read of their mistakes and mis-steps throughout the Gospel accounts. But by the time we get to the book of Acts, these same men were turning the world upside down.

Acts 4 describes how the apostles bravely preached the Gospel before the hostile Jewish ruling counsel; and Peter proclaimed, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved: And the very next verse, Acts 4:13, gives the response of the audience: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus."

They had followed Jesus as best they could; and Jesus had kept His promise to make them fishers of men. That's the pattern for all of us who are Christians. First we are disciples (learners) then we become apostles (those who are sent). First we are followers, and then He makes us fishers. As we grow in Christ, we should become increasingly influential in leading others to Him.

There's a second observation to make about this, however. We must always be aware that we're not the only ones interested in catching fish. I want to take you into the Greek New Testament and show you something very interesting in the Scriptures. The New Testament was originally written in the Greek language, and it has been translated into English. There is a word that only occurs two times in the Greek New Testament, and that is the word *zogreo* (zo-gre'-o). It means "to catch, like in a net." The first time it occurs is in Luke 5:

In this passage, Jesus has been teaching the multitudes. The crowds were so great that Jesus got into a boat with Peter, pushed out from the shore, and taught the multitudes from the boat. Then, His teaching finished for the moment, Jesus told Peter to launch out further into the lake and to let down his nets. Suddenly so many fish swam into the nets that the nets were in danger of breaking and the boats were in danger of sinking. It was a great miracle.

When Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch—zogreo—men. This was a rephrasing of our Lord's promise to

make Peter and the other disciples into fishers of men. You will catch men in the nets of the Gospel.

But this unusual word occurs one other time in the Bible, and it is in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 where the apostle Paul is instructing Timothy on how to go about his ministry.

And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive—zogreo—by him to do his will.

This word, which means to catch in a trap or in a net, occurs twice in the New Testament; and I don't think it's an accident. The Holy Spirit put it there to show us that we're to be diligently fishing for men, for there is another fisherman—a diabolical personage of evil—who is also trolling for men and women and boys and girls, and who wants to catch them in his nets and in his traps and in his snares.

It is urgent that we become fishers and that we do the work of evangelism. How do we do it? How can we influence others to Christ?

There are three ways.

By Attitude

First, by our attitude. First Peter 3:15 says, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is within you." In other words, there should be such a radiance and joy and hope to our lives that others will ask about it, thus opening the door for us to share the Gospel.

The wonderful Bible teacher, J. Sidlow Baxter, used to pray:

"Lord, make me winsome so that I may win some."[2]

I'll never forget how this worked out once in my own experience. After I graduated from college I worked for a time at J. C. Penney's, and my supervisor was a young man who was not a Christian. I longed to witness to him, but the right occasion didn't seem to come. So I just did my work as well as I could and sought to maintain a good attitude. One day he came to me and said, "Robert, there's something different about you. You seem to have a sense of direction and an inner hopefulness that I've never seen before." And that opened the door for me to tell him about Jesus. My wife and I had him into our home and we were able to share Christ with him on that occasion. I don't know what ever became of this young man and I cannot say that he actually became a Christian; but I believe that he has because the Lord deliberately placed me there and gave me the chance of displaying Christ.

By Action

Second, by our acts. Matthew 5:16 says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Christianity is defined in the eyes of the world by the good works that we do. I want to read something written by a scholar named Paul Maier who is a professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University. He wrote the foreword to a book entitled How Christianity Changed the World. Here's what he said:

Even knowledgeable believers will be amazed at how many of our present institutions and values reflect a Christian origin. Not only countless individual lives but civilization itself was transformed by Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, his teachings elevated brutish standards of morality, halted infanticide, enhanced human life, emancipated women, abolished slavery, inspired charities and relief organizations, created hospitals, established orphanages, and founded schools.

In medieval times, Christianity almost single-handedly kept classical culture alive through recopying manuscripts, building libraries, moderating warfare through truce days, and providing dispute arbitration. It was Christians who invented colleges and universities, dignified labor as a divine vocation, and extended the light of civilization to barbarians on the frontiers.

In the modern era, Christian teaching, properly expressed, advanced science, instilled concepts of political and social and economic freedom, fostered justice, and provided the greatest single source of inspiration for the magnificent achievements in art, architecture, music, and literature that we treasure to this present day... No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement—whatever—has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done.[3]

Now, what is true on a historical perspective is also true on a personal perspective. The most powerful kinds of witness we can bear are those good deeds and acts of kindness that communicate the love of Jesus Christ to another person. The Bible says, "They will

know we are Christians by our love.”

By Assertiveness

Third, we witness by our assertiveness. While it's essential that we witness by our attitudes and by our actions, it's sooner or later necessary for us to actually say a word for the Lord. We have to communicate the message of Christ by lip. It might be in the form of a simple sentence about Christ. It might be in a note or in a letter. It might be by inviting someone to church or to an evangelistic event. It might be through giving a Gospel presentation; but sooner or later we have to be assertive about our faith.

Now this isn't very popular in our culture today. It is no longer politically correct to share our faith with unbelievers. “How dare you do that?” say today's Christian-bashing intolerant exponents of pluralism. “How dare you think someone else should believe as you do? How dare you try to shove your religion on someone else? How dare you think you're the one who is right?”

That's the way our society views evangelism today, but I have news for you. It's always been that way. In the book of Acts, the Jewish Sanhedrin commanded those first apostles to shut up and to preach no more in the name of Christ. “Don't evangelize,” they said. “Don't tell others about your faith. Don't try to persuade someone else.” But Peter and the apostles had only two answers.

They said: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

And they also said: “We cannot possibly keep quiet. Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. But we cannot help but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20, my paraphrase)

Now, I'm seldom comfortable when I open my mouth to witness for Christ. I find that after all these years, I'm still shy and nervous about it as a rule. But I've learned that the greatest joy on this side of heaven is leading someone else to Christ.

The other day as I was preparing this message, I found a several sheets of paper in an old notebook. On it were names and addresses of people I had not thought about in many years. When I gave my life fully to Christ as a sophomore in college, I instantly developed a burden to share Christ with others. A friend of mine named Steven Cheatwood and I began going to the local mall and witnessing. I kept a record of those who made decisions for Christ, and just the other week I came across those names:

- 1-30-1972: Randy Brown (about 20), black, acceptance of Christ
- 2-4-1972: Charles Buckner (about 16), white, acceptance of Christ.
- 2-4-1972: Gerry Gyton (about 13), white, acceptance of Christ.
- 2-4-1972: Jimmy Bickly (about 15), white, acceptance of Christ.
- 2-6-1972: Kevin Weekley (about 16), white, acceptance of Christ
- 4-15-1972: Ray Landrey (solder at Fort Jackson), assurance of salvation.
- 4-15-1972: James Lee (solder at Fort Jackson, Mormon background), assurance of salvation...

I don't know what became of any of these people; I hope some of them were truly saved and have continued on to serve the Lord; but the memory of those days is very precious to me and I can say that the greatest experiences I've had as a pastor are those times when we have seen people come to Christ.

I think there are times when others are converted and we do not know about it. When we were on our trip to Israel recently a young man came to me and asked if I would baptize him in the Jordan River. I told him I would gladly do it, but I asked him when and how he had received Christ as Savior. To my surprise, he told me that he had prayed to receive Christ at our Easter Service at the Grand Ole Opry two years ago. When I had led people in offering that prayer for salvation to God, he had joined in and that had become his moment of new birth. But he had not indicated that to us, and had we not been traveling together I'm not sure I would have known this side of heaven. You never know when you say a word for the Lord how God may use that in another person's life. But there comes a time when we have to be assertive, when the love of Christ compels us.

Several years ago, someone gave me a little book entitled Jungle Harvest, written by missionary named Ruby Scott who described some of her experiences in reaching a people group known as the Tila Indians who lived in a remote village in the jungles of south Mexico, just north of the Guatemalan border. As Ruby and her colleague learned the Tila language, they translated the message of the Bible in order to give the people the Scriptures in their own tongue; and they arranged to have the Gospel recorded and duplicated on records that could be played on little wooden record players that worked by turning a crank. The Tilas were astonished at this.

One of the men who heard the message was a witch doctor named Domingo. He was in his mid-fifties and illiterate, and his face was a sea of wrinkles. When he learned about Christ, he turned from his old way of life and was wonderfully converted. He instantly became burdened for his old friends, the other witch doctors in his former village. One day he decided to take the message to them. He borrowed one of the portable record players and the records (which the Tilas called Talking Black Tortillas), and off he

went.

His former friends were happy to see him, and they talked, laughed, and reminisced about the good old days. When Domingo opened up the record player, they watched him with great curiosity and begin listening. After playing some of the Scriptures, Domingo told them that God had turned his heart around. He shared his own testimony with them and preached the Gospel to them as well as he could.

They were angry and incredulous, and they replied, "How can you, who have experienced the power and authority of a witch doctor, turn your back on the very gods who have chosen you?" They argued with him and threatened him. Domingo remained calm and kept preaching Jesus to them. Finally, his friends grabbed their machetes and ordered him to leave.

Domingo hastily closed the phonograph and slipped the records into his carrying bag. Swinging the machine onto his back, he turned sadly and started down the trail. But he was so burdened and so upset that he felt he had to make just one more try. Turning back, he began to say another word for Christ.

In great anger, one of the men raised machete and aimed it at Domingo's phonograph. Instinctively, Domingo's hand touched the machine to steady it, and the machete sliced off three fingers. Domingo hurried away, and when he was out of sight he stopped and tore a sleeve from his shirt to bandage his bleeding hand. Then he trudged wearily home.

Two days later, as Ruby Scott was dressing the stumps of his fingers, she coaxed him to tell her exactly what had happened. He told the story, then after a long pause, he looked at her and said these words: "Those poor men! God's message just didn't grab their hearts. I'll go back and tell them again."

In her book, Ruby Scott wrote that she stayed awake a long time that night, staring into the dark and thinking of Domingo's crippled hand and of his quiet words: "I'll go back and tell them again."

She thought of the times she had failed to witness to her friends, the times she had grown discouraged with her witnessing, and the times she had failed to go back and tell them again. Then she wrote, "I turned over, struggled to my knees in the cramped confines under my mosquito net, and rededicated my life to the Lord. I asked him to make me as faithful a missionary as this humble, illiterate former witch doctor."^[4]

When we think of modern-day evangelists we think of men like Billy Graham, but let me tell you about another evangelist who used a different method. It was Billy Graham's wife, Ruth. Years ago, when Mr. Graham was conducting a month long crusade in London, there was a girl named Wendy who came to the meetings. She was very heavily involved in drugs, and somehow Ruth met her and the two began talking together. One evening before the service began, Ruth said, "One day you will come to something difficult in your life. And then you will either go back on drugs or go on with Christ." A few days before the end of the crusade, Ruth was sitting in her seat at Earls Court when she was handed a note. It was from Wendy, and it simply said, "I am on drugs. Come help me." Ruth found Wendy almost unconscious by the stadium entrance. A friend explained that Wendy's best friend had died from an overdose that afternoon. Ruth searched through her pocket for something to write on and found a little box of tissue. Using the cardboard backing she wrote, "God loves me. Jesus died for me. No matter what I've done, if I confess to Him, He will forgive me." She tucked the cardboard into Wendy's pocket and asked one of the crusade staff to drive Wendy home.

A year passed, and the two women met again. Wendy had no recollection at all of asking Ruth for help and she had no idea how that note had come to be in her pocket. But she said it was the lifeline that brought her to Jesus Christ.

While her husband was preaching to thousands of people and reaching the great multitudes, Ruth was stuffing a little Gospel note into the pocket of just one person; but that note made all the difference.^[5]

It reminds me of something Lorne Sanny said in his little book on personal evangelism. "We may not be like Peter who preached one day and three thousand were added to the church. We can be like Andrew, however, who after he had been brought to the Savior, found his brother, Peter, and brought him to the Lord Jesus. Peter fished with a net, so to speak, and caught large numbers. Andrew fished with a pole and line, catching one fish at a time. We may not be called upon to preach to great multitudes or even to groups, yet we can witness effectively to individuals one by one—the pole and line method. What a privilege that can be! We, like Andrew, might lead someone to the Lord, and that one, in turn, might lead thousands."^[6]

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul,
You can tell the love of Jesus, and say He died for all.

So today that's my challenge. Or rather, that's the call of Jesus Christ on our lives. "Follow Me," He says, "and I will make you to

become fishers of men.”

[1] Lorne Sanny, *The Art of Personal Witnessing* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), p. 9.

2 E. A. Johnston, J. Sidlow Baxter: *A Heart Awake* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), p. 142.

3 Paul Maier in the foreword of *How Christianity Changed the World* by Alvin J. Schmidt (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001, 2004), pp. 8-9.

4 Ruby Scott, *Jungle Harvest*, privately published by Ruby Scott and the Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society, 1988), pp. 45-48.

5 “Wendy’s Story” by Julie Nixon Eisenhower in *Ruth Bell Graham: Celebrating an Extraordinary Life*, compiled by Stephen Griffith (Nashville: W Publishing, 2003), pp. 116-117.

6 Lorne Sanny, *The Art of Personal Witnessing* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957), pp. 8-9

Mark 3:31-35

The God-Planned Life

Next week officially begins our “Forty Days of Purpose” Campaign. We’re going to be studying the same thing together in our personal devotions, our small groups, our Sunday School classes, and in our worship services. The other day as I was reading an old book related to this subject I came across a phrase that intrigued me a great deal. It was the phrase—the **God-planned life**.

Who would you like to plan your life? You say, “Well, I want to plan my own life.” But we can’t really do that, because we don’t know what the future holds and there’s no way we can plan for all the contingences that may come our way. George Herbert said, “Life is half spent before we (even) know what it is.” In some cases and in some cultures, the parents plan out their children’s lives, sometimes even choosing their spouses. In some Communist and totalitarian nations, the government plans a person’s life and directs him or her as to where to live and into what vocation to enter.

But what if the all-good, all-loving, all-wise, wonderful God offered to plan your life for you. Well, He does. I want to show you some Scriptures today, and it would be helpful if you would turn to them in your Bibles. They all use the same phrase. It’s a phrase that occurs twenty-five times in the New Testament, and while we can’t look up all twenty-five occurrences, I want to look up a few of them, because they all drive home the same point. The common phrase in all of them is “the will of God.” Let’s begin with Mark 3:31-35

Mark 3:31-35

Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.” But He answered them, saying, “Who is My mother and My brothers?” And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.”

This seems a little strange to us at first. Why wouldn’t Jesus acknowledge His family who had come to visit Him? He was arriving at popularity, great crowds were coming, and His family members showed up to see what was happening. I remember several years ago we celebrated our 40th Anniversary at a church by throwing up a great tent and having a wonderful service. In fact, it’s one of the best services we’ve ever had, and I don’t know when I enjoyed speaking and preaching so much. We invited back the former pastors and most of them were here. We were beginning to move toward building this Celebration Center and there was a festive atmosphere. But the thing I remember most was walking out of the church that morning a few minutes before the worship service and here came my sister and my aged mother. My mother, despite her infirmities, had wanted to come and be here on that special day. And as long as I have mind and memory, I’ll remember her showing up unexpectedly and how delighted I was.

Jesus, however, didn’t feel that way when His mother and sisters and brothers showed up. He didn’t even go out to see them, and in fact He sort of snubbed them. Why? Because of what we find earlier in the chapter. Look at verse 6: Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him. So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him. For He healed many, so that as many as had affliction pressed about Him to touch Him. And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out saying, “You are the Son of God.”

Now, look down at verses 20ff: Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. But when His own people—His family, His relatives—heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, “He is out of His mind.”

His mother, brothers, and sisters had showed up because they thought He had lost His mind, and they were trying to lure Him out so they could take Him away and have him committed to a hospital for the mentally ill! Of course, they didn’t have any such hospitals in that day, but you know what I mean. They wanted to restrain Him, to take Him home, to nurse Him back to His senses. So they arrived on the scene, but they couldn’t just break through the crowd to hustle Him away. There were too many people. So they said, “Let’s get Him out here alone. Send word that we need to see Him. And then between us all, we can restrain Him and get Him somewhere so that we can help Him recover His emotional and mental health. He’s gone bonkers. He’s off His rocker. He’s gone off the deep end. He’s lost His marbles. He’s not right in the head. He doesn’t have both oars in the water.”

Jesus, however, knew exactly what He was doing, and He wasn’t about to be lured out. Instead, He said something very wonderful that has a direct meaning to you and me. He said, in effect: “I want to be your Brother. I want to be your Son. I want to be your Father. I want to be your Best Friend. I want you to be My family. I want to be in an intimate, personal, daily, family relationship with you. But there’s one thing that’s necessary. You must be committed to doing the will of God in your life.”

Luke 7:30

Now, let’s take it a little further and look at another passage in the Gospels, Luke 7:28ff. Here, Jesus was commenting on the role of John the Baptist. In verse 28, He said: But I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

Notice that awful phrase: they rejected the will of God for themselves. That’s the way Luke puts it. God has a plan for our lives, but He isn’t going to force it. He has a will for us, but it’s optional. You can reject it.

Ephesians 5:17

That brings us to Ephesians 5:17 and this is a great verse to memorize: Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. When we do the will of God, we are the brothers and mothers and sisters of Jesus. But we can also choose to reject the will of God for ourselves. Our great need, then, is to be wise and not unwise, understanding what the will of the Lord is.

In other words, there are two ways to live—wisely and foolishly. There are two kinds of people—the wise and the foolish. What’s the difference? What is the difference between a wise person and a fool? The foolish reject the will of God. The wise understand what the will of the Lord is.

That implies that the will of the Lord is understandable. We can find it for our lives if we want to. God will reveal it to us if we meet certain conditions. What are these conditions? Well, that brings us to our last passage, one that I touched on recently, but we can never refer back to these verses too often.

Romans 12:1-2

Perhaps the greatest passage in the Bible on this subject is Romans 12:1-2. As you turn there, it’s a good place for me to mention that when you read through the writings of Paul the Apostle, he was very desirous that God’s will be fulfilled in His life. Let me just quote some verses to you:

- He said to the Romans: ...that I may come to you with joy by the will of God.
- He introduced himself in 1 Corinthians 1:1: Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God.
- In 2 Corinthians 8, he said that the Christians in Macedonia had given themselves and their gifts faithfully according to the will of God.
- He told the Colossians that Epaphras was always wrestling in prayer for them that they might stand firm in all the will of God (Colossians 4:12).
- Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.
- He wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So it isn't surprising that this great apostle tells us not to be foolish, but to understand what the will of God for our lives is. You say, "Well, yes, but that's just it. How do I know the will of God? How do I discover His plan for my life?"

Well, that brings us to these two verses in Romans 12. This is the Bible's classic three-point sermon. These two verses give us three ways of finding God's will. First, we must offer our bodies as living sacrifices; then we must make a break from the world around us; and finally, we must get the Bible into our minds and be transformed by God's Word.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Let me read this two you from two paraphrases, the first being the new one called The Message:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I like that paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, but no one has ever restated this better than J. B. Phillips in his version of the New Testament. Let me read it to you:

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity.

What does God want from my life? He wants my whole life. He wants my entire life. There is not a single verse of Scripture that says you can be a Christian and then live any way that you want to. God doesn't want 10 percent of you, or 50 percent, or 85 percent, or 99 percent. He wants all there is of you.

Jesus told a story about this once in Luke 9:

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Do you see the problem with these men? Jesus said, "Follow me." But what did these men say? Look at verse 59: But Lord, let me first... Look at verse 61, But Lord, let me first.

Do you see those words: Lord, me first. That's a contradiction. You can't say, "Lord, me first!" Because if He is Lord, He is first.

He has got to be first in our lives, our bodies a living sacrifice, our lives divorced from the world, our mind renewed by the Scripture. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." This takes discipline. This takes the cross. But it leads to living a God-planned life.

Recently I read the autobiography of the great Christian composer, John W. Peterson. He grew up in church; and then at a certain point in his life, he invited Jesus to be his Savior. But as a young man, someone gave him a copy of a book about John and Betty Stam, who were missionaries to China when the Communists took over. Perhaps you know this story. The Stams were taken captive by a roving gang of Communist bandits and commanded to renounce their faith. When they refused, they were paraded through the streets, subjected to all kinds of humiliation, and finally John was forced to kneel beside a block of wood. While Betty watched helplessly, he was beheaded. And then she, too, was murdered.

The story of such dedication and sacrifice had a profound effect on John W. Peterson. He couldn't put the book down, and then he

couldn't get it out of his heart. He knew that Christ was commanding him to offer his life fully in devotion to God. Whatever it meant. Hours passed, and John struggled with the decision. Finally the last wall of his resistance crumbled, and he cried out, "Here I am, Lord. I don't know what You want of me, but even if it's China and martyrdom, I'm willing."

And that became the defining moment of his entire life. He later explained that there were three phases of his understanding of Christianity. The first was as a child, when Christianity was little more than stained glass windows, going to Sunday School, and being a good boy. The second was his conversion when he began to understand that the spiritual birth was something real, a personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ. But now, he saw that Christianity was something more. Jesus Christ was to be Lord of all there was of life, and he was to be a living sacrifice. And that understanding changed his life.

What about you? Are you at the stained glass stage? Is Christianity little more than coming to church and trying to be a good boy or girl or man or woman? Or have you had a real encounter with God through Jesus Christ? Or are you at the Lordship stage when you're beginning to understand that God wants to be the Lord of all there is of you. It's at that stage that we begin to understand and to prove the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

For the Bible says, Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lusts of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever..

Mark 4

Oh Yes, He Cares!

In one of my courses in Graduate School, we spent a solid unit talking about the importance of questions in the teaching process. Of formulating and asking the right questions. Good teachers know both how to devise good questions and how to answer them. Jesus, being the Master Teacher, often asked probing questions, and He openly welcomed His listeners to ask Him questions. Some of our most beloved Gospel passages were given as responses to questions that were posed to our Lord. But there was one time when Jesus was asked a question which He did not appreciate. And that's what I'd like to talk about this morning.

That day when evening came, He said to His disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took Him along, just as He was, in the boat. There were also other boats with Him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to His disciples, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and asked each other, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey Him!" (Mark 4:35-41).

The King James Version says, "Master, carest Thou not that we perish?" Jesus didn't appreciate that question, for it implies they were in dire distress and He was unconcerned, inattentive, indifferent, and unsympathetic. So this morning I would like to answer the question: "Does Jesus Care?" by looking at a montage of six Bible verses. We'll look at one at a time, and then at the end of the message we'll put them together. The first verse is Psalm 142:4.

Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life --Psalm 142:4

This Psalm was written by David when he was a young man, perhaps in his early 20s, and he had been reduced to living in a cave and hiding from the authorities. In verse 3 he complained that his spirit was faint, and in verse 6 he described himself as being in desperate need. In the middle of the Psalm are those words, "No One Cares," and I value their inclusion in the Bible because they tell us that even God's people can sometimes go through an experience in life that leaves them wondering if anyone cares what happens to them. We may even be tempted sometimes to ask, as the disciples did, "Master, carest Thou not?"

These three words—"No one cares"—are among the saddest words in the English language. Frank Sinatra had a hit song entitled, "When No One Cares," the words said:

When no one cares
And the phone never rings
The nights are endless things
You're like a child that cries
And no one heeds the crying
You're like a falling star that dies

And seems to go on dying

I'd like to read you a poem that was carried in a newspaper in Akron, Ohio. It was written by a troubled 14-year-old gay teenager named Robbie Kirkland.

I try to stand and walk
I fall to the hard, cold ground
It feels as if to life I'm no longer bound
The others look and laugh at my plight
Blood pours from my nose.
I am not a pretty sight
I try to stand again but fall
To the others I call
But they don't care
The pain is unbearable
The world is not fair
I'm lost and cold
I wish one would lend a hand to hold
My tears mix with my blood
The End of My Life
It nears
I'm Dying and no one cares...

(The Beacon Journal of Akron, Ohio, January 13, 1998).

Two years after writing this poem, Robbie Kirkland took his own life. It's very hard when you feel that no one else cares.

Some time ago, a Phoenix newspaper, The Arizona Republic, carried a terrible story of two other troubled teenagers in Yuma, Arizona, who fell in love but kept getting into trouble with their parents, with the law, and with drugs. Finally they hanged themselves with the same rope. They slung it over the limb of a eucalyptus tree, and used the two ends as nooses for a double suicide.

A friend later told the newspaper, "If you ask me if this was a waste... In a world like this, when no one cares, I would say they made their choice."

I wonder if someone is here today and you've thought about killing yourself because you feel that no one cares about you. I wonder if someone is here today and you're feeling exceedingly lonely or depressed because you have no one who cares for your life. Anyone here feeling like the Psalmist: "Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares..."? Well, let me show you four words in another verse, one found in Deuteronomy 11. I'm going to take them out of context just a little, but they are true and powerful:

The LORD your God cares... --Deuteronomy 11:12

In this passage, Moses is speaking to the Israelites, assuring them that God intended to take them into the Promised Land and to bless them there. Look at verse 8: "Observe therefore all the commands I am giving you today, so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, and so that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your forefathers to give to them and their descendants, a land flowing with milk and honey. The land you are entering to take over is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come where you planted your seed and irrigated it by foot as in a vegetable garden. But the land you are crossing the Jordan to take possession of is a land of mountains and valleys that drinks rain from heaven. It is a land the Lord your God cares for; the eyes of the Lord your God are continually on it from the beginning of the year to its end."

Just isolate those five words in the middle of verse 12 as they occur in the New International Version: "The Lord Your God Cares!" He cared about the land of Canaan because, of course, He cared for the people who were going to live there. He cared for their children, for their elderly, for their families, for their boys and girls, for their livestock and animals. He cares. The Lord our God cares.

This week I was reading through Luke's Gospel during my morning devotions, and I came across a wonderful little verse in chapter 7. Jesus happened through a little village called Nain just south of Nazareth. As He arrived, a funeral procession was making its way through the village. The deceased was a young man who was the only son of his mother, who was a widow. Luke 7:13 says, "When the Lord saw her, His heart went out to her and He said, "Don't cry."

What a tender, human phrase: "His heart went out to her." I looked up the cross references and found quite a few verses that

described in similar terms our Lord's response to human need.

Matthew 9:36 (Peterson) – When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke.

Matthew 14:14 (TLB) – He pitied them and healed their sick.

Matthew 20:34 - Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes.

Mark 1:41 (AB) – Being moved with pity and sympathy, Jesus reached out His hand and touched him.

Mark 10:21 – Jesus looked at him and loved him.

Matthew 15:32 (Phillips) – "My heart goes out to this crowd," He said.

Luke 19:41-42 (NCV) - He saw the city and cried for it...

John 11:33-36 - He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

Hebrews 4:15 says, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses." He does care. He cares about your life right now, where you are, what you're going through. And that leads me to the third verse I'd like to show you, hidden away in the minor prophets:

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him--Nahum 1:7

This verse links God's care to our trust in Him. He is good. He is a refuge in times of trouble. He does care for us. But we must trust Him. We must replace fear with faith and self-pity with God-focused trust.

While preparing this sermon, I was reading a great old book entitled, *None of These Diseases*, by Dr. S. I. McMillen. I hope to preach a sermon based, in part, on this book next month. In one chapter, Dr. McMillen said that while writing the book *None of These Diseases*, he received a letter that pierced his heart like an arrow. His daughter, a missionary in Zimbabwe, had been hospitalized for several weeks. A spinal tap had found an incurable yeast meningitis. Nine thousand miles from home, his only child was dying.

But as he staggered under this blow, there came a verse of Scripture that saved him from despair and reassured him of God's care for both his daughter and himself. It was from 2 Corinthians 4: For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.

He later wrote: "This promise paints a clear picture of faith. Life is a balance. On one side lies a tiny ounce of lead—today's trouble. On the other side falls an immense weight of gold—eternal glory. My current load of sorrow seemed overwhelming. But God was turning today's light trial into an immense weight of eternal glory. God—the divine Alchemist—was miraculously transforming our hearts of grieving led into hopeful gold."

God gave him peace. God reassured him of divine care. As it turned out, his daughter was able to return home, and there she experienced medical help and a remarkable healing. But for Dr. McMillen, it was one of God's greatest lessons in trusting His care in situations in which we ourselves are powerless to help.

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him.

Now, in what way does God care for us? That brings us to our next question—Ephesians 5:20.

After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church --Ephesians 5:29

In this passage, the apostle Paul is making a comparison, telling us that men should love their wives as their own bodies, for that is exactly how Jesus loves us. He loves us as if we were His own body. He feeds and cares for us.

The word "feed" is the Greek word *eiktrevfw*. The root word *trevfw* has the idea of feeding, even pampering, and nourishing up to maturity. The word for "care" is *qavlpw*, which comes from a word meaning "to warm," and it's the word the Greek-speaking people used to describe a mother bird who keeps her babies warm by covering them with her feathers. It implies tender care. Here in Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul is saying that we tend to take care of our own bodies, to feed and cherish and care for them. In the same way, husbands should care for their wives. But most of all, he is telling us that is the way that Christ cares for His church—for you and me. He nourishes us to maturity. He gathers us under His wings. He cares for us as though we were His own body.

In fact, He cares more for us than He cared for His own body. He sacrificed His body for us. He allowed it to be smitten, beaten, ripped by thorns, flayed by whips, pierced with nails, affixed to wood, drained of its vital fluids, and thrust through with a spear. That's how much He cares for you. I think we sometimes become too accustomed to that truth. This week at our Kid's Jamboree an

eleven-year-old girl came forward at the invitation. She came forward two nights in a row, and on the second night I spoke with her. Her chin was quivering and tears were in her eyes. When I asked her why she had come, she said, "I never knew that someone had ever done anything like that for me," and she was referring to the message of the cross.

Jesus cares for us more than He cared for His own body. What then must we do? How can we appropriate God's care in any given situation? How can we take advantage of His loving heart? Well, look at 1 Peter 5.

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you --1 Peter 5:6-7

I love the way this is put in the Amplified Bible: Casting the whole of your care—all your anxieties, all your worries, all your concerns, once and for all—on Him; for He cares for you affectionately, and cares about you watchfully.

The Bible says here that we must humble ourselves. We can't deal with our problems alone. How often we must step aside and let God's mighty hand take over. He can lift us out of the miry clay. He can set our feet on a rock to stay. He can put a new song in our soul today. Humble yourself under God's mighty hand that He may lift you up in due season, and cast all your care on Him, because He cares for you.

Frank Graeff was a Methodist minister in and around Philadelphia who was known for his optimism and sunny disposition. In fact, he was called the "Sunshine Minister." But he once encountered such a difficult trial that he lapsed into a severe despondency. In his depression he began to wonder if God really cared for him. But in the middle of his painful circumstances, he rediscovered 1 Peter 5:7 and after meditating on this verse, he broke through to victory. It was out of this experience that he wrote the words of that well-known hymn...

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth and song;
As the burdens press, and the cares distress,
And the way grows weary and long?

Oh yes, He cares—I know He cares!
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.

Now, this wonderful verse has a predecessor, an Old Testament counterpart. And that is the last of our six verses for this morning. Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall --Psalm 55:22

The word "cast" in the English language is a fairly vigorous word. It means to throw or to fling. It means we must vigorously commit our burdens to God in prayer and then to trust Him to do what we cannot do. We must rest in His care.

Someone sent me a book recently containing the most astounding pictures I've ever seen. They are from the Hubble Space Telescope and they are pictures of the stars and galaxies and planets and nebula such as no generation of humanity has ever been able to see before. As I've look at those pictures I've thought to myself, "The God who created the endless, mind-boggling cosmos is the one who cares for me. The Psalmist made the same point in Psalm 147: He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.

He counts the stars and He comforts the saints. That's our Jesus. So let's put all these verses together and begin to live in the reality of them starting now:

Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me.

I have no refuge; no one cares for my life
The LORD your God cares...
The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in Him

After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you

Cast your cares on the LORD and He will sustain you;
He will never let the righteous fall.

Mark 6:41

Mastering Life Before It's Too Late

Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. Mark 6:31

In Mark 6, Jesus sent out His twelve disciples on a series of ministry tours. Verse 7 says, "Calling the Twelve to Him, He began to send them out two by two..." Verse 12 says, "They went out and preached that people should repent." Then they received some terrible news. In Mk 6:14-26, they learned that John the Baptist had been executed by Herod the Great. In spite of this traumatic report, Jesus and His disciples kept going and kept ministering. Verse 31 says, "Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them...."

They were hungry, tired, worried, and overwhelmed by work and needy people. So Jesus gave us Mk 6:31, saying some words that are just as applicable to us today as they were to those original Twelve: Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

Notice the word "Come." Jesus used that word over and over in His ministry. Often He said, "Come to Me." But here He said, "Come with Me." In other words, Jesus was tired too, and He intended to get away for some rest. He often did that. This time, He was inviting them to come with Him. A lot of people leave Jesus behind when they take breaks. They leave Jesus behind when they go on vacation. But there's no true rest unless there's a spiritual element to it.

Come with Me by yourselves. Leave the crowds behind. In today's terms, He might have said, "Turn off your phones and emails and Facebook pages."

And where did He want to take them? Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place. They didn't need to be in a loud place. They didn't need to be in a busy place. They needed green pastures and still waters. They needed solitude. They needed peace and quiet.

And what did Jesus want them to do in this quiet place by themselves and with Him? Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. I have those last three words underlined in my Bible as a reminder. They are red-letter words in the Gospels, words spoken by Jesus Himself. He said: "Get some rest!" And how does the Bible define "rest"? Well, that's what I'd like to share with you this morning.

Review

There was a report in the news recently about a subway train in New York City that veered onto the wrong tracks. It happened on the A Line when the train operator pulled onto the wrong tracks as he left the Canal Street Station. He headed uptown on the downtown rails. The dispatcher saw what was happening and frantically tried to radio the train but the crew later said they never heard the emergency broadcasts. The driver continued for several stops unaware of his mistake until he saw the headlights of a southbound train coming toward him. Both trains managed to stop in time or it could have been a disaster. Interestingly, the passengers had no idea they were on the wrong tracks or that their lives were in danger. They sat there napping or reading their newspapers or listening to their earphones, oblivious to the potentially fatal mistake.

Our current series of sermons is entitled "Mastering Life Before It's Too Late." But we could have called it "How to Get Your Life on the Right Track." I believe God has a specific strategy for your life and for mine. He saw us before we were born and scheduled each day of our lives before we began to breathe. Every day was recorded in His book. So how do we get ourselves on the tracks God has laid for us?

There are ten principles I want to share with you in these weeks.

The first one involves committing yourself to Jesus Christ and to doing His will. Remember the Jim Elliot quote? "He is no fool who gives what He cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Success is doing the will of God in one-day increments and with the right attitudes.

The second strategy is redeeming the time. When we give ourselves unreservedly to the Lord Jesus, we realize that every day is an opportunity to serve Him. God has proportioned us a limited number of days. It's easy to lose them but vital to use them.

The third strategy is get our lives organized. God is not disorganized so why should we be?

The fourth strategy, which we looked at last week, is getting the day started off right, preferably by spending some time every

morning with Him in prayer and in Bible study and in planning out our day. When we begin the day with a plan that we've formulated in His presence, it helps us make sense of the unfolding hours and navigate through the morning, afternoon, and evening with greater productivity.

Now, if we stopped this sermon series at this point, there's a danger we could become workaholics. So far I've taken a fairly aggressive approach to mastering life. I've said we should be committed to action, take advantage of every moment, keep ourselves organized, and plan out each day. Without our next step, that could lead to an exhausting life.

And many people today are exhausted. Many of you are tired. Some of you are battling physical fatigue. Some are battling mental and emotional exhaustion. Doctors report that many patients begin their conversations with, "Doctor, why am I so tired all the time?"

For many years I tried my best to practice strategies 1, 2, 3, and 4, but I didn't do very well with strategy 5, which I want to share today. I lived in a state of ongoing fatigue. Looking back, I can see the signs of it. I would complain of being tired all the time. I would fall asleep during my devotions. I would nod off while driving. I was often cross and irritable. But I didn't really realize I had a problem in this area until one day as I sat at a little table with my Bible and a copy of the book *Walden Pond*. Suddenly it was as clear as day that I needed to make some changes in my life.

That day I begin to learn something that Mrs. Charles M. Cowman wrote in her devotional classic, *Springs in the Valley*: "Many are slowly succumbing to the strain of life because they have forgotten how to rest.... Rest is not a sedative for the sick, but a tonic for the strong.... It saves us from becoming slaves even of good works."¹

So I want to balance out our first four strategies with a fifth one, which I call: Pull Off at Rest Stops. I want to use the word REST as an acronym for the message today.

The "R" Stands for Refresh

The word "refresh" — I want to take you on a little tour of this word in the Bible.

- In Genesis 18, Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the hottest part of the day, and he looked up and saw three men standing nearby. He hurried to meet them and he said in verses 4-5: Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way. Abraham understood that people traveling during the hottest time of the day needed to pull off at rest stops. They needed some water and food and rest in the shade.
- In Exodus 23, the Lord gave some commandments about the Sabbath day, one day in seven, which was to be set aside as a day of rest. Ex 23:12 says: Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed. It's important to build periods of time into our weekly schedule in which our strength and our spirits can be replenished.
- In 2 Samuel 16, we have the story of King David being chased out of his capital city of Jerusalem because of a rebellion led by Prince Absalom. Verse 14 says, The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted, and there he refreshed himself. Sometimes we can't avoid growing exhausted, but it's dangerous to stay that way. Sometimes even in the middle of a crisis such as David faced, we have to pull off at rest stops to replenish our inner resources.
- One of the ways we replenish our inner resources is with Scripture, which brings me to the next verse — Psalm 19:7: The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul.
- In the New International Version I'm using for this message, the next time this word occurs is in the Twenty-third Psalm: He makes me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside quiet waters, He refreshes my soul.
- Proverbs 11:25 says: A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.
- In Jeremiah 31:25 the Lord said, I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.
- On the day of Pentecost in Acts 3, Peter said, Repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.
- The apostle Paul said of his friends in 1 Corinthians 16:18: For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.
- He told Philemon: You, brother, have refreshed the hearts of God's people.

God made us to need constant replenishing. He did not make us to be perpetual motion machines. He could have done that, but He didn't. I don't know what it's going to be like in eternity, but here on this earth there is a continual cycle between expenditure and intake. We expend energy, we become drained, we pull off at a rest stop, we refuel, we're replenished, then we can work some more. That's the cycle of productivity, of life; and it's terribly important to keep the right balance between work and rest. We have to learn to replenish our resources and be periodically refreshed. This is the cycle God established at the Creation when He worked for six days and then rested on the seventh. He Himself didn't need to be replenished, of course, but He was establishing a pattern for us. If you are not refreshing and replenishing your energy through adequate rest, you'll eventually suffer some kind of breakdown.

The "E" Stands for Enjoy

The "E" stand for enjoy. This is another great biblical word. Here I want to

give you just one verse – 1 Timothy 6:17: Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

God doesn't want us to be working so hard all the time that we can't enjoy the world He has made or the blessings He has given. A part of the concept of rest and resting is that of enjoying God's creation and His blessing.

I've been reading a book by Christian journalist Tim Stafford on the subject of miracles, and I found the book reasonably interesting in the first chapters, but I really begin to resonate with what Stafford was writing when I came to chapter 4. He talked about the difficulty of defining the word "miracle." What is a miracle? Is the birth of a baby a miracle? Is a sunrise a miracle? Is a rosebud a miracle? Well, no, not exactly because those things happen all the time. If everything is a miracle than nothing is a miracle. And yet, in a sense, they are. Stafford wrote:

I sympathize with the sentiment behind calling everything a miracle. Each sunrise and every baby's birth is astonishing and beautiful, a sign of God, and if they happened once in a generation, we would drop everything and stare at them in sheer amazement. If no one had ever seen a sunrise, and then one morning you did, it would strike you speechless. As is, sunrises, while very beautiful, are so common that very few of us get out of bed to witness them...

Stafford goes on to say:

Everything is natural and supernatural at the same time. In fact, the non-miracles that God does every day should astonish us. The nuclear fusion of the sun? The ponderous and unstoppable movement of the earth's crust? The electrical flashes of a human brain? Those happen constantly, but they are nevertheless amazing. The ordinary really is extraordinary. The ordinary is full of God's supernatural glory.²

If we're working so hard and keeping ourselves so tired and so busy that we can't stop to smell the roses, than we've not learned the meaning of biblical rest. Rest is that time when we refresh and replenish our resources and when we pause to enjoy life and the blessing of God and the wonders of His creation.

The "S" Stands for Sleep

The "S" stands for sleep. The Bible has a lot to say on this subject. For some reason – I don't know why – the Lord created human beings with an inborn need to spend approximately 33 percent of their time or one-third of their lives in an altered state of consciousness, which we call sleep. If you live to be 60, you'll have spent two decades sleeping. If you live to be 90, you'll have spent three decades sleeping. Thirty years! If you went to sleep right now and didn't wake up for thirty years, you'd wake up in the year 2045. That's how much of our lives we spend horizontal.

But we're living in a world that never sleeps, and so our temptation is get along on less sleep than we should. But even on this subject the Lord has something to say:

Psalm 127 says: Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat – for He grants sleep to those He loves.

I want to give you this same verse from a couple of other translations:

- The Living Bible says: It is senseless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, fearing you will starve to death; for God wants His loved ones to get their proper rest.
- Peterson's paraphrase says: It's useless to rise early and go to bed late, and work your worried fingers to the bone. Don't you know He enjoys giving rest to those He loves?

When Elijah had his breakdown in the Old Testament, the prescription was sleep. Without sleep, our health breaks down and we become grumpy and irritable. Without sleep we don't function clearly. Even the Lord Jesus needed periodic sleep so much that on one occasion He slept through a storm on a boat in the middle of a churning lake. Psalm 4 says: In peace I will lie down and sleep, for You alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

R, for refreshment;

E, for enjoyment;

S, for sleep; and

T, for Trust.

The "T" Stands for Trust

In the Bible, resting isn't just something that happens to our bodies; it's something that happens to our souls. And we rest inwardly by trusting the Lord with our burdens and with our business.

- Exodus 33:14 says: My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.
- Psalm 37 says: Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him... Do not fret—it only causes harm (verses 7-8, NKJV).
- Psalm 62:1 says: My soul finds rest in God alone.
- Isaiah 30:15 says: In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength.
- Jeremiah 6:16 says: Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.
- Jesus said, Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28, NKJV).

When we try to bear the load of life ourselves, bearing our burdens, we'll exhaust ourselves at the first bend in the road. When we learn to cast our cares on the Lord and trust Him, we can tap into His strength and rest in Him.

Years ago, I met a man named Ed Dobson and had coffee with him. He was the pastor of a large church in Grand Rapids, and at the very pinnacle of his ministry he was diagnosed with ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease. Not long after his diagnosis while he was still relatively independent and ambulatory, he came to Nashville and we arranged to meet in a coffee shop. I walked in and there he was at a table with his Bible spread out, and his legal pad, and his Greek New Testament and his Hebrew copy of the Scripture. He was just pouring himself into the Word. He told me that one passage of Scripture had met more to him than any other passage. It was Hebrews 13:5: "God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.'"³

Well, this week I've been reading a book Dr. Dobson published a couple of years ago. His disease has progressed since I met with him that day, and his life is significantly altered. But that is still the passage he advocates. In his book, Prayers & Promises When Facing a Life-Threatening Illness, Dr. Dobson wrote, "Hebrews 13:5-6 has helped me in my struggle with ALS more than any other passage in the entire Bible." He went on to say

that soon after his diagnosis, he learned to take five-minute time-outs. "Whenever fear would begin taking over my life, I would take a time-out and repeat the verses from Hebrews 13... I would say these words over and over for the entire five minutes."⁴

Notice this passage in Hebrews 13. It's a quotation that is found three times in the Old Testament – twice in Deuteronomy 31 and once in Joshua 1. It was a promise to the ancient Israelites and to Joshua, but according to the writer of Hebrews we can claim it for ourselves. Hebrews 13:5-6 say:

God has said,
"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."
So we say with confidence,
"The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid."

Notice these two phrases: God has said... So we say...

Because God has said something, we can say something. God has spoken, and what He has said causes us to respond in a certain way—God has said... So we say with confidence.

What has God said? He has said: Never... Never... This is a very emphatic promise. It is not a double negative; it is a double never.

Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. So we say with confidence, The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

This is the passage that Dr. Ed Dobson has repeated over and over, and it has given rest to his soul. It's not the only passage that has helped him, of course. In the book I'm reading he lists 30 other verses that have been extraordinarily helpful to him. But this is the one he says has helped him the most, and so he takes five-minute breaks to meditate on it.

Conclusion

Refreshment, enjoyment, sleep, and trust. That's the biblical definition of rest. And that brings us to the end of today's message. I want to conclude with a handful of practical takeaways. If you're tired and drained and worn out, if you're not getting the rest you need, if you're suffering from prolonged exhaustion, I don't believe that represents the on-going will of God for your life. You need to take heed to yourself and figure out how to make some changes.

- Take some of these Bible verses to heart. Take them seriously as patterns to be obeyed and implanted in your life. Jesus said: Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. The Psalmist said: It is senseless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, fearing you will starve to death; for God wants His loved ones to get their proper rest. Take that seriously and figure out some ways to implement it.
- Second, slow down enough to look at sunrises and sunsets and enjoy life. God has given you all things richly to enjoy. Cultivate the sense of wonder.
- Third, figure out how to take breaks. You need periodic little breaks during the day, like the five-minute time-outs practiced by Ed Dobson. You need one day in seven as a day of rest. You need periodic getaways. You need a real vacation every year, designed for rest. Building these things into your routines is an aspect of mastering life before it's too late.
- Fourth, go to bed a little earlier at night. It's not going to hurt your television or computer or phone to turn it off a half-hour earlier. It's not going to hurt you to do that, either.

For God has said,
Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.
So we say with confidence,
The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.

Come apart by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.

Endnotes

- 1 Mrs. Charles E. Cowman in *Springs in the Valley* (Los Angeles: Cowman Publications, Inc., 1939), 218.
- 2 Tim Stafford, *Miracles* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2012), 60.
- 3 Personal interview with Dr. Ed Dobson.
- 4 Ed Dobson, *Prayers & Promises* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 29.

Mark 10:6-8

Our Scripture reading today is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, and the words I want to read are written in red letters in my Bible, which means they were spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, as He quoted them from the Old Testament, and as He affirmed them and commented on them. Here is Mark 10:6-8:

But at the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. So they are no longer two, but one flesh.

My message today is on the subject: Sex—The Bible's One Rule. And that one rule, which Jesus references here and which is consistently articulated from Genesis to Revelation is this: Sex is a God-given blessing to be practiced and enjoyed exclusively within a marital union of one man and one woman. That is the essence of biblical teaching, and that is the unwavering teaching of Scripture, as I want to demonstrate today. Wherever you turn in the Bible, you'll find this as a consistent moral baseline established by God at the Creation.

The biblical teachings on this subject are so strong and consistent and recurring in the Bible that they have formed the basis of sexual morality in the Judeo-Christian world for the last 4000 years, and in the biblical world for even longer. But in the last two or three years, we've arrived at a cultural tipping point. All at once, it seems, people who hold the position I've just stated the position that has undergirded our society for millennia—have become the most vilified, hated, bigoted, bullied, disparaged, maligned, marginalized people who walk the earth.

Those holding to the biblical view of sex and marriage are being fired from their jobs and removed from their positions. Their television shows are cancelled. Their products are boycotted. Their professorships are revoked. Their applications are being denied. Some are facing lawsuits and the infringement of their liberties. All of us who hold this view are now accused of speaking with hatred in our hearts. This is the major battleground between church and state, and between Christians and a secular society. But that's not why I want to speak on this subject today.

The reason I've been thinking about this issue is because I am so very burdened for the well-being and integrity of our children and our young people and our young adults. We're ministering in a society that doesn't want to hear what the Bible says, and that attitude is even seeping into church life everywhere. We are surrounded by a culture that is so sexually permissive and promiscuous that even among church-going people there is a decreasing concept of biblical morality.

Earlier this year, The Christian Post reported on a study that said, "A majority of single Christians are rejecting biblical doctrine by choosing to have sex before they are married." It reported on a survey sponsored by the dating service Christian Mingle, which found:

- Sixty-one percent of self-identified Christian singles said they are willing to have casual sex without being in love.
- Twenty-three percent of self-identified Christian singles said they were willing to have premarital sex if they felt they were in love the other person.
- Only eleven percent said they are willing to wait to have sex until they are married.¹

I'm not sure that was a reliable survey. The Pew Foundation did a similar study that showed somewhat more conservative results; but other studies have reflected the statistics I've just given. There's no doubt that this is a challenging issue for Christians and for churches and for families today. So today I want to look at several aspects of this in the Bible.

1. Sex: God's Great Purposes

First, God's purposes for sex are great. He invented sex for several reasons, including pleasure. But another purpose is reproduction; and one of the main reasons sex is such a powerful force is because it's the divinely-given driving impulse for the reproduction and replenishing of the race. Look at Genesis 1:27-28: So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it."

It's truly remarkable how God designed this aspect of the Creation. If it were not for the miracle of the reproductive drive God built into the world, every living thing would become extinct within one generation. But even plants and insects have a drive to reproduce. Trees and berries and vegetables have a drive to reproduce. Every species of animals has a drive to reproduce. God created a reproductive force within the living Creation, and that's why one generation follows another. That's what makes the sexual drive so powerful. The very survival of all the living systems on earth depends on it.

2. Sex: God's Great Plan

Second, God's plans for sex are great. He planned for this powerful energy to be exercised and enjoyed within the parameters of a biblically-defined marriage. Genesis 2:24: This is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

3. Sex: God's Great Precautions

Third, God's precautions about sex are great. Because the power and force and urge of reproduction and sexuality are so tremendous and strong and viral – we use the terms potent and potency to describe it – God's precautions are very great. God repeatedly tells us that sex within marriage is vital and vitally important; and that sex outside of marriage is damaging to us in every way.

- This is stated very succinctly in the Ten Commandments. Exodus 20:14 says: You shall not commit adultery. How does one define adultery? It is whatever violates the pattern of sex and marriage, which God established in Genesis 1 and 2, and which Jesus quoted in the words I read from Mark 10.

- The book of Proverbs gives us many warnings and metaphors and examples of the importance of this command. For example, Proverbs 5:15-18 says: Drink water from your own cistern, running water from your own well. Should your springs overflow in the streets, your streams of water in the public squares? Let them be yours alone, never to be shared with strangers. May your fountain be blessed, and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.

- Jeremiah 23:10-14 warns about how easily both people and preachers can fall into this sin: The land is full of adulterers; because of the curse the land lies parched and the pastures in the wilderness are withered... Among the prophets of Jerusalem I have seen something horrible: They commit adultery and live a lie... they are like Sodom to me; the people of Jerusalem are like Gomorrah.

- Jesus talked about the sanctity of marriage and sex, and about what happens to a society that disregards God's law. I think one of the most interesting verses is Matthew 24:37, which is in our Lord's Sermon about His Second coming. He said, As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. In other words, in the Last Days, world morality is going to deteriorate to the conditions before the flood.

There's a fascinating new book out entitled *As It Was in the Days of Noah*. It's by a Jeff Kinley. I want to read you an excerpt from this book:

Back in the Garden of Eden, God commanded Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." This was one mandate they and their offspring would have no problem obeying. Sex was good, and procreation was plentiful. In our world of perversion and pornography, we may forget it was God who thought up the idea of sex.... Sex is a beautiful gift straight from the heart of God. He created it. It's His invention. He gets the credit. He also designed our bodies, minds, and emotions to actually enjoy the experience, even becoming exhilarated by it... (But by the days of Noah) the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that (according to Genesis 6:5) every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually... Perhaps no other area of desire (outside of breathing and living) is so powerful and intoxicating as sex... It is a good thing from God. However, sexual appetite is also a natural narcotic, and when laced with evil, it becomes a potent and deadly drug... in a world without any moral compass or restraint. Jeff Kinley went on to say:

Think of what our present world would be like if there were zero restrictions whatsoever on sexuality. If you want it, you go for it. If you desire it, do it. No one can tell you no. What would life be like in such a world? What would sex and sexuality look like if mankind's worst and most vile imaginations were permitted, even encouraged? Now imagine no moral conscience issues, no marital boundaries, no age restrictions. You get the picture. Noah's earth was one giant orgy... Every thought. Only evil. Continually.²

I'm not sure we're there yet, but the foundations are collapsing more quickly than I had expected. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be at the coming of the Son of Man. Going on to the epistles and letters, in which the apostles instructed Christians as to how to live, we find this subject is mentioned again and again.

- 1 Corinthians 6:18 says: Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against his own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies.

- Let's go on to the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 7. Look at verse 2: Since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband... Do not deprive each other... Sexual relations are reserved for marriage, but they are to be enjoyed within marriage; and this instruction is just as vital as the commandment against adultery. When a couple is not living in obedience to this passage, bad things happen. Married couples must have a healthy relationship in this area.

- Galatians 5:16-24 says: The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love...

- Ephesians 5:3 is one of the most powerful and succinct verses on this subject: But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.

- 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5: As for other matters, brothers and sisters, we instructed you how to live in order to

please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more. For you know the instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God.

- Hebrews 13:4: Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.

4. Sex: God's Great Pardon

Now maybe you're hearing these verses and a sense of defeat and discouragement has come over you. Perhaps you've been guilty of some of these things. Well, without minimizing the nature of these sins, I also want to say that God's pardon is every great. The Lord knows these are strong temptations and virulent sins, and if we come to Him in true confession and repentance, the Bible says He will abundantly pardon. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). But true repentance means we're willing to make some changes in the way we live as God helps us to do so. That leads to my last point, God's great provisions.

5. Sex: God's Great Provisions

The Bible teaches, "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful. He will not 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" (1 Corinthians 10:13). How do we find that way of escape? I want to end with four words that can serve you strategically: Magnify, Modify, Minimize, and Memorize.

First, magnify Christ in every area of life. Acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord of your life in this and in every other area. I want to give you a good verse for times like these—Joshua 24:15. At the end of the book of Joshua, the old leader of Israel, Joshua, gave his farewell address to the people. He knew that many of them would succumb to false gods. Joshua 24:15 says: If serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.

We cannot control what a secular society does, but we can reserve our right to serve God and live biblically. The Bible says that in all things Christ must have the preeminence. The Bible tells us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. And when He becomes our Lord, His Lordship extends to the areas of our sexuality and morality.

Second, modify your behavior. Quickly but carefully make whatever changes you need to make to bring these areas of life under the control of the Lord. You may have to break off a relationship. You may have to have a long talk with someone. You may have to find an accountability partner. You may need some further counseling.

When this area of life becomes more pure and holy, it brings greater healing and health into every other area. So don't be afraid to quickly but carefully make some real changes to the way you are living. If you are immorally involved with someone right now, you and Jesus Christ should have a talk with that other person. Say, "This isn't easy. Let's back up. Let's start over. Let's end it"—whatever you need to say. You can say, "I don't understand everything about it, but God created my body and it belongs to Him and He invented sex; and I know with all my heart we need to follow His instructions. He loves us, and He died for us that we might live for Him. In all things He might must the preeminence." If you're having an affair, break it off—not tomorrow but today and seek Christian counseling as you work through it.

Third, minimize your exposure to temptation. One way of doing that is by establishing a personal code of ethics. You can't wait until you're caught in the throes of temptation. You have to prepare for it in advance and seek to avoid it whenever possible. The great biblical example of this is the patriarch Joseph. He didn't come from a family known for its sexual purity. His family was known for its polygamy and immorality. And yet somehow Joseph established a personal code of ethics that made him different from his brothers and that enabled him to resist and refuse temptation when it came. Genesis 39 is a classic biblical text on sexual purity. It says: Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused.... He told her... "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her.

In 1948, Billy Graham conducted an evangelistic campaign in Modesto, California, which was the hometown of his associate, Cliff Barrows. In those days, traveling evangelists had a bad reputation. Some were considered womanizers. Some were caught up in financial scandals. The Graham team talked about these things, and one day during the Modesto meetings, Billy called the team together to discuss these issues. Billy asked them to spend an hour listing all the problems that evangelism and evangelists were

encountering. When the men reassembled, all their lists were very similar, and in a short amount of time these men had made a series of resolutions or commitments among themselves that served as the basis for all their future work.

One of the areas had to do with purity and the avoidance of sexual immorality. They all knew of evangelists who had fallen into immorality while separated from their families by travel. They pledged among themselves to take extreme care to avoid any situation that would have even a passing appearance of compromise or suspicion.

This covenant or agreement they made with God and each other became known as the Modesto Manifesto. From that day, Billy Graham has never traveled alone or allowed himself to be in a situation where he could be tempted or accused of anything scandalous. He never met or shared a meal with any woman except his wife. When I worked with the Billy Graham team for awhile in the 1970s, I learned the even when Billy checked into a hotel, other people would enter the room first to make sure no woman was waiting there to try to trap him in any way. He took extreme precautions to avoid any situation that would bring reproach to the kingdom of God or the work of evangelism. His example served as a model for me when I began my ministry, and I've lived under the same rules.

The point is—we have to establish our moral code in advance. We have to build the fences, draw the lines, and make the determinations in advance. We all need a personal manifesto. You have to determine in advance what lines you're never going to cross, regardless of the temptation—just like Joseph.

Fourth, memorize the Scripture. I've quoted a great number of Bible verses today. You can go back through them and memorize some of them. When you find yourself being tempted, quote them. Quote them aloud. Quote them all night long if you have to. The power of God's Word is stronger than any other force in the world.

Magnify... Modify... Minimize... and Memorize. This is no time to capitulate; this is no time to quit. This is the time to say: As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Endnotes

1 "Christian Dating Culture: Majority of Single Christians Reject Idea of Waiting Until Marriage to Have Sex" written by Morgan Lee in The Christian Post, February

2 Jeff Kinley, *As in the Days of Noah* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2014), excerpts from chapter 1.

Mark 10:17

One Thing I Lack

We've begun a series of Sunday morning messages entitled "Ultimate Priorities." The word priority is a noun that goes back to the 14th century, meaning the quality or state of being prior. Prior-ity. The word prior means before. If I brush my teeth prior to coming to church, then it means that I brushed my teeth before I got here. So when we talk about priorities, we're talking about those things that come first in our lives, before everything else.

When we talk about "Ultimate Priorities" we're talking about the most crucial and critical priorities of our lives, and the Bible uses a little phrase to describe those. It is the phrase: "One Thing."

Last week, we saw in Psalm 27, how King David said: "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the day so of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple."

Now today we have another occurrence of that phrase coming from the lips of Jesus Himself in Mark 10. We usually call this passage the story of the "rich, young ruler." This is a very familiar story, partly because it is recorded for us in three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's given most vividly in Mark's Gospel (and I think there's a reason for that, as we'll see), so will you turn and read with me, beginning at Mark 10:17.

Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother."

And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth."

Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”

But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.”

Then Peter began to say to Him, “See, we have left all and followed You.” So Jesus answered and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My sake and the Gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

The Story

Verse one of this chapter gives us the setting: Then He arose from there (Galilee), and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. His Galilean ministry was now completed, and Jesus was en route to Jerusalem for the last time. He did not take a direct route, but He took an Eastern route that had Him crossing the Jordan River and traveling south in what we call today the East Bank of the Jordan River, or the nation of Jordan. In Bible times, it was called Perea. Jesus ended up where He had begun His ministry, in the desert areas of John the Baptist, where He was baptized, and where He was first introduced as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” From here, He would cross the Jordan into Judea and press on to Jerusalem via Jericho, Bethany, and Bethpage.

So Jesus had spent the night somewhere in this region, and the next morning as He was going out to get on the westbound road, a young man came running. Mark is the only one of the three Gospel writers who tells us that he came running. But here was a young man who didn’t want to miss Jesus. Perhaps he had tossed and turned all night, wondering if he should approach this controversial preacher with his question, and at the last minute he decided, “Why not?” And he darted out the door before he could change his mind, running up to Jesus and stopping the Savior in His tracks.

And then he fell at the Master’s feet. He knelt down. “Good teacher,” he said. He’s the only person in the Bible who ever addressed Jesus like that. It was unusual. Perhaps there was just a touch of flattery here, we don’t know. But the young man certainly knew how to ask the right question: “Good teacher,” he said, “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” If you could personally ask Jesus Christ anything—any one question—what would it be? This is the best question of all. This was a very smart young man. He reminds us of the jailer in Philippi who asked Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved? How can I know I’m going to heaven? How can I be sure of life beyond the grave? How can I know for sure that I have everlasting life?”

Now if someone came running to me, fell down on his knees in great sincerity, and asked me that question, I’d immediately say, “What a great question. Let me show you how to be saved. Let me lead you to accept Christ as your personal Savior.” But Jesus was more cautious. He almost rebuked the young man. “Why do you call me good?” Jesus asked. “No one is good but One, that is, God.”

Now, this is a very confusing statement of our Lord. We know that Jesus was, in fact, good. We know that Jesus was, in fact, God. We know that He wants us to acknowledge Him as both good and God. So why did He seem to deflect the young man’s compliment. Some people say, “Well, look at this: Jesus here was saying that He wasn’t really good and that He wasn’t really God.”

But we must read this more carefully. Jesus did not deny that He is good, and He did not deny that He is God. He just asked the young man if he really understood the implication of what he was saying.

This young man had blurted out, “Good Teacher,” and no one had ever called Jesus that name before. So Jesus replied, in effect, “That’s an odd thing to say. Why did you say that? Don’t you realize that only God is good and that in calling me good you are really calling me God? Are you willing to live with the implications of that? Are you willing to obey Me in what I’m about to tell you?”

Then I'll tell you what to do. If you want to go to heaven and have eternal life, the simplest way is to never sin. Keep all the commandments. If you never sin, there is nothing separating you from God, and thereby from eternal life. All you have to do to go to heaven is to be perfect."

And to our astonishment, the young man said, "I am perfect. I have kept all the commandments." He was thinking merely of the outward observance of Jewish religious obligations.

Now, our Lord has a curious reaction to this. If I would have been Jesus, I would have said, "You may have lived an outwardly upright life, but you haven't kept the law of God in your heart. You aren't perfect. You have sinned." But Mark tells us—and he is the only Gospel writer who tell us this—that Jesus at that moment looked into the young man's eyes and loved him.

Well, then," said Jesus, "Let's see about it. If you really love your God and your fellow man that much, if you are so perfect and so upright, then give away all your possessions to those who need them more than you do, take up your cross, and come, follow Me. Let Me be the only valuable thing you have in life. Let me be your Lord and Master."

And at that, a cloud fell over the young man's face. The Greek word that Mark used here, when he said that the young man went away sorrowful, was a word the people of that time used for the weather, to describe a gloomy, overcast day. He went away with a gloomy, overcast feeling engulfing him, because he had great possessions and he wasn't willing to leave all to follow Christ.

The Problem

Now, what was the problem with this young man? It wasn't his wealth. I don't think that this passage universally and completely is commanding us to liquidate all our assets and live a life of poverty. There were well-to-do godly people in the Bible such as Job, Abraham, King David, and Barnabas. Now, there are particular temptations that come with money, and Jesus goes on in this passage to address those temptations very strongly. But the real problem wasn't the young man's wealth.

Nor was it his youthfulness. Mark doesn't tell us that this man was young, but Matthew does. In my mind, I picture him in his early twenties, but we don't really know. He could have been a teenager, or he could have been in his mid-twenties—anywhere from age 15 to age 25 or 30, I would say. But his youth (his inexperience and immaturity) wasn't the problem here. As I researched for the book I've written on the history of our English hymns, I was amazed at the number of hymns that were written by teenagers and young people.

For example, one of the deepest and most profound and most beautiful of our hymns is one—a prayer—that says:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I love Thee because Thou has first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree.
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I'll love Thee in life, I will love Thee in death,
And praise Thee as long as Thou lendest me breath;
And say when the death dew lies cold on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

Would you believe that that hymn was written by a sixteen-year-old? William Featherstone wrote this hymn as a Canadian teenager to celebrate his conversion to Christ and he sent it to an aunt living in California. God has greatly used men and women and boys and girls of every age, and some of the greatest things He has done on this earth He has done through teenagers. The problem here wasn't the man's youth.

Nor was it his rank. We aren't sure what Luke meant by telling us he was a ruler. Mark doesn't mention that he was a ruler, nor does Matthew. It is Luke who described him as a certain "ruler," and the word Luke used was *ρχων* (*archōn*), which meant someone in some level of authority. It may mean nothing more than that this young man was from a wealthy, aristocratic family. Perhaps he was helping oversee some aspect of the family business. There was nothing wrong with that.

Nor was the problem his sincerity. This young man came running to Jesus, kneeling before Him, asking Him questions about eternal matters. He seemed to be utterly sincere.

What, then, was the problem?

This young man had a reading problem.

It's as simple as that. He didn't know how to read.

First, he misread the times. A key to understanding this story is to realize when it occurred. This story didn't happen in the early days of our Lord's ministry. It didn't happen alongside the Sea of Galilee during those early, refreshing years of rural, northern ministry. Jesus was making His final approach to Jerusalem, and the shadow of the Cross was falling very heavily over His pathway. This event occurred late in His ministry, just as He was leaving for Jericho, Bethany, Bethpage, and Jerusalem. This happened just days before Calvary.

Those who were serious about following Christ were about to be torn inside out. The next few weeks were going to be filled with testing and terror and tragedy. Satan was about to sift them as wheat. The devil was going to find and exploit every chink in their armor, every spot of idolatry in their hearts.

I want to show you a parallel passage which, I think, throws some light onto this story. In 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Paul warned the Corinthians of coming persecution: What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (NIV).

In other words, persecution is coming, death is coming, and Christ is coming. Those things that are so important to us here are all going to change, and we shouldn't be so attached to them. Time is short, and we should live with a certain detachment to the things of this world. Luther put it this way:

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.
And He must win the battle.

Jesus was telling the young man, if you're going to follow me, you need to realize that the next month is going to turn your life inside-out and up-side down, and your money is a luxury you can't afford. You're going to be tested, then after the resurrection you'll be persecuted and flung to the ends of the earth as my ambassador. Go ahead and start detaching, start divesting, start getting ready. But the young man couldn't discern the times. He didn't realize how urgent and transient the moment was.

Second, he misread his Bible. Notice the question he asked Jesus: "Good Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life." Now, the message of both the Old and New Testament is that we can not do anything to earn eternal life. This young man was morally upright and ethically pure, but he felt that there was still something more that he had to do, still some work to perform, still some ritual to add to his life. But Jesus told him, "You've just got to follow Me. I'm the One that must do what must be done." The Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith, and not of ourselves, not by works.

Third, he misread the Savior. He thought of Jesus as a great teacher who could give him spiritual and moral insight. But Jesus is not interested in just being a great teacher who wants to give us spiritual and moral insight, although He is that and He does that. Jesus intends to be the Lord and Master of our lives. Any anything that comes before Him in our lives is an idol that keeps us from following Him.

It might be money. It might be a drive or a dream for success. It might be a stubborn streak in which we just want to do our own thing and go our own way. But if you and I love anything more than Christ, that's a soul-defeating, faith-destroying idol in our hearts.

Now, I have a theory I want to share with you. It isn't exactly original with me. I had a professor once in Graduate School who

suggested this to me casually and in passing, but I've never forgotten it, and the more I've thought about it the more I like it.

There is a good possibility, it seems to me, that this young man was named John Mark—the very same Mark who later wrote this Gospel. Why do I say that? First, he fits the description. Mark was a rich young aristocrat. Second, he tells us things here that nobody could possibly have known—particularly that little sentence, “And Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” Matthew doesn't say that, and Luke doesn't say that. It isn't likely that onlookers would have understood the silent communication that went on between these two men. Only two people could have interpreted the message in Jesus' eyes—that being Jesus Himself and the rich young man himself.

Third, this story fits the profile of Mark as we see him in the Gospels. He was a young man who was fascinated with Jesus, who wanted to follow Jesus, but who had a hard time fully yielding himself. He fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane. He deserted Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. But in the end, he did yield himself to the Lord, he did surrender, he did commit, and he did become a world-changer for God, heedless of the cost, willing to take up his cross and follow Jesus.

I can't prove any of that. It's just a little theory of mine, but somehow I really think it's true.

And that brings it back to me and you. Are you misreading life? Is there anything you haven't surrendered to Jesus? Anything you love more than Him? Is it money? Possessions? Is it another person? Is it a lifestyle choice? Is there a stubborn streak in you that just doesn't want Jesus to really have full control? Only in the Christian life does surrender bring victory. Come to Christ, and give Him absolute control. Break down every idol, cast out every foe. Tell the Lord what that 16-year-old Canadian young man once said:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.