

Walk with Jesus

Living the Teachings of Jesus Christ

Book

By Anandkumar Peter

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Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Master, model of all perfection, we thank You for all Your tender mercies and abundant Blessings You have showered on us while we do not deserve Your love. You continued to be as merciful to us as ever. Grant us the strength to imitate Your example, to be like You, mild, humble, chaste, zealous, charitable, and resigned. Let our efforts be to see Your image in all those we meet.

AMEN

PREFACE

There never was, is, or will be a substitute for the Bible. The Bible is the living Word of God. However, innumerable books and essays have been written by theologians, researchers, historians, and even the critics, on Bible. I am certain many more will be written in times to come. This is so because humanity continues to grapple with the profound truth of God as contained in the Bible; this is so because the Bible contains the Word of God; this is so because every word, verse, passage, chapter and book of the Bible presents such depth of knowledge, wisdom and truth that, humanity continues its quest for understanding what the Bible is telling us. The Gospel according to John concludes thus: "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen." - John 21:25. No wonder the interpretations of the Biblical proclamations also will be an on-going activity.

All who read Bible face one challenge; elucidation of what it conveys to the reader. Take for example the insightful parables of Jesus Christ, a teaching aid He effectively used to drive home the point He was making. His parables are contextual and He used imagery His audience would relate to. This should have made His parables simple and comprehensible by ordinary people, like you and me. The parables served this purpose at the time Jesus spoke to His audience. Jesus, however, did not want to limit His teachings to a restricted audience who lived during the time He walked the earth. The real import of His teachings is intended to extend into the limitless time. It is only natural that as we try to learn from His teachings, we tend to get into an overdrive of interpretations. This is the reason why we hear preachers tell us something different each time they speak about the same parable.

I may not be wrong in saying that, as we read the Bible, we are permitted to relate His teachings to our own circumstances. In doing so, we begin to apply the Word of God in our lives, and as the Biblical truth sink in, we begin to connect with Jesus and start our Walk with Him.

When I became conscious of this process, I could see why the interpretations are so varied in presentation. I also began to understand the Bible in my own perspective. It is needless to say at this point that, the ideas propounded by many writers, discussions in my Bible Study groups, and many a sermon I heard during church services have substantially influenced my own understanding of the teachings of Jesus Christ. These, obviously, will reflect in what I write. This book is a compilation of my thoughts, presented to you in all humility, with a hope that these may challenge you to deliberate and come up with your own interpretations and application of the teachings of Jesus Christ in your lives. A word of caution: being fallible by nature, I believe, we can never be 100% Christ like; but we are expected to make our best efforts to reflect Jesus in our lives. If this humble submission of mine is of some help to someone to make such an effort, I would consider my effort meaningful.

The chapters in this book discuss the possible application of the teachings of Jesus Christ, to address the challenges we face day by day. I accept my gross limitations, as an unworthy human, more so as a layperson. I have, therefore, made no attempt to answer the questions a reader may have. Rather, I have put forth my perception on various subjects and given pointers to the passages in the Bible for the reader to ponder on and arrive at his or her own interpretations. I expect the reader to challenge my overview and fine tune it to their own personal circumstances. The chapters are not, therefore, placed in any specific sequence and may be read at random.

It is my prayer that, as you read through the topics in this book, the Holy Spirit be your constant guide and mentor and

direct your paths in the right direction, in your endeavour to walk with Jesus rest of your earthly existence. AMEN

Life applications

Take a walk through your soul

Years ago, my wife and I got off the Paris Metro at a wrong station, on our way back to our hotel, after a great day of shopping. Soon we realised that we were in a suburban area, and all our attempts to find a cab were futile. Language presented the biggest hurdle in seeking directions. So we walked, looking for some familiar building, a sign board, or a landmark. We walked through immaculately maintained parks with beautiful flowers; we walked along messy construction sites; we passed rubbish dumps; we saw a brawl between two drunks; we saw old people, a young couple in love. We were on the strange roads of Paris for nearly three hours, resting on the road side benches every now and again, before we found our hotel.

If you dare to take a walk through your soul, your experience would be somewhat similar to what we experienced. The first thing you will realise is that you are treading through unknown territory! You would have never imagined that your inner being looked like what you see. Nevertheless, you should press on through the twists and turns of your soul. Such a venture, however, should have a purpose. For my wife and me, in the suburbs of Paris, it was to find our hotel. A walk through your soul should be to find your Christian faith. If you successfully complete the journey, you will be blessed with a bonus -- Jesus Christ!

This walk through your soul is not going to be easy. You are going to discover plenty of landmines of hidden sins, the wrongs you did, the good you have failed to do, doubts about Christ you secretly harboured, fear of the unknown and deceptive ideas planted in you by the evil one, and much more. These are memories and matters you have managed to hide deep in your inner-self. You need to look out for these, as soldiers do, without stepping on any, but neutralising each as you go on.

You need not get petrified when you encounter these landmines. Remember what Jesus said: "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." - John 8:12. His light will guide you on this journey of yours. Jesus will restore your soul and His rod and staff will comfort you as you progress. Keep in mind Psalm 23:3-4 "3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Jesus wants you to take this journey and He will be with you all through.

You will also find beautiful things during your journey through your soul, just as my wife and I saw beautiful gardens full of colourful flowers. You will encounter the many blessings you have received from Jesus. You will discover how much Jesus loves you, how many times He has forgiven you. You will come across those angels Jesus had sent to help you out of difficult situations, in the form of a stranger, even in the person of someone you disliked. You will understand the value of forgiveness, knowing how Jesus forgave you, time and again. You will know the beauty of pure love and compassion.

As you complete your journey, you will discover the real you. You will emerge much stronger in your faith, and you will have experienced Jesus Christ in the process.

Passages for reflection:

Ephesians 4:21-25 "if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, 23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness. 25 Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another."

1 Corinthians 5:7-8 thus: "Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth."

What are you waiting for? Now is the time to start on your journey through your soul.

AMEN

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Are you at peace?

Have you ever met a person who is completely at peace with self? I know many tend to claim that they enjoy total peace. It is a fallacy; either they are not truthful or they have, somehow, made themselves believe that they are at total peace. I am not talking about the transitional peace one may experience; I am talking about the true peace of Jesus that is everlasting and steadfast. Personally, I believe my faith in Jesus is deep-rooted, but I dare not claim that I am fully at peace. Can you?

We wake up every morning with a prayer on our lips; a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer of adoration, a prayer of confession, a prayer for guidance, a prayer of appeal, and, perhaps, a prayer for others who are in distress. We feel refreshed, enthused, encouraged and are ready to face another day. As the day progresses, something starts bothering our hearts. It could be something we heard, saw, or knew personally; something we read in the newspapers, saw on a news channel, or chanced upon on the road; something someone said to us; a phone call we received; the list is endless. Any one of these is enough to bring disquiet in our hearts. The point I am driving at is that most of us fail to experience complete peace in our hearts.

Jesus had said “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” - John 14:27. He also said “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” - Matthew 11:28. How come we are unable to claim that rest He had promised? Why do we live our lives with troubled hearts?

I recall an illustration I heard from a pastor. The topic given for a painting competition was ‘peace.’ Many tried to use colours to represent peace, but one painting stood out. The picture depicted a stormy, turbulent sea and in the middle of it stood two tall rocks rising above the waters. A little bird is seen quietly resting in its nest built in between the two rocks, oblivious of the turbulence around it. I am sure you got the message. The two rocks represented the ever-protective hands of Jesus Christ.

All we need to do is to place ourselves completely in His hands. Trials and tribulations are bound to come. But nothing, nothing whatsoever should shake our faith in Jesus Christ. All those who come to Jesus and take part in doing His Will receive His peace, a peace that passes all human understanding. Be like that little bird and claim your peace in Jesus.

I am not suggesting that we should be emotion-free. Emotions, both positive and negative, are bound to trouble our hearts. It is all the more so because we live in a fast-changing, turbulent world. We should learn to check our emotions and keep them under control, and not fly off with our emotions. As we begin to walk with Christ, we tend to feel His protective arms around us, giving us the assurance that He is in control of our lives and we are completely safe with Him protecting us. Most of the time we are like Peter, who took a step out onto the troubled waters in faith, but soon lost his cool and began to sink, while Jesus was at arm’s length. Are we ready to beat Peter in our faith performance?

Passages to ponder:

2 Timothy 1:7 “7 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

Romans 5:1-2 “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Isaiah 26:3-4 “3 You will keep him in perfect peace, Whose mind is stayed on You, Because he trusts in You. 4 Trust in the LORD forever, For in YAH, the LORD, is everlasting strength.”

Colossians 3:15 “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

AMEN

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Are you contented with life?

Being content is one of the perennial struggles in our lives. Material possessions are normally the yardstick employed to determine the level of contentment one has achieved in life. Christians are also no different in this regard and greatly blunder in doing so. Unfortunately, we look sideways to others and envy their material possessions and render ourselves to be discontented. Rather, we should look vertically towards Jesus. A believer’s contentment should come from how close one has got to Jesus Christ. As we focus on Jesus, we will soon learn that all we need is Him and nothing else.

We know well enough, as we are taught from our childhood, that we came into this world empty-handed and will depart out of this existence empty-handed. Despite this cardinal truth, we indulge in a mad rush for accumulating material wealth and in this process forego the inward peace. Without contentment, there can be no peace in our hearts. Unlike the worldly peace, which is usually considered as the absence of conflict of any nature or as arising from contentment, Jesus' promise of peace is the confident assurance in any situation; with Christ's peace we have no reason, whatsoever, to fear the present or future. The peace of Christ moves in our hearts and lives and shields us from all the forces of discontentment and conflict. Jesus says that we are entitled to that contentment, if only we place our implicit faith in Him. In Philippians 4:6 we read "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;"

More is less when it comes to material contentment. Therefore, to be content with 'less' is not an easy disposition of mind one can develop. The help comes to us from our dependence on Jesus and Jesus alone. Accepting everything else as ephemeral, believers should place their trust in Jesus and not on material substance. Jesus said, "19 Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." - Matthew 6:19-20

The caution for the believer is the possibility of a shift in our focus; a fatal shift from Jesus to money and the seeming contentment, we think, it may bring. The contentment we seek could also be emotional; in our relationship with others. We could lose the peace in our eagerness to keep our relationships intact. Jesus knows that we need all that and all that will be ours, if we are focused on Jesus alone.

Passages to ponder:

Hebrews 13:5 "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Philippians 4:11-12 "11 Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need."

1 Timothy 6:6-8 "6 Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content."

Matthew 6:33 "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

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Are you at the crossroads?

There are times in life we fear that it is not Jesus who is directing our paths, and we end up at a crossroads. Sometimes His directions are explicit, but other times it may seem as if we are left on our own. The question is how do we deal with such a situation?

When you are in such a predicament, make a dispassionate, considered, and prayerful decision yourself. All that you have learned from the teachings of Jesus Christ should be weighing in our minds as we do so. It will then be tantamount to following the directions of Jesus Christ. Such decisions are not, in fact, without the sanction of Christ but are decisions that result because of our intrinsic relationship with Him. Such decisions are also the result of His teachings, which we have internalised as our lifeline. What starts off as our own decision would become the directions of Jesus; decisions He has made us capable of taking through His Grace. The Holy Spirit will be guiding us in all we do.

The Spirit of God speaks to us in many ways -- through our hearts, through our desires, and through our gut feelings. Many a time we fail to recognise this and needlessly worry thinking that Jesus has distanced Himself from us. In Philippians 2:13 we read "for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

In many ways, God's providence is a mystery for us. What we need to remember is that Jesus has invested in us with His life and is serious about fulfilling His good purpose in us and through us. When we are in relationship with Him, and when we seek His will, His Will be done!

In all decisions, small or big, listen carefully to what Jesus has to say. Talk to Him about it often, and listen unceasingly to what He has to say. He is never far from you.

Passages to ponder:

Proverbs 16:33 “The lot is cast into the lap, But its every decision is from the LORD.”

Jeremiah 6:16 “16 Thus says the LORD: “Stand in the ways and see, And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls.... ...”

AMEN

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Are you facing a wall?

I can never forget a particular period in my life. It happened several years ago; my career was at its peak and everything around me looked fantastic. I thought I had made it in life, as my life and those close to me were progressing remarkably well. Then suddenly I found myself facing a towering wall. It was as if a huge rock had appeared from nowhere in my way, like a great roadblock. All my plans came crashing down; my dreams were shattered; I lost my joy, my peace, my purpose in life. That was what I thought at that time. Most of my friends and associates, who used to dote on me, just vanished. I am sure many of you might have experienced a similar state in your lives.

It took me a while, doing a lot of introspection and repeatedly asking Jesus “Why me?” I realised that all I need to do is to press into the rock. I found out that this rock in the path of my life was not an impediment but an opportunity that Jesus challenged me with. I realised that He had plans for me and all I had to do was to take on the opportunities and walk with Him. In doing so, I encountered Jesus in most amazing ways.

When I look back on those times it seems straightforward. While I went through it, I suffered disappointment and my self-esteem dropped to the lowest possible level. However, my hope in Jesus and my faith and trust in Him remained unshaken. I understand now that it is not just one such boulder that would suddenly come up in our lives, but that boulders big and small do appear as we progress in life. When that happens our plans, ‘A’ to ‘Z’, will crumble down. Such failures should not disappoint us or discourage us. We are required to keep trying and in the midst of all that Jesus will steer us towards the path He wants us to take, His Will. He wants us to understand and obediently comply with it. When we do that, without doubting, besides getting on a new track in life, we would have ‘experienced’ Jesus.

As I learnt to deal with such situations, I found out that Jesus can never be in my way as an obstacle, but He is always on my way; it was I who strayed away from His side. I came to know Jesus as never before. He continues to change our hard places into grace places. It is only then we begin to enjoy the gifts of faith, mercy and blessings. My prayer for all those who are in such a seemingly hopeless situation is to look to Jesus and walk in His path and not yours. We cannot foresee what He has in store for us but we should know that there are no full stops in His plans for us from eternity past to eternity future. All we need to do is to learn to listen to Him; learn to hear Him when He speaks to us; learn to hold His hand when He extends it to us.

Passages to ponder:

Romans 9:33 “As it is written: “Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, And whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”

Romans 14:21 “It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.”

Psalms 119:165 “Great peace have those who love Your law, And nothing causes them to stumble.”

AMEN

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Are you pressured by covetousness?

Have you ever wondered what caused Adam and Eve to sin (part played by the serpent aside), which resulted in the fall of mankind? It was their irresistible desire to possess something which they were not supposed to have. But they yearned for it. In common parlance, such desire is known as covetousness. Covetousness assumes various manifestations, and we know it as greed, materialism, avariciousness, envy, and longing. It will cover all things which are sought after inordinately. In other words, it is an intense desire to possess something, even another person, not belonging to us. Quite often it is not desirable for us to have these, and probably we are not entitled to have it either. That was the case with Adam and Eve; they possessed the earth, but they coveted one thing they were not supposed to

have, and fell from the grace of God.

Such uncontrolled desire for something which or someone who is the lawful possession of someone else, falls under the ban of the Tenth Commandment of God, " You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's." - Exodus 20:17. Jesus directed us to the very core of these Commandments. He said "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 "And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." - Matthew 5:27-30. He is cautioning us against what causes the wrongful act. Such acts are the result of an intense desire of the heart. Jesus wants us to purge out all such desires or covetousness before it results in a wrong.

It is human to desire something that does not belong to us or to be envious of someone else's possessions. Only the degree of such desire varies from person to person. Jesus is telling us to nip such desires in the bud and purge such desires from our system and enjoy the peace it brings to us. There is an antidote to covetousness and envy. We do not have to give in to it. We need to develop an attitude of gratitude and thankfulness to God for all that we possess small or great. All that we have are the gifts we have received from Jesus. The feeling of gratitude, in turn, helps us to experience further blessings that come our way from Him. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. 11 "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? - Luke 16:10-11. This saying can be interpreted to mean that we need to 'max out' in what God has entrusted us with before we are blessed with much more.

The process of 'maxing out' involves being grateful to Jesus for what we possess, for the job position we hold, for the family we have and for the state of health we enjoy. It also entails that we put to use our possessions fully, do our jobs diligently as unto the Lord. When a feeling of satisfaction settles in and when we are gratified, God will decide to bless us with more; with the things He knows we need, things which are rightful for us to possess.

Passages to ponder:

Luke 12:15-31 "And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses." 16 Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. 17 "And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' 18 "So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. 19 'And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." ' 20 "But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?' 21 "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." 22 Then He said to His disciples, "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. 23 "Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. 24 "Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? 25 "And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? 26 "If you then are not able to do the least, why are you anxious for the rest? 27 "Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. 28 "If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? 29 "And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. 30 "For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. 31 "But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.

Colossians 3:5 "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

Ephesians 5:5 "For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."

Hebrews 13:5 "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

AMEN

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Facing rejection? Don't quit.

Rejection in any form, from anyone, for any reason, and at any stage in life would inflict, at times, deep wounds that refuse to mend. It is an onslaught on the very person who faces rejection. The destruction begins at our self-esteem and question the very purpose of our lives. It is impossible to find a person who has not experienced rejection at one time or the other. The problem arises when the rejection is intense in nature and comes from totally unexpected quarters. Suddenly, we lose our peace of mind and even our spiritual convictions get shaken. Sadly, some decide to call it a day. Don't.

The first person to face rejection is God Himself, soon after His work of creation got over. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and tried to hide from Him, they were in fact rejecting Him. But God never gave up and worked harder to make humanity understand Him and His purpose for us. Humanity, however, continued to reject Him unabashedly. They would have finished God off if they had the means to do that. They thought they finally managed to do that when they crucified, God the Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus faced fiercest of rejection from not just ordinary people but from religious people, people of God. This rejection of Jesus Christ did not end with His crucifixion, but it continued to happen all the time. When we disobey Him, when we depart from the path He has chosen for us, when we reject a fellow being because we see him or her as a threat or as an obstacle or as inferior, we reject Jesus all over again.

If you are facing rejection or unjustified opposition, do not quit. Just remember that Jesus faced rejection first. Jesus responded to His rejection by His own people, saying, "57 So they were offended at Him. But Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house.'" - Matthew 13:57. The sinful nature of mankind has made humanity deny and reject Jesus Christ. All those who rejected Him had their own justifications. It is tragic that such justifications are, more often than not, the result of an unrighteous mindset or brazen evaluation.

Some say that you face rejection for your own doings. This statement may be partially true, and is a pitfall we must avoid at all costs. Our actions at home, at school or college, at workplaces, at the playground, at worship, and at market places should be above reproach. All our actions should pass the approval of Jesus Christ. We should internalise the teachings of Jesus Christ so that the values learnt should become our second nature.

Just as Jesus faced rejection for no fault of His, we too are likely to face rejection for no fault of ours. Before we quit in the face of opposition and rejection we need to remind ourselves that we are also sinners and our fight is not with fellow beings but against sin in some form or the other. If Jesus is with you who can be against you? If we are deeply rooted in our faith in Him, if we have learnt to unburden our worries, problems and rejections onto His shoulders, Jesus will strengthen us and guide us to overcome all such rejections.

Just don't quit.

Passages to ponder:

Psalms 34:17-20 "The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears, And delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit. 19 Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. 20 He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken.

John 15:18-19 " If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. 19 "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

1 Peter 2:4 'Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious,'

Psalms 27:10 "When my father and my mother forsake me, Then the LORD will take care of me."

1 Peter 5:8 "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."

AMEN

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Have you been deceived?

Deception is one malady that we encounter almost on a daily basis. At times, we indulge in it ourselves, and other times we are the victims of it. When we indulge in self-deception, we are both the deceiver and the deceived. The worst form of deception is when the perpetrator appears honest, religious, sincere and convincing. Sometimes deception is done on the erroneous impression that it is harmless and will not have any serious impact on anyone. Some believers just would not give it a second thought and pass it off as a minor sin. Any aberration, minor or major, however much it may seem

just a matter of perception, is a sin indeed by the standards set by Jesus. Satan has been and continues to be at it, attempting to undermine Jesus using weak mortals like me and you. Deception compromises the grace and protection available to all believers in Jesus Christ.

By definition, deception is to mislead by giving a distorted impression or false sense of reality; to trick; to cheat; to beguile. Truth when extended to encompass a falsehood makes the entire expression a deception. The half-truth, in such cases, does not merit any consideration. I encountered, to my utter surprise, such a deception recently from someone I trusted. It left a lingering discomfort in my heart. The dilemma we normally face in such a situation is whether or not to face up to the people concerned and call his or her bluff.

Bible tells us about many instances of deception. Eve was deceived by the serpent and in turn deceived Adam. The story of deception begins in Genesis, and what we normally categorise as greater sins followed after this first sin. Abraham used deception twice, once in Egypt when he encountered Pharaoh (Genesis 12:10-20), and again in Gerar when he encountered Abimelech, the King of Gerar (Genesis 20:1-18). In both cases, Abraham deployed deception with a view to avert possible threats to his life. While Sarah was his half-sister, in reality, she was his wife. He spoke a half-truth when asked to reveal Sarah's identity stating that she was his sister. Conversely, the whole truth was she was his wife. He feared death if he spoke the truth. Surely the fear of God and faith in God was absent when he indulged in deception. Abraham, the father of faith chose to lie! Several other Biblical luminaries, such as Samson, Delilah, Esther, David, to name a few, practised deception in one form or the other.

The only way to guard against deception is by remaining alert with faith in Jesus. Put on Jesus as your armour as Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:11 "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." Further, in Galatians 6:1 we read "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

The worst form of deception is when we try to deceive Jesus Himself. We do that knowingly or unknowingly. This form of deception arises out of our self-deception. We cannot deceive Jesus in any manner. If we expect to be guarded by Him from deception, we should rid ourselves of our self-deception first.

Passages to ponder:

Galatians 6:7-8 "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. 8 For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life."

Proverbs 12:22 "Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD, But those who deal truthfully are His delight."

Romans 12:2 "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."

James 1:22 "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

Mark 7:20-23 "And He said, "What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. 21 "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, 22 "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. 23 "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."

AMEN

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Are you terrified about death?

In the face of the fact of death, Jesus offers an even greater fact: everlasting life.

Death stands as a culmination of the journey through life -- inevitable, and final. Rich, poor, sick, and healthy all alike must face it someday. Most people are terrified at the thought of death, and for most, it is a depressing thought. Not many people are prepared to talk casually about one's own death, just the way they talk about their birthdays or wedding anniversaries. That, however, need not be the case with those who place their faith in Jesus Christ and accept Him as their Saviour and God. He is, indeed, the Resurrection and Life. The religions of the world had tried to help people cope with their impermanence, but none of them have anything substantial to offer. All of their founders lie dead and buried to this day. How completely different Christianity is! In the face of the fact of death, it promises a greater fact, an everlasting life in Christ through His resurrection.

The atoning death of Lord Jesus Christ alone does not complete the Salvation story. It is His death and His resurrection on the third day, completely conquering sin, death, and Satan, which is the prime mover of Christian faith. An attempt

has been made, all through the past 2000 years, to disprove the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but none could ever put out any convincing and conclusive evidence to prove that it did not take place. On the contrary, all the physical and circumstantial evidence points to His resurrection.

The women who had witnessed the events of the fateful Friday must have returned home disappointed, depressed, and confused. All their hopes had been shattered when they saw the body of Jesus placed in a tomb and sealed with a great stone, bringing some kind of irrevocability to the life of their beloved Master. They must have wondered about the Kingdom Jesus often spoke about. Ironically, they could not only not figure out the Kingdom, but they could not figure out the King Himself either. All of them and the disciples of Jesus must have struggled through a miserable Sabbath on Saturday. As is natural for people they must have already begun to put their plan B into operation. After all, they had to get back to their personal lives.

However, as a final act of love for the Master, they went out and bought sweet spices, after the Sabbath ended. Mary Magdalene and other women with her, without wasting time set off towards the tomb early in the morning on Sunday. The fact that the tomb was sealed and soldiers were placed to guard it was weighing heavily on their minds. They must have also, in their unbelief, suspected that the body would have started to decompose. With many such doubts in their hearts they approached the tomb.

To their utter surprise, they found the stone rolled away, and entry to the tomb wide open. Mary Magdalene ran towards it and peeped inside only to come across an empty tomb. Her initial reaction was that someone had removed the body. Doubts again; she obviously did not comprehend what the Lord had told them about His resurrection.

A little later, she encountered Jesus, and she believed in His resurrection right away, though she may not have understood the full import of this event. She, in fact, became the first evangelist to proclaim the rising of Jesus from death. When John and Peter arrived at the scene, they found the burial cloth with which the body of Jesus was bound on the spot the body was placed, intact as if the body just came straight out of it.

The frightened guards had run away and reported the events of the early morning and the fact that the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. The authorities, fearing the worst -- that the resurrection had indeed taken place -- wanted to falsify the facts and bribed the guards to say the disciples took away the body while they were asleep.

The empty tomb is the first evidence of the resurrection of Jesus. His appearance before Mary Magdalene and subsequently to others proves that the resurrection did take place. The Romans or the Jews could not have taken the body away. It would have been a self-defeating action on their part. Even if they had done that, they would have produced the body when the disciples started preaching resurrection. The disciples could not have taken and hidden the body; all but one of them were martyred and died terrible deaths, and so could not have died for a lie.

The believers must come out of their depressing Saturdays. Death need not be a threat anymore. Death has been conquered by Jesus in His resurrection. People saw a glimpse of the glory of His resurrected life for forty days. Such a glorified life in Jesus will be ours too as we transit from this sinful existence.

Passages to ponder:

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” - Psalm 23:4

Revelation 14:13 “Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’” ““Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. 14 For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.”

1 Corinthians 15:42-44 “So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.” AMEN

Are our hearts conducive to Gospel Truths?

The house used to be energised with people: grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and some visitor or the other. Children used to be all over the lush green vegetation surrounding the house. I vividly recollect those days, as a school-going child, back home in Kerala, in the south of India. Children used to do a bit of gardening as a hobby. As I look back on those days, I realise that I have moved on with many other things which I took on as hobbies. Life seems to have come a full cycle, and of late I am into kitchen gardening again. If you have not done it, let me tell you that gardening,

of any nature, is a fascinating activity. Tiny, dried seeds are planted into the earth and morning after morning I would make a beeline to the garden to see if any shoots are appearing on the surface; though I know that the process of germination should take place. This happens unaided by us. I also understood that there are few critical variables involved, such as the soil and weather. And when the sprouts appear, my heart would sing praises to Jesus, in the words of the Swedish poet, Carl Gustav Boberg ‘Lord, How Great Thou Art!’

The kingdom of God is the heart of the messages Jesus taught us when He said, ‘The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.’ Sitting on a boat, He spoke to a large crowd giving the example of a sower, seeds and the soil. The master storyteller, Jesus, expounded profound insights to His audience through His Parables. Most, however, heard Him for entertainment, probably neither understanding the inner meaning nor bothering to enquire into it. His disciples were no better, though they were given explanations to the extent they would understand at that time in their ministry.

Are we to, then, draw a conclusion that the large numbers of parables spoken by Jesus were lost on the people altogether? Let us not be hasty as Jesus is not a vain speaker. The Parable of the Mustard seed -- Matthew 13:31-32 is the key to all His Parables. The tiny dried seed, of which thousands may fit into a matchbox, springs up into life, and life nurtures new life in new seed, and enjoins in a larger reality of nature. The rest of the creation, including people like you and me, gets interwoven into this process. This parable seems to encapsulate the entire Christian endeavour. It tells us that, any process of change can begin small. See how Jesus used just a dozen of His disciples to promote Christianity which has now become a world religion.

Jesus prepared the way for His disciples well in advance. People who heard His stories told others and through word of mouth it spread to thousands of people. Jesus was planting a tiny time device which, by the time Peter, Paul and others were ready to take on the ministry, went off and prepared the hearts of people, like the good soil that is ready to receive the seed, the Gospel truths, and grow in faith.

Talking about soil that is conducive for cultivation, the question before us is what kind of soil our hearts are made of. Are our hearts hardened because of sin and the cares of the world? Are our hearts susceptible to wavering faith? Are we those casual Christians who make the right noises and are pretentious for the sake of others, but in their heart of hearts Christian values take second place to the ways of the world? These are questions one must ponder on with all seriousness, if one were to mature in Christ.

Let us also ask ourselves, whether we are receiving the right messages from our Pastors and Preachers? How often we are able to deliberate on the message we hear Sunday after Sunday from the Pulpit? If these messages have failed to impact our thought process, there is something drastically wrong with the delivery or the person who delivered the message.

Though simple in contents, the Parable, talks of the need for us to develop a receptive heart for the teachings of Jesus to remain lodged. He spoke of 4 kinds of soil. No plant could grow or sustain in the first three types. But on a soil free from weeds, prepared with the right quantity of water and manure a plentiful harvest could be reaped. Believers are cautioned about the state of their hearts. What kind of soil are you and me at this point? Has the Gospel message found a lodging place within our hearts and our lives? Are we bearing fruit to the glory of Jesus as we ought to?

Passages to ponder:

Psalm 78:8” And may not be like their fathers, A stubborn and rebellious generation, A generation that did not set its heart aright, And whose spirit was not faithful to God.”

James 1:18 “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures”

Deuteronomy 6:5-6 “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 “And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.”

Jeremiah 31:33 “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Ezekiel 11:19 “Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh,”

AMEN

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Humble before Jesus, He will ‘justify’ you!

We are living in the times in which most people, inside the church and outside of it, suffer from ‘I, me and mine’ syndrome. People look at humility as the behaviour of a weak person, rather than seriously pray to God for this virtue. The present favoured culture seems to accept selfishness as a normal behaviour and humility as some form of psychological disorder. Christians, however, have to deal with humility as the core value of the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus said “And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” - Matthew 23:12.

In His parable about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Read Luke 18:9-14) Jesus tells us about two men who went to the temple, a desirable action; people ought to go to church. They would not have done that if they did not believe in God; people ought to believe in God. They did not go to the Temple to survey the buildings, they went there to pray, and pray they did. Quite normal behaviour from both of them and that is exactly what all of us do when we go to church. Jesus would not have narrated this parable to state the obvious. Something was not right here; there is something insightful to be learnt from this parable.

The Pharisee, a religious leader, someone who stood for the Law of God, stood ‘with himself’ and uttered his prayer loud and clear. He stood away from others, perhaps to maintain his important position in the society; or maybe he did not want to be made defiled by accidental touch by others. Well, he is entitled to do all that, one may argue. When he prayed, he began to narrate to God how righteous he was, doing all the right things according to the Law. He also was telling God how he was not like the despised sinner, the tax collector in particular. All that he said was absolutely true, but his prayer was not a prayer at all. God was obscure in his prayer. He mentioned God just once and mentioned himself 5 times. He probably considered his righteousness to such an extent that he imagined himself to be a sinless human person; there was no remorse for sin in anything he said. There was an absence of any appeal to God in his prayers, as though there was no need for God to intervene in his life. In short he projected himself aside from God with no dependency on Him. He obviously had never heard Jesus say “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” - John 15:5.

He may not have, but we have. What is the level of dependency on God we harbour in our hearts? Absolute, some or like the Pharisee, none?

The Tax Collector also stood “afar off”, for a very different reason: he knew he would not measure up to any standard; be it of men or of God. He was so ashamed of himself he would not dare to look up to heaven when he prayed. He then “smote upon his breast”, to show his remorse for his sins. We also note that the Tax Collector had a prayer approximately 1/6th the length that of the Pharisee. Jesus had warned (Luke 20:46-47) to beware of people who make long and loud prayers, and all those who make pretentious prayers. God loves short dense prayers (with no words wasted), so that people can connect with Him quickly and commune with Him in earnestness. He addressed his prayer to God; he asked only for mercy and confessed himself as a sinner. He made no sacrifices. As a matter of fact he had nothing to offer God. He emptied himself before God and allowed God to work on him and save him, though he may not have known that, that was what he was doing.

At the end of it all, we find that nothing changed for the Pharisee. He came in as a righteous person and went back as a righteous person. But the world of the Tax Collector changed completely. He came as a sinner without hope, and returned ‘justified’ by God. He is justified on the basis of God’s divine sanction and grace. When we read this parable again and again and try to understand the real import of the story, we will find ourselves, with nothing to claim but our dependence on the mercy of Jesus Christ. When this happens, we too will be justified by our Lord Jesus Christ, experience His grace, counted by Him as righteous, and grateful in our hearts.

The choice is ours. Do we want to be justified by Jesus or do we want to be abased for our self-exaltation?

Passages to ponder:

2 Chronicles 7:14 “if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

James 4:6 “But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

1 Peter 5:6-7 “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, 7 casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.”

Daniel 10:12 “Then he said to me, “Do not fear, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard; and I have come because of your words.”

AMEN

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The believer cannot be an oxymoron

Oxymoron is a figurative speech that combines contradictory terms. Here are a few obvious examples, I quote from Wikipedia: ‘dark light’, ‘living dead’, ‘guest host’. I am sure you got the point. A lukewarm believer, probably, is a classic example of such a contradiction. Such a person is one who professes to be a follower of Christ but at the same time is only at the periphery of his or her Christian faith. He or she is more of the world.

In Ephesians 2:4, 5 Paul wrote “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),” A disciple is one who would allow his or her sins to be put to death and is made alive (cleansed internally) together with Christ. The change in the believer is, therefore, profound and is from within and not just on the periphery of his or her life.

In English language, the term ‘Laodicean’ is used in a derogatory manner referring to those who are neutral or apathetic about matters of faith. Incidentally, Laodicea has been mentioned in the Book of Revelation 1:11 as one of the seven churches for whom John received specific instructions. The judgement to be handed out to Laodicea is mentioned in Revelation 3:15-17 thus: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. 16 “So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. 17 “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’ -- and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked --”

People of Laodicea were indicted for their neutrality, for being lukewarm. In verses 18 and 19 it is stated: “I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. 19 “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.” Alongside the possible retribution comes the promise of redemption for those who are willing to die in their sins and rise again with Christ with complete inner transformation. Immense wealth is offered; not the material wealth but Spiritual wealth and purity of hearts, to all those who concede their spiritual bankruptcy. A believer’s focus should not be material possessions and conveniences, which, from a worldly perspective, are normally used as the yardstick of success.

We live in an era of innovation. Our lives revolve around mobile phones, tablets, malls, eateries and so on, the list is endless. Little we realise that all these are inventions of convenience, to make our life easier, to conserve on time. The question is, time for what; our families, church or our spiritual life? The tragic effect of all the present day conveniences is the fact that these have turned us into lukewarm as far as our spirituality is concerned. We squander away the time created by these conveniences on these conveniences themselves. What a paradox. Our lives are no better than the lives of people in Laodicea used to be. It is easy to believe in God, we all make that claim. It is almost impossible to serve Him genuinely when our lives have become so convenient for us.

But all is not lost. God was about to spit the people of Laodicea out; condemn them in eternity. Just a few verses later, in Revelation 3:20-22, Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. 21 “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne. 22 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

If you have been lukewarm, if you have been too normal or comfortable, He is knocking on your door. He wants you to let Him in - all the way in. Are you prepared?

Passages to ponder:

1 John 2:15-16 “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. 16 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.”

Matthew 16:26 “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

2 Timothy 3:5 “having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

Matthew 7:22-27 “Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ 23 “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ 24 ” Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: 25 “and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. 26 “But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: 27 “and the rain

descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.”

AMEN

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Your response to sin happening under your nose

‘And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”’ - Acts 15:1. They were teaching about Salvation. The undertone is clear, a gentile cannot be ‘accepted’ into the Christian fold unless he or she also become like a Jew in the bargain. Paul and Barnabas just could not stomach this teaching as they rightly believed that it is by Grace of Jesus Christ alone Salvation is available to the believers. The misinterpretation of Christ’s teaching had already begun and Gospels were not in existence at that time for cross reference. The situation has only deteriorated in the 2013 years since then. All of us are guilty of casually quoting Jesus as an act of one-upmanship.

But that is not what I want to meditate here. I am often advised that I need to be more tolerant, especially of the mistakes others make. I am amazed at the wisdom of people and their armoury of Biblical quotations they use to argue their point. While I am humbled by all the admonishing I receive, I give serious thought to what is being said. What bothers me is this: yes, we need to be tolerant, but do we have to accept the wilful mistakes?

What is a mistake after all? The Oxford Dictionary defines mistake as ‘an action or judgment that is misguided or wrong’. Some of the synonyms for mistake are: oversight, blunder, misinterpretation, false step. However, the antonyms for mistake are truth, accuracy, soundness, respect, certainty. As an act of tolerance, compassion, and Christian love, should we settle for what is not truthful? Paul did not and went ahead and wrote almost half of the New Testament!

Talking about the New Testament, unlike Paul and Barnabas, we have the benefit of the teachings of Jesus Christ in the Gospels and Epistles. We are a ‘post-Gospel community.’ Moving forward from the Old Covenant, we have before us the ‘new arrangement’ of living with Jesus Christ. It calls for all efforts, including sacrifices, by believers to make amends and refurbish the spiritual health and vigour of the believers who live in error. Through the ultimate sacrifice of Christ and His new priesthood after Melchizedek, we have better access to Christ’s Holy presence, making us more accountable to Him in truth.

Any intentional departure from the truth is a sin, since such a departure is tantamount to distancing oneself from Jesus, who is the Truth. The Bible makes it clear that there is no ‘sacrifice’, as in the Old Covenant, for the continuous and intentional sins of believers. In Hebrews 10:26-27 we read: “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.” Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” - Matthew 5:48

Let me paraphrase something I read in an article on the subject: ‘Many people insist that Grace covers all sins. But this Christian Brother John is an upstanding guy. Accepted that he has committed adultery a few of times, but he has repented and quit since then! Well, good for John! Let us hope and pray Jesus forgive him. He forgives whomever He pleases because He knows our hearts. But we need to remember also that Jesus is clear that those who know the Gospel are not expected to engage in deliberate sinning, minor or major, and that there is no sin sacrifice for continued, deliberate sinning. So our ‘good guy’ John may have endangered his eternal life by repeatedly ‘committing adultery’ - a deliberate act that took some thinking before doing. Planning to have an extra-marital affair is not a ‘mistake’ nor do ‘unintentional’ sin, such as accidentally letting a cuss word slip while angry!’ (Imaginary John and his adulterous acts are mentioned by way of an example).

Sin is sin, however small or inconsequential it may seem!

Passages to ponder:

2 Timothy 4:1-2 “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: 2 Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

2 Peter 2:21-22 “For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: “A dog returns to his own vomit,” and, “a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire.”

Hebrews 10:26-29 “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the

adversaries. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?”

Luke 6:37 ” Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

AMEN

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Coming Clean about Our Weakness

Our Lord Jesus Christ says “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” - 2 Corinthians 12:9. In our contemporary world, one may consider this as a counterintuitive statement. We try to find role models based on their success in life, their perceived strengths and but not definitely for their weaknesses.

We spend our lives telling each other to focus on our strengths, to work in our core skills, to ‘flow with the tide’, to perfect our brand, and to protect our image. I am not arguing a case against using your strength. If you want to see the power of God at work in your life, you will have to quit hiding your weaknesses from people and in doing so trying to hide our weaknesses from God. It is not as if anyone can hide anything long enough or hide from God. This teaching of Jesus Christ just means that you have to be honest, to deal in truth, though the truth may not be what one wants to see. It is this requirement of Jesus that scares most Christians.

There was a time when I lamented about not being offered a chance to preach in my church. It drove me to a level of frustration. A well-meaning bishop told me that I was getting carried away by my strengths and not looking to the Lord to know what His purpose for me is. I introspected and found my weakness. I was basking in the popularity and was slowly slipping away from working for the glory of our Lord. A course correction, indeed, was in order and I sought the Lord’s help in making those changes in my outlook. I am now at peace with myself and my Lord.

What are your weaknesses?

Passages to ponder:

Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?”

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

2 Corinthians 12:10 “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 Timothy 3:16-17 “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

AMEN

Are you anxious that you may forfeit Salvation?

A couple of months ago, my brother sent me a car sticker which says: ‘Warning: In case of rapture, this car will be empty!’ I promptly stuck it on the rear windshield of my car (Surprisingly, no one has, so far, enquired about the message it conveyed). Rapture is the eventual saving of the spirit of the believer when the fullness of Christ’s time comes. In other words, the fulfilment of the promise of Salvation Jesus made to humankind. The question that worries many is, having received the promise of Salvation, by the grace of Jesus; can one lose it before the time comes? This is a vigorously debated subject and Christian groups have taken different positions on it.

One strong argument favouring those who believe that Salvation once received cannot be lost is that, after all Salvation is received not because of the believer’s works but by the Grace of Jesus Christ. The only condition being the person confesses Jesus Christ and accepts Him as his or her Lord and Saviour. One can deduce from this that there is no way anything a believer may do that will cause him or her to either receive or lose Salvation. On the flip side, a believer who has become entitled to Salvation may adopt a wanton way of life which is not acceptable in the eyes of Jesus Christ.

If we accept the argument that there exists a possibility that a believer could lose the benefit of Salvation, it may cause the believer to do various things to hang on to his/her Salvation. This would result in Salvation becoming the only

objective in their lives. In the anxiety of not wanting to lose it, Christ is shifted out of focus.

One can come up with a large number of scriptural quotes to argue both ways. A passage in 1 Corinthians 5:5 is very interesting in this regard. Paul says “deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” All human beings are sinners, but Christ redeemed us through His unrepeatable sacrificial death on the Cross. The redeemed who accepts Jesus becomes eligible for Salvation. But if that person continues to live in sin, Paul seems to suggest that let his or her flesh be handed over into the waiting arms of Satan in hell, but his or her spirit would attain salvation. Paul could have meant that the punishment for such a person is the removal of spiritual protection and social comfort, not an infliction of evil. In doing so the person is put out in the harsh world where he or she is likely to suffer at the hands of evil people. On the other hand, we have no right to write off such persons for the very reason that Jesus would never write off anyone. The spirit of such a person will attain Salvation.

I had always held the view that Jesus will not desert anyone, not even those who have never heard about Him. I am aware that not many believers would like to accept this position. Some even protest vociferously. Jesus I know is kindness incarnate, forgiveness incarnate, and love incarnate. All and everything is His creation. No creator would ever stand the ultimate destruction of his creation. I believe that no one has figured out Jesus fully, and He has His own plans for Salvation of humanity. I want to leave it as one of those mysteries that He will reveal to us in His good time. For those who have accepted Him, He has given the mandate to be His ambassadors to the entire world. We are not Christians only for the sake of Salvation; we are Christians to be obedient to Christ and for doing His will.

Passages to ponder:

John 10:28 “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand.”

Hebrews 6:4-6 “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, 5 and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6 if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.”

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

1 Corinthians 9:27 “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

2 Timothy 2:11 “This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him.”

AMEN

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Who determines the course of our lives?

It may shock you, if you dare to look at yourself in your school farewell group photograph. Your initial shock will be the way you looked and dressed in those days. Everything about you, and for that matter others who were your classmates, would seem very strange. Then you will also realise, unless you had kept up with others, you cannot recall some of who went to school with you, though you might have been together for several years. However, you would remember some others by name and for what they were then known for, like excelling in studies, sports, games, fine arts, and so on. You will remember some of your classmates on whom the teachers and others might have placed their bet on. However, it is quite unlikely that you will know how they fared eventually.

This gave me a reason to reflect on myself and wondered whatever happened to me. I remember I was one of those promising all-rounders in school, though no one would have placed a bet on what I would eventually become. I tried to trace my life from then till now, like a movie flashback, once again passing through many a twists and turns; all those disappointments of not getting to where I thought I should be, and all the successes that came my way, at times in totally unexpected ways. Your story is not likely to be any different. What if we have not lived up to the expectations, both ours and that of others? As the poet John Greenleaf Whittier said, “of all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, it might have been.”

The problem is that we try to forecast and determine the purpose of our lives. This sets expectations high and is likely to fail. In life, it does not work that way. It is only in Jesus we can find our identity, our worth, and our purpose. Any other way of determination will meet with failure. Having said that, we cannot use God and make Him fulfil our own designs. God determines how we are used for His purpose. I know that this statement may not be readily accepted. It

may give an impression that God uses us as puppets in His hands. That is not so, but Jesus knows what is best for us and, within that framework, uses us for His purpose in His own time.

We are given wisdom to choose our course in life. We are, however, expected to align our choices in line with that of God. We read in Romans 8:6 “For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” Jesus said “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” - Matthew 16:25-26

We have two ways to determine our purpose in life. First, the option most of us try to take, is to speculate. We make self-evaluations with or without help from others and arrive at a course we could take. Intelligent planning is always good and should be done. Such planning, however, should not be harsh speculations.

The second option is to understand God’s Will for us from the Word of God. Jesus has provided us with a clear road-map for our lives. Careful study of the Scripture will reveal to us our purpose. This is exactly what Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:11 “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,” All we need to do is look up to Jesus for guidance, He knows what is best for us and align our plans with His Will for us.

It is not very easy to know what He expects from us. We have to be vigilant and perceptive to His directions. Such directions will come to us in several forms and through several people. Remember, this life of ours is just a fleeting moment compared to eternity we will spend in the glorious presence of Jesus Christ. This realisation should tell us whether we should try to shape our lives unaided by Jesus and lose everything we may seem to achieve or we should seek His purpose and work for Him.

Passages to ponder:

Proverbs 4:23 “Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.”

Psalms 119:9 “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.”

Proverbs 16:9 “A man’s heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.”

Read Daniel Chapter 10. It tells us why we should persistently seek God’s directions.

Philippians 3:18-19 “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: 19 whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame - who set their mind on earthly things.”

AMEN

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Jesus is not a ‘Spanner in the Works’, in our lives!

Adam Smith and Karl Marx propounded the economic theory of specialisation of labour. The former had a capitalistic focus on the economy, but the latter, because of his communist beliefs, asserted that specialisation of labour would isolate workmen and would drive them to spiritual and physical despair. With Henry Ford applying the principles of division of labour in the production of Model T motorcars, standardisation of components and assembly line production system become the norm and an era of modern management was ushered in.

Standardisation and specialisation gradually crept into all walks of life and gave birth to compartmentalisation. Modern management gurus soon realised that for compartmentalisation to work well, one needs effective time management. I have no quarrel about such directions the world has taken for economic growth and sustenance, but what worries me is the fact that it has in its wake compartmentalised our personal lives impacting our spiritual life seriously. A division as full time and part-time Christians emerged. In saying so we are not discussing the division of believers as full and part-time Christian workers, wherein we outsource God’s work to the ordained priests and confine our roles to attending church services, contributing in the life of the church in some small ways, supporting it financially, all within the time available.

The challenges posed by specialisation in turn made everyone dispensable in the secular world, giving rise to the fear that we may become irrelevant. In our quest for relevance, we gradually pushed the spiritual aspect of our lives into a corner, apportioning only a negligible slot of time for it in our time management schema. Most Christians, therefore, find the Pulpit exhortations that we should live as true Christians, Walk with Jesus and so on as of no relevance to them

anymore. In our faulty scheme of things, God suddenly became a spanner in the works! To the statements like “Yes, of course, I am on the board of directors”, “Of course, I am very regular with my morning workout”, “Yes, we find time to take holidays”, we also hear the feeble statement “Yes, I do make it to the church most Sundays”

The Bible tells us to live quite differently. We cannot treat God as the ‘spanner in the works’, rather He should be the prime mover around Whom our lives should revolve. While no one is indispensable from a worldly perspective, all are important to God. We never cease to love our families and care for them even in the midst of a compartmentalised life. It gives us all the more reason to love, revere and submit to Jesus. Jesus never ceases to love us, forgive us and care for all our needs because “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” - John 3:16

The problem with us is, we fail to understand the distinction between being religious and having an intimate fellowship with Christ. Being religious demands that we live by the rules and outward expectations, a time for church, a time for prayer, a time to be courteous to people, a time to be generous and so on. The assumption is that this would please God. When we try to fit all these in with the compartments we have created in our lives, we find the going difficult and at times burdensome.

Our focus should be in living in fellowship with Christ. “We love Him because He first loved us.” -- 1 John 4:19. In Galatians 2:20,21 we further read “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. 21 “I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.”

We are called upon to live a righteous life, but righteousness will not happen through half-hearted religiosity but by living our lives in Christ. When we understand that, we will also know that we need not have to struggle through lives trying to do what God wants us to do. When Jesus told us to build a right foundation for our lives, He is not talking about a foundation in religiosity alone. We are bound to fail if we do that. Rather we should live in fellowship with Jesus, reflecting Him in everything we do and in every relationship we build and every action we perform. It will then become a part of our character; so much so, that there would be no need for us to struggle to fit in our spiritual life with any or all of the compartments we have created for ourselves.

Our lives work best when we bring Jesus into every area of our lives, central to everything we do. He will no more be a ‘spanner in our works’.

Passages to ponder:

Psalms 119:105 “Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path.”

Isaiah 40:31 “But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.”

Jeremiah 29:11-12 “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.”

AMEN

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Should God grant us whatever we ask for?

I thought I should share with you some critical learning I gathered from 1 Samuel Chapter 8. The background, as narrated in the passage, is quite straightforward. Fed up with the misrule of Samuel’s sons whom he had appointed as the Judges, the Israelites demand that a king be appointed to rule over them.

On the very face of it, their demand may seem very genuine. We do that all the time. In many churches, we see demand for the change of guard, be it the Pastor, Secretary, Treasurer or members of the Governing Committee. Most of us, like the Israelites then, fail to take our problems before God. We do not have the patience to wait for His intervention; our timings are normally wrong; we refuse to heed to warnings of consequences and imagine that we can deal with all that on our own. We just insist on having what we want.

The Israelites got Saul as their king who turned out to be a disaster. Later, after “their” king failed, God gave Israel “His” king: David. If Israel had not denied God when they made their demands, David would have been made the first king by God, thereby sparing Israel and so also David himself all that they suffered in the hands of Saul.

Surely it is the mistake of our life that we carry our burdens ourselves instead of unburdening everything to Jesus; that

we worry instead of trusting; that we pray so little. It may seem amazing that at times Jesus even let us have something which is not right in His eyes. In such instances, He will also suffer the consequences along with us.

The basic thing that we often fail to recognise is that in making such demands on God, we are indirectly rejecting Him; we are rejecting His wisdom and judgement, which always will be fair. Samuel himself was not very happy to replace his sons. Samuel, perhaps, could not look objectively at his sons. He would excuse the sins in them. We all make a similar mistake when it comes to members of our families, who may go astray. So he lamented that, despite being a just and godly person, people were rejecting him. We learn from the passage God was almost telling Samuel, ‘Samuel, there is nothing personal here. They are not rejecting you, but Me.’ If they had accepted God in Heaven as their King they would not have ever felt the need to have an earthly king. Remember later Jesus, the King of Kings, Himself was rejected by men.

When problems come up, we think up an answer that brings more problems with it. In our anxiety to find a solution to our problems on our own, we often fail to anticipate the further problems such solutions may bring. We must understand that there rarely is a perfect solution we can think of. We should not become impatient with God, but allow Him to take on our problems and resolve it in His own way and in His own time.

Passages to ponder:

Matthew 16:24 “Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

Matthew 19:28 “So Jesus said to them, “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Psalms 66:18 “If I regard iniquity in my heart, The Lord will not hear.”

Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together,” Says the LORD,”

AMEN

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Does the Church get on your nerves?

Let us not pretend that it does not happen. It happens all the time and we need to face up to it and deal with it, rather than run away from it. If something within you makes you dispirited when you start for the Church or if your mind is preoccupied with the affairs of the church, rather than the worship, during the church Service, I would say the church has hurt you, or the church matters are overly bothering you, for one reason or the other. Church does not affect those who are on the periphery of the church, who just attend the Service and rush back home. It normally affects those who are concerned with the church in many respects and are active in the church, on spiritual matters or otherwise.

Let me make a disclaimer here: When I say ‘Church’, I mean a congregation of individuals who gather to worship in Christian faith. I am in no way referring to our Good Lord Jesus Christ, because He can never hurt us.

When the church hurts us, our first reaction is to reject it; to distance ourselves from it. We move to another church where matters look tranquil from the outside. That is normally not the case, and soon we will run from that church too. Once we start running, we will continue to run forever. In the bargain, we will lose not just the fellowship the church offers, but Jesus Christ. That being so, how do we deal with such a situation?

The first thing that we need to get into our heads is the fact that the church is an organisation of fallible human beings. All of us are fallible. It is within the dynamics of a group of weak people, disagreements and hurt show up. We cannot distance ourselves from this malady as there is every possibility that we might have contributed to such unsavoury situation and might have hurt others in the process. We must stay put and accept our responsibility.

It is my belief that, despite our brokenness, Jesus continually remodels us. Remember the apprenticeship God made Jeremiah undergo at the potter’s field. “4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make. 5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 6 “....., can I not do with you as this potter?” says the LORD. “Look, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand...!” - Jeremiah 18:4-6. Jesus is continuously remoulding His Church by remoulding its members. When He encounters impediments, like the good potter, He breaks everything down, removes the impairments, and remodels us and the Church again. We as individuals and the church as an organisation should prayerfully yield to this on-going process. The remodelling can happen only if we are willing to pool our hurtful experiences together as a body and resolve to deal with matters with utmost patience. Our prayer should be as the Hymn goes: ‘Have Thine own way,

Lord! Have Thine own way! Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mould me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still.'

The church would never ask us for our forgiveness. If the church has hurt us, we should be prepared to forgive those who are instrumental in hurting us, remembering the cardinal fact that, after all, Jesus continues to be the Head of the Church. We need to recall what Jesus said to His disciples as He was preparing them for His departure from this world: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another." -- John 13:34.

Passages to ponder:

Ephesians 4:1-6 "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

Philippians 2:3 "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."

1 Corinthians 1:11-13 "For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Romans 15:5-6 "Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, 6 that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

AMEN

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Who are you putting up the show for?

There is this English News anchor I especially abhor. He gets on my nerves with his mannerisms and his sheer arrogance. I have always wondered who he is putting up the show for. Talk about target audience, we all play for some audience or the other. In school and College, we strive to impress our teachers, classmates; at work places, we endeavour to impress our bosses and colleagues; at home, we try to impress other members of the family. Pastors play for the congregation and try to impress them with their depth of knowledge on spiritual matters; performing artists perform for different classes of art lovers. Who are you putting up your show for?

Come to think about it, most of the time we play to impress ourselves; we strive to boost our egos. Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:20-21 "20 giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another in the fear of God." Though he was speaking about families, he emphasises the same principles for our workplaces.

We tend to play to the audience we believe are most important for us, and many a time fail in the effort. We forget the Christian truth that rather than playing to the gallery, we need to play to just one-Jesus Christ! It is time for us to sit back and reflect on what we are doing in terms of impressing Christ. Is it possible that even when we play for the Lord we do it with our own agenda in mind? We need to do some serious introspection and make some course corrections so that we do everything as unto our Lord Jesus Christ. Total obedience to His teachings and living by His rules is the way we walk with Him.

Passages to ponder:

Colossians 3:23-24 "And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ."

2 Timothy 2:15 "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Colossians 3:17 "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him."

AMEN

Are we performing true worship of Jesus?

I have always wondered why Christianity is preached to Christians. Those who are born into Christian families learn about Jesus Christ at home, at the Sunday school, at Vacation Bible School, during preparations for confirmation and when they become adults, from the pulpit. Others, who come into Christ at a later phase in their lives, work overtime to catch up and be at par with the born Christians. If I say, talking to Christians about Christianity, week after week in church is unnecessary; I will be making a scandalous statement. By implication one may construe that there really is no need to go to church on Sundays or listen to theological discourses. Church going, however, is critical for many reasons, corporate worship and the fellowship it entails, being the prime one.

That brings to fore a critical question. Are we able to perform true worship while we are in the church? I am conscious of the reason why I try to be regular at the church on Sundays. I want to worship Jesus, with all my heart, with all my mind and with all my strength. Let me confess I am not always successful at that. Are you?

While we are in the church our focus shifts from Christ to the Pastor and others present with us. The Holy Spirit nudges us and urges us to stay focused on Christ. The hypocrisy, one-upmanship, larger than life ego, uncharitable comments, pulpit abuses that surround us in many of our churches makes it difficult for many of us to hear what the Holy Spirit is telling us. One can argue that these are problems, we are warned, would come as obstacles; not just in the local church, but at home, and elsewhere. If that's so, we have no place left on this earth from which we can perform the true worship of the Lord. There has hardly been any place where we are not in the proximity of others. There are times we get so frustrated that we wish Jesus would carry all of us away so that we can worship Him in absolute sincerity and happiness. It is a frightening thought, however, that even if that was to happen, we will continue to be in the midst of the same people who have taken our minds off Jesus!

Are we to then conclude that we can never perform the true worship of the Lord? Let me assure you that it is an ill-conceived notion. We need to look within ourselves to see to what extent we ourselves are responsible for the conflicts. We would like to imagine and attribute all those hurdles before us as the doings of others, the Pastor, the elders and the fellow Christians. They have their failings, just as we have ours, there is no denying that. The reason why we are distracted by all that is because we also suffer from the same problems of attitude like others. How else do we see the speck in their eyes?

We forget that it is each one of us, as members of the Body of Christ that makes up the Church in true sense. If any part of the body begins to decay, it will result in death sooner or later. It becomes cancerous. Unlike the terminal cancers without cure, the Church has remedies prescribed as a sure cure for all these ills. None of these are recent problems. Even the early Church at the time of the Apostles suffered from this. Therefore, we have the Epistles that tell us how to deal with such problems. The composition of the treatment prescribed includes, forgiveness, reconciliation, Compassion, fellowship, and above all unconditional love for each other. Christians need constant reminders about these virtues they are expected to possess, if they are to live as true followers of Christ.

When we rise above all our personal agenda and focus on Jesus in corporate worship; when we accept the fact that all of us are fallible, we will stop looking into the lives of others and start looking within, resulting in giving our entire being in the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Passages to ponder:

John 4:23-24 "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. ^24^ "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

Matthew 15:9 "And in vain they worship Me, Teaching *as* doctrines the commandments of men.' "

Romans 12:1-2 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. ^2^ 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."

Hebrews 12:28-29 "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. ^29^ For our God *is* a consuming fire."

AMEN

To be a servant leader

Jesus Christ is our role model!

Many churches would, secretly, wish that the obsession of ‘leadership’ amongst their congregation would cease to exist. I receive newsletters and other reading material on the subject almost every day in my inbox, which establishes the fact that, it is a worldwide phenomenon. Innumerable books and articles have been written on this subject. Most of these writings, however, are focussed on teaching people how to be ‘better leaders.’ Unfortunately, very little is written about how to be a church leader in the first place. If one were to summarise most of what has been written, it would be found that it is all about how to get the rest of the people in the church to do what the leaders want!

It is also an accepted principle that matters do not happen in an orderly way, or reach their logical conclusion successfully, without the help of good leaders — leaders with vision, with the ability to convert such vision into tangible plans, with the ability to inspire confidence in others, who are ready to take risks, and who are willing to hold themselves accountable, and so on. One may, therefore, argue that leadership is essential in every organisation where two or more people and public resources are involved. I am not, therefore, in any way denouncing the very concept of leadership. I myself have rich experience of leadership both in the secular world and in the church. The question we need to address would be, is it all about simply leading, or about the God we are following?

The principle governing the ‘leadership’ in churches seems to be getting prominent so that nothing can work unless such leaders are present. Quite often such people bask themselves in the temporary glory of such high status, forgetting the fact that it could be a ‘coat of whitewash on the tomb of decay inside.’ Business schools will not teach you to be a good church leader. The only role model for the aspiring Christian leaders is Jesus Christ and the rules of the game are clearly spelt out in the Holy Bible.

When Jesus said “come,” they dropped everything and followed Him. They, probably, had never met Him before. He was not the most popular one around and yet they followed Him. They would not have forsaken everything, including their livelihood, had someone else given them the call. Let us briefly examine what made Him different from others.

The most persistent obstacle in leading like Jesus is the heart motivated by self-interest. If you are motivated by your own personal interest, keep away from church leadership. A heart motivated by self-interest looks at the world as a ‘give a little take a lot’ proposition. Such people put their own plans, ego, and motives ahead of those whom they lead. Effective leadership like Jesus begins from within.

Jesus exemplified what a ‘servant leadership’ is all about. From a secular perspective, servant and leader are poles apart, and combining the two is an improbability. 100% human and 100% Divine is also a mathematical improbability. Jesus demonstrated that both are possible. He showed us what a servant leader should be as opposed to being a self-serving leader.

A self-serving leader dreads feedback and/or criticism. He considers feedback as a threat to his public image and reputation. The gospel tells us that Jesus conducted His ministry under intense criticism and constant public scrutiny; but He saw these as a gift rather than a threat and turned all that into advantage. Those who are rooted in the unconditional love of Jesus and infallible faith in His grace should overcome the initial reactive emotions and seek to find truth and value in criticisms for improving leadership qualities.

In the secular workplace, it is a widespread practice to recruit subordinates who may never become a threat to the boss’ position. During His time on earth, Jesus demonstrated sacrificial passion for ensuring that His followers were equipped to carry on with the mission. He lived His legacy in an intimate relationship with those He empowered by His word and His exemplary life. Jesus said “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. 16 “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. 17 “These things I command you, that you love one another. - John 15:15-17. A servant leader should lead with love for all those who work with him or her and all those whom he or she leads.

Humility is the underlying quality Jesus Christ displayed as a Servant Leader. We read in John 13:3-5 “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, 4 rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. 5 After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.” Peter did not like this action one bit. To his simple mind it seemed scandalous for the Master to wash his feet. Jesus told him, “.....What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this.” 8 Peter said to Him, “You shall never wash my feet!” Jesus answered him, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me.” 9 Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!”- John 13:7-9. Jesus was very right in saying that Peter, at that time, would not

understand the meaning of His action. This fact is very evident from his response. He had to say something and he just said it. Later, much later, when the time came for Peter to lead, when he underwent humiliation and persecution for the sake of truth, he must have understood the meaning of what Jesus had told him on that fateful night.

Jesus, as a leader, had exhibited knowledge, authority, compassion, love and above all humility.

Lead like Jesus!

Passages to ponder:

Matthew 20:25-28 “But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ^26^ “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ^27^ “And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -- ^28^ “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

John 13:12-17 ^”^So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? ^13^ “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. ^14^ “If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. ^15^ “For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. ^16^ “Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. ^17^ “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.”

Philippians 2:3-8 “*Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ^4^ Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. ^5^ Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, ^6^ who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, ^7^ but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. ^8^ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of death*, even the death of the cross.”

AMEN

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Who or what is shaping our lives?

Our physical being is, often, shaped by the things we eat or don’t eat and also by the physical exercise we do or don’t do; our emotional being is often shaped by our parents, teachers, friends, mentors and others who exercise influence on us or the lack thereof. Our intellectual being is shaped largely through the education we receive, the mistakes we make (and the lessons we learn from such mistakes), our workplace exposure, the general environment of our upbringing and also through media (movies, TV, music, sports, news) and so on.

The most critical question that we need to answer is as to who or what is shaping our spiritual life? We need to look within ourselves very closely and find answers to the following questions:

- Is it Jesus our Saviour or some motivational guru?
- Is it the Holy Spirit or some other spiritual influence?
- Is it in the Scriptures or our self-help philosophy or the culture around us?

As good Christians, our answers to these questions should be obvious. Even if it is so, we should introspect to determine that we really are amenable to Jesus reshaping and reforming our lives. We must remember that quite often we get carried away by the compulsions and distractions of our environment; the lifestyles of the modern world. In the process we tend not to leave enough space for Jesus to work with us and to work within us.

Our inner transformation is a continuous process:

God instructed Jeremiah to visit the Potter’s Field and see for himself how the potter makes the clay pots. He must have observed how carefully the potter prepares the clay from dry earth by moistening it with the right quantity of water (**Holy Spirit**), obtaining the correct constancy (**receptive heart**), before the clay is placed on the spinning wheel. He also must have observed the manner in which the potter shapes the clay into vessels, using his two hands; while at all this time the design of the vessel remains in the mind of the potter (**God’s Will for us**).

During the course of these highly skilled operations the pottery may not turn out to be perfect or may get marred due to

the imperfections in the clay. But the potter is not discouraged, nor does he ever throw the clay away as waste, not to be looked upon again. So long as the clay is moist and soft, yielding to his hands, he would re-use the clay to re-shape and make another pottery; more beautiful than the previous one. He is constantly at it and tirelessly works on the vessel to shape it the way he wants it to be.

This message is very much relevant to us in today's context.

As long as we remain soft like the moist clay, our Potter, Jesus Christ, who is full of mercy, can Form, Reform, and Transform us. He is unlikely to give upon us, so long as we remain receptive to Him.

On the other hand, if we become stubborn, rigid, and hard and set in sinful form, we will continue to lead broken lives. An unrepentant person will carry the heavy burden of all his sins throughout his life.

Jesus loves us just the way we are. But being a perfectionist, He refuses to leave us with deficiencies; He wants to shape us in His own likeness. The process of refinement and the process of re-shaping of our spiritual being by our Lord continue forever.

One may ask as to how do vessels become 'marred', in the skilful hands of the potter!

1. It happens when we are not centred (unbalanced) on the wheel of life - because we live an unchaste, unrestrained life, upsetting our spiritual alignment. Only we have ourselves to blame for this.
2. Secondly it happens due to the internal imperfections of the clay. In other words due to secret and hidden sins that surface as the Hands of Jesus touches the unresolved grips of sins in us.
3. The third reason is that the clay dries out. We neglect to moisten our lives with the Baptism of the Holy Spirit.

God formed us out of the clay, and we are still clay in his hands. Are we allowing our Potter's Hand to continuously shape us, removing imperfections, and transforming our beings into the likeness of Himself? Do we believe that Jesus can easily rise up repentant people from their ruins as the potter can make anew the marred pottery in his hands? Do we know that sinners call it liberty to live as they like; whereas for a man to be a slave to his sin is the worst form of slavery? Our calamities will easily pass away when Jesus looks towards us, and smiles upon us.

Are we receptive to His calling?

Passages to ponder:

Job 33:6 "Truly I *am* as your spokesman before God; I also have been formed out of clay."

Isaiah 64:8 "But now, O LORD, You *are* our Father; We *are* the clay, and You our potter; And all we *are* the work of Your hand."

Romans 12:1-2 "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. ^2^ 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."

John 14:16-17 "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever -- ^17^ "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."

AMEN

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To be a Church Leader

If a church was to advertise inviting applications for church leadership positions, will it read like the advertisement for a business executive, may be with some theology requirements thrown in? Looking closely at the leadership requirements of any modern church, one might argue that successful business executives make good church leaders; after all, management is nothing but the art of managing people and resources. The church also needs some people to lead and manage its people and resources. Though we may agree that the skill requirements of a business leader closely match with that of a church leader, there are a number of profound differences which makes the church leader a different kind of manager.

Perhaps we will understand this difference when we take a close look at the advertisement for a business executive and

read in between the lines and understand what the advertisement ‘did not’ say: the advertisement would virtually imply that, the incumbent should be prepared to be available on a 24/7 basis; be prepared to ‘live out of airports’; be prepared to delegate all the responsibilities of upbringing of their children to the spouses, maids, teachers, neighbours and others and at times to the police and the judiciary; be ready for partying at the drop of a hat and keep others happy by getting high, on not so holy spirit; be prepared to liaise with others and think nothing of offering bribes in any manner they desire, so long as the work is done; be ruthless with the employees and be ready to fire them as a fashionable activity; should possess an urge to amass wealth through, even, dubious means.

I want to argue here that it is not the same to be a business executive and a church leader. The most important attributes a church leader should possess are spiritual, moral and ethical observances. These, more often than not, are really not the consideration of business leaders, in most instances. Paul talked about this aspect, probably as a guideline to the less experienced Timothy as he was getting ready to select and assign responsibilities to his ministers -- Elders, Deacons, Bishops-- (I hasten to add Pastors to the list) - 1 Timothy 3.

Most books on church leaders often highlight acceptance of calling, complete reliance on God and perseverance in faith; the kind of qualities we see in the great Biblical characters like Moses, Jeremiah, and Paul. All of them and many others were powerful leaders who were assigned critical and difficult tasks. While the real role model for the aspiring church leaders is Jesus Christ, it would be worthwhile to study other Biblical leaders. On the question of ‘who is fit to lead a church?’ one needs to begin looking at the concerns raised in 1 Timothy 3:1-13. The moral and ethical lapses, undoubtedly, would leave any fellowship in a state of instability. And such internal disruptions would attract severe criticism from unbelievers.

The focal point is the leader’s reputation among believers *and* also amongst those who are not in the Christian faith. This is to be assessed on the basis of proven moral character and maturity, and such a leader should be ‘above reproach’ (1 Timothy 3:2) and blameless (1 Timothy 3:10).

The code of conduct as stated in 1 Timothy 3: 2-7 gives guidelines for measuring a leader’s reputation. The focus is on observable conduct. Love for money and comforts are the main disqualification for a church leader. The church leader’s outlook on material wealth should be one of prayerful detachment. Such a leader can be a model of generosity towards the needy and should lead a simple lifestyle, identifying himself with the materially and spiritually poor he leads. The leaders must accept the fact that whatever financial situation the church might be in, and all the resources that are at his disposal belong to the Lord and so must be looked after faithfully for Him. (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Paul has, in great details, articulated what he meant by “above reproach.” The candidate must be *temperate*, or “sober”. Leaders are advised to be vigilant against ‘spiritual laziness’ and avoid habits that affect the faculties, in other words, to stay away from all activities that would lure the leader away from the ways of the Lord. Vigilance, self-discipline, uprightness, and a delicate balance of inner and outer life that Paul wrote about are applicable to us even after 2000 years.

Passages to ponder:

Hebrews 13:17 “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

Acts 20:28 “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

Colossians 3:17 ” And *whatever* you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.”

1 Peter 5:2-3 “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;”

AMEN

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Whom are you working for, self, others or Jesus Christ?

Consider this scenario: your school buddy settled abroad, surprises you with a call, early in the morning, to tell you that he is in town and will visit you with his family for dinner. Both of you have a lot to catch up as you have not met for over 15 years. Think of the excitement and the preparations you will launch yourself into, in the expectation of the re-union. Here is another scenario: as you woke up, you are told that Jesus Christ will call on you in the evening and share dinner

with you. Your preparations are going to be far exceeding in excellence and in details, in comparison to what you would have done for your friend. You will pay attention to the smallest of details, lest the Lord disapprove of your readiness. You will search scriptures to determine what food Jesus would relish. You would do everything with zeal.

Two synonyms for zeal are fervour and passion. That is exactly what Paul said in Colossians 3:23, 24: “23 And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; 24 Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.” Paul says ‘heartily’ meaning from ‘your very inner-self’. What is striking about this passage is that Paul was not addressing the spiritual leaders, he was addressing the ‘servants’; some of whom might have been slaves in those days. By implication this advice would embrace any work one would undertake, whether it is done for the ‘masters’ - employers in the present context -- or done for oneself.

We are working on something or the other all the time. Irrespective of what and for whom; irrespective of the task on hand is menial or demand high degree of skill and training, we are told to do it ‘as to the Lord’. In the same breath, Paul tells us not to do anything ‘as unto men’. Verse 22 is more explicit in this regard. Paul writes “..... not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God.” As we get on with our tasks, we need to put our best for what we do, willingly and with no effort spared. Paul knew the problem of working for others: we cannot please men because (a) it is impossible and (b) people are capricious. It is impossible to please everyone as the goalpost of their expectations keep changing. The same principle is applicable when we try to please ourselves in our work. If our focus is not Jesus Christ but ‘men’ or ourselves we tend to drift from sincerity and honesty. The ‘God consciousness’ we otherwise carry in our hearts when we do our tasks as to the Lord will diminish and we will begin to experience the disconnect between Jesus and us.

We lack zeal for ‘work as to the Lord’ because some of us do not know Jesus as we should. The zeal for work comes from the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. We live in a society with ‘me first’ syndrome all around us. Many view, every facet of life - work, school, home, play, and church - as a means of satisfying themselves. Sometimes our desire for popularity pours water on our zeal.

Our purpose in life should be to bring glory to Jesus in all aspects of our lives, including the way we perform our tasks. Our work is the primary aspect of our lives where we can reflect Jesus by our diligence, excellence, and honesty, aligning ourselves with the teachings of Jesus Christ. When we do our tasks as serving Jesus Christ, it would change our perspective of work. When we are working as to the Lord, we will show the world the Character of Jesus Christ.

Whom are you working for? The call is yours.

Passages to ponder:

Proverbs 13:4 “The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing; But the soul of the diligent shall be made rich.”

Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Colossians 3:24 “knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.”

Ephesians 6:7 “with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men,”

AMEN

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What is your excuse today?

The previous chapter began with two hypothetical invitations to dine; first an old friend inviting himself to dinner at your home and the second Jesus Christ coming over for dinner with you. Your response would have been positive in both the scenarios, though with varying degrees of perfection in your preparations. In this chapter you are invited to a ‘Great Banquet’, a banquet prepared by Jesus for you. How would you respond to His call? Would you respond with ridiculous excuses, similar to the ones used by three invitees who did not want to go to the feast? Read Luke 14:15-24 for details.

Some may want to argue that the narrative of Jesus is not relevant to the present times. After all, who would not want a free meal, that too at the invitation of an important person the society wants seen with? I have heard talk about people, who are seldom seen at the church Services, promptly turning up, with families and friends, at the Christmas Dinner and Easter Lunch. Those who argue on this matter, strictly from a ‘good meal’ perspective, greatly err in their understanding of what Jesus was conveying to us.

Jesus has taught us to see people as an opportunity and not as a nuisance. He turns every situation into an opportunity to tell people about the Kingdom of God. He contextualised His narrative about the banquet while sitting at lunch in the house of a prominent Pharisee. The invitation is all about being part of His Kingdom. The invitation had come to you and me only because of His grace and not because we are worthy of it. The narrative tells us that the banquet was eventually enjoyed by the poor, the destitute, the sick, the hated and the unwanted, quite unlike the kind who normally get invited to such momentous events. We have a choice, be like the high and mighty with no time for Jesus or be like the so-called unwanted who are blessed that they “shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.”

By His grace, all of us receive the invite, the ‘call’ to be part of His Kingdom; to be workmen and women in His kingdom. But we come up with absurd excuses like the three men in the passage. We may not know it, but the bread served could be the one which would give us eternal life with Jesus and that the wine served the blood of the ‘Lamb’ slaughtered for you and me. The call, the invitation, is to continue the redemption effect; we are expected to sustain the redemption walking with Jesus. His call is a reminder of the Last Supper He celebrated; it is a reminder of His sacrifice on that rugged cross for you and me, and the hope of eternal life brought to us through His resurrection.

Christian faith is centred on the Eucharist. Through the Holy Communion we remain united with Christ. In our spiritual poverty we receive nourishment through the humble bread and wine, when received with humility and faith. We cannot stop short there but should reach out to the poor and the needy, and the spiritually bankrupt. In doing so, we will reach out to Jesus. And as we accept His call and work in fellowship with the least of us, for His glory, it becomes ‘faith in practice.’

How do you want to respond to His call today?

Passages to ponder:

Luke 14:18-20 “But they all with one *accord* began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ ^19^ “And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ ^20^ “Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.”

Exodus 4:10-14 ^”^Then Moses said to the LORD, “O my Lord, I *am* not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I *am* slow of speech and slow of tongue.” ^11^ So the LORD said to him, “Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? *Have* not I, the LORD? ^12^ “Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say.” ^13^ But he said, “O my Lord, please send by the hand of whomever *else* You may send.” ^14^ So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: “Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. And look, he is also coming out to meet you. When he sees you, he will be glad in his heart.”

Jeremiah 1:4-10 ^”^Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: ^5^ “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.” ^6^ Then said I: “Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I *am* a youth.” ^7^ But the LORD said to me: “Do not say, ‘I *am* a youth,’ For you shall go to all to whom I send you, And whatever I command you, you shall speak. ^8^ Do not be afraid of their faces, For I *am* with you to deliver you,” says the LORD. ^9^ Then the LORD put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the LORD said to me: “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. ^10^ See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, To root out and to pull down, To destroy and to throw down, To build and to plant.”

Matthew 7:21 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

AMEN

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Are we a reconciled community?

Disobedience to God and sin disconnected God and humanity. Jesus by dying on the Cross, for our sins, brought about reconciliation between God and humanity. While the redemption that Jesus bestowed on us is unconditional, we are expected to lead our lives reconciled to Jesus Christ and to others. Paul hit the nail on the head by stating that it is our responsibility, “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” - Ephesians 4:3

Before we can answer the question whether we are a reconciled community or not, we need to introspect in honesty and earnestness. In 1 John 1:7 we read “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” If we do not have fellowship with each other,

we probably are in the dark. We probably have not yet known the Light-Jesus Christ. Jesus wants us to be reconciled people who by our exemplary lives would draw others to us. We should be a community ready to accept everyone with no bar on religion, caste, social and economic status and lead them also into light.

Humanity comes bundled with ego, and we can find hardly anyone who has no ego at all. The problem arises when our ego gets the better of us; when we fail to rein in our ego. We have to determine who is at the centre of our lives: is it our Lord Jesus Christ or an egoistic church community? The only way we can bury our ego and live as reconciled people is to put Jesus at the centre of everything, working as unto Jesus Christ and not in our own self-interest.

We claim that we have received forgiveness for all our sins and shortcomings because of the never to repeat sacrifice offered by Jesus for our sake. Having become the beneficiary of such Grace of the Lord, we have no excuse not to be a forgiving community. If we are not, then we are crucifying Jesus every time we fall short of the standard He expects from us.

When we allow Jesus to step into the centre of our lives, our lives will begin to change, and even those who stay away from the Church will return into our midst. Let us be a reconciling, forgiving and loving community.

Passages to ponder:

Ephesians 4:32 “And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.”

2 Corinthians 5:18 “Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,”

Colossians 1:20-22 “and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. ^21^ And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled ^22^ in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight --”

AMEN

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Are we shy to confess Jesus?

” Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. ^33^ “But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. - Matthew 10:32, 33

In simple terms, Jesus Christ is telling us that all believers should confess Him before others.

Almost everyone loves to participate in a lively discussion. At times, the participants could be total strangers. Such conversations could be on any topic, climate, trivia or an involved discussion about a new world order.

Jesus Christ, however, is a special topic of conversation. In this age of anxieties, with numerous concerns about the future disquieting the hearts of people, with the fear of the unknown predominant; with the widespread promotion of secular ideologies, few people remain neutral concerning Jesus Christ. Most who have heard about Jesus Christ would have formed an opinion about Him in their minds. Some see Him as a good teacher, some fear Him, and some are in outright opposition to Him. There are many who are eager to learn more about Him, His life and His purpose. People also suspect that accepting Jesus would place on their lives some burden of far-reaching implications, which, they are not willing to shoulder. Discussing Jesus, therefore, is not an easy task.

We cannot talk about Jesus Christ as a matter of opinion either. Some tend to say “Jesus loves me because my grandmother told me so” or statements to that effect. People are desperate for accurate information that will help them arrive at accurate conclusions and find practical answers for the problems in their lives. In this knowledge era, people are seeking such truthful information that will help them to conclude that there is hope for eternity and that there is truly a purpose for their lives. People are also desperately in search of others who have ‘known’ Christ, and can reveal Him through their lives. Reflecting Christ in our lives will give others the assurance that there is hope in Christ Jesus.

Believers face a challenging audience with a mix of knowledge and emotions about Christ. This renders most of the believers tongue-tied when it comes to talking about Jesus. However, believers can become a source of valuable information concerning Christ in any discussion. Information and arguments alone, however, will not convince people concerning such spiritual issues. As a matter of fact, one cannot just argue Jesus. Believers must understand that Jesus is spiritually a very sensitive topic to talk about and should try to gage the inner conflicts of the listeners before drawing them into a wide-ranging discussion on Him.

Many amongst us have been Christians for ten, twenty or seventy plus years. Yet most remain dumb when it comes to talk about Christ. We go through the motions all believers do; attend Church Services regularly, give liberally, celebrate Christmas and Easter and stop there. In the worst instances, such people may even be a hurdle in the efforts of others who wish to fulfil Christ’s Will. Those who come in the way of others err the most.

Some hide behind the false notion that carrying the Good News to the rest of the world is primarily the responsibility of Evangelists and Ordained Priests. They hide behind their family, work and social responsibilities, forgetting that there is always an opportunity to confess Jesus before others.

Admittedly there are many stumbling blocks that one may encounter while trying to share the truth about Christ. These barriers will be different from people to people, from place to place and from society to society. We cannot ignore these problems if we are to bring men and women to Christ. Having witnessed Christ’s wonderful saving power; His unfathomable Love and compassion; I believe there can be no barrier strong enough to prevent us from bringing others into the knowledge of Christ. The more we know about these obstacles, the better equipped we will be to overcome them. At the same time, we should remember that with God the impossible becomes possible!

Time to wake up and act

Passages to ponder:

Romans 10:9 “ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Romans 10:13 “For “whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.”

Acts 19:10 ^”^And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.”

Mark 16:15-16 “And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. ^16^ “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”

Psalms 16:8-9 “I have set the LORD always before me; Because *He is* at my right hand I shall not be moved. ^9^ Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope”

Revelation 14:6 ^”^Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth -- to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people --”

AMEN

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Rate your maturity in Christ on a scale of 1 to 10

We do that all the time, I mean rating of merchandise, services, personality traits, and so on. Why not rate our maturity in Jesus Christ, lest we live our life with an erroneous impression about our piousness? Leaving matters where it stands has many pitfalls. Anger, lack of compassion and love, hatred, inability to forget a wrong done to you, dissatisfaction, hidden sins, untruthfulness, compulsive unbecoming behaviour, and the like, are some of the non-virtues which are stumbling blocks in our journey towards maturing in Christ. It requires spiritual courage to rate oneself. It is like waiting to know a biopsy finding. We dread the truth.

This maturity has nothing to do with physical ageing; it has everything to do with our walk with Christ, our walk like Christ. In our journey through life we look up to many people, siblings, father, mother, teacher, pastor, friend, celebrities including film personalities, as our role model. Learning virtues from others is not wrong in itself. What we must keep in mind is that no human living or dead can be a perfect person in all respect. By the same token, we can never achieve 100% maturity in Christ, not at least in this life. Paul understood this truth perfectly well as he wrote in Philippians 3:12-14 thus: ‘Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. 13 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, 14 I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.’ If we are to press forward towards the mark, we have to accept Jesus as our role model.

Our Salvation begins with our walk with Christ; walk like Him. It is this that we must learn for ourselves, teach our children and teach others. Walking like Him entails reflecting Him in every sphere of our lives and imbibing in ourselves His virtues. Walking with Jesus would, therefore, mean the application of the virtues as we journey through

our lives. It does not matter whether we managed to practise one, two, three, or many of the virtues; what matters is that we practise what we learn.

Let us briefly look at some of the virtues that we must internalise and practise. We may place these on a rating grid of 1 to 10. Tick off each item rating it as 'not present', 'minimal presence', 'maturing' and 'matured'. One will then know which of these to work on. If we do this exercise periodically, we will know where we stand on our maturity in Christ. Here are 10 of the critical virtues (not placed in any particular order. Work on these as you please):

1. Know your Scriptures (Sources are Bible, studies, sermons, own notes

and thoughts);

2. Unconditional love (seeking no reciprocation. Love is the supreme

gift of the Spirit, and has governing power over other gifts "Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up;" - 1 Corinthians 13:4

3. Compassion and mercy (Expressing compassion towards others reveals a

strength of character that few people possess! Being compassionate is to be moved inwardly; to yearn with tender mercy, affection, pity and empathy. "Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy." - Matthew 5:7. Christ forgave all including those who plotted and killed Him.)

4. Humility (Opposite of pride. Not pretentious but humble in the sight

of Jesus Christ) We read in Philippians 2:8 about Jesus "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

5. Kindness: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for

nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil." - Luke 6:35)

6. Meekness (Meekness is a humble attitude that expresses itself in the

patient endurance of offences. Meekness is not weakness; it is power under control.)

7. Patience: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some

count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." - 2 Peter 3:9

8. Forgiving and forgetting (Forgiveness is a choice we make through a

decision of our will, motivated by obedience to Christ and His command to forgive. Unless we forget what we have forgiven, we have not forgiven completely.)

9. Truthfulness (Jesus is the truth, the ultimate truth and when we are

not truthful and transparent we are declaring our stance in opposition to Jesus. There is no partial truth as truth is Christ.)

10. Teaching: Jesus said: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." - Matthew 28:19-20

We should uphold Christ as our model for testing our maturity in Him. As we progress with the testing and as we continue to transform towards becoming people of Jesus, we are bound to face many challenges Satan will bring in our paths. Remember, Christ Himself was tested by Satan in the wilderness. Christ confronted Satan with the principles drawn from the Bible. When we are faced with such obstacles we also should draw our strength from the Bible.

Passages to ponder:

1 Corinthians 13:11 ^^^When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things."

John 3:19-21 “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. ^20^ “For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ^21^ “But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

Luke 8:14 “Now the ones *that* fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity.”

Galatians 4:19 “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you,”

AMEN

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How Is It Between You and Jesus Christ?

Jesus desires from us a complete, intimate and honest relationship with Him. We cannot worship Him as if we are doing Him a favour; worship is for our benefit, not His. True worship is when we connect with God with a clean heart, devoid of all feelings of guilt. In Psalm 51, David implored God “10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.” Having experienced the forgiveness, blessings, grace of God, and the glorious presence of the Holy Spirit in his life, David is beseeching God to set their relationship right, though, Holy Spirit in David’s days was a visiting Spirit. We are advantaged that we have an indwelling Spirit.

By implication, the operative word here is ‘disconnect’. David, like most of us, had experienced disconnect from God. The nuances of our time and the numerous temptations it holds out, often disconnects us from Jesus. Many of us would have experienced this disconnect, a very disturbing feeling of having moved away or cut off from Him. It seems guilt is one of the main reasons for this. I am not saying anything new here. But the problem lies in the fact that we fail to deal with our guilt promptly and effectively by purging the roots of sin out of our system. We fail to prepare a clean heart to re-connect with Jesus. And then when we remain in that state, it causes us to commit more sins and drift further away from His presence.

There was nothing to envy about David’s married life. His wife held him in contempt, and she disappeared out of the Biblical narrations quite quickly. David’s sins were many -- misuse of power, betrayal, adultery, deception, conspiracy, wilfully sending a person to his death and more importantly his refusal to acknowledge his guilt. Adultery compounded by deception to cover up his betrayal of Uriah resulted in David sinking deeper and deeper into sin. Unknown to him he progressively drifted away from God, and his actions became totally unworthy.

David knew he had sinned, but the Bible does not tell us how his relationship with God was, between sinning and repenting. It is quite possible that he got on with his life and remained aloof from God because his heart was heavy with the feelings of his guilt. We cannot have both sin and Jesus at the same time within us. When we are tormented by the thoughts of sin, it is difficult to worship God with any degree of sincerity. It is all the more so if one has no intention of turning away from the sinful ways.

Taking a sincere personal inventory of our inner selves is something most of us rather avoid, although we need to do it every now and again. We continue to live in denial because: we are too busy for our inner lives; we are quick to justify ourselves and slow to excuse others, and we are fearful of what we will see within us.

It will usually take some kind of outer voice or an event to turn us towards the inward journey. It may be the words of a friend who cares, and who dares to tell us to take an inward look of ourselves. For David, it was Nathan the prophet as he continued to live in denial, like most of us do. Eventually, Prophet Nathan must have asked David the critical question, “Is your relationship with God alright?”

This is the question we should ask ourselves. May be we also have a Nathan who will steer us towards re-building the relationship with Jesus. Most of the time we tend to take Jesus for granted. When we make serious self-examination we will find several such wrong doings, tucked away in our inner selves. We must accept the fact that in most instances, we will never have an opportunity of restitution for many wrongs we might have done to others. The only hope for us is our Lord’s abundant mercy.

Let us not invent excuses for our wrong doings. Let us not claim to be the victims of circumstances or try to rationalise our actions. When we come into the presence of the Lord there is no escape, no hiding, and no excuses. David recognised the need to have truth in the innermost parts, as he understood that truth is paramount to God. Let us look at what David acknowledged in Psalm 51:6-7: “Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, And in the hidden part You

will make me to know wisdom. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Living in a sinful world this should be our daily prayer; we may find ourselves powerless in the situations we may get caught. We need the Holy Spirit’s benevolent help. Remember as followers of Christ we cannot afford to lead lives of pretence.

May God give each one of us the spiritual courage to look within ourselves to confront our many sins and experience the joy of reconciliation with our Lord Jesus Christ. In this way, we will leave behind our guilt and be able to worship our Lord in truth and peace.

Passages to ponder:

Psalms 24:4-5 “He who has clean hands and a pure heart, Who has not lifted up his soul to an idol, Nor sworn deceitfully.
^5^ He shall receive blessing from the LORD, And righteousness from the God of his salvation.”

Proverbs 16:2 “All the ways of a man *are* pure in his own eyes, But the LORD weighs the spirits.”

Matthew 5:8 “Blessed *are* the pure in heart, For they shall see God.”

Philippians 1:9-11 “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment,
^10^ that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, ^11^ being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

AMEN

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Is Jesus at the centre of your life?

Discussions on Christian family life have brought into focus a problem almost all of us face in life. Most people find the ‘balancing act’ between the family life and spiritual life difficult to cope with. On the horizontal axis three facets of our lives: family, work and social life are considered. Our spiritual life is, usually, placed on the vertical axis.

According to the Bible, God created man and woman to be husband and wife, starting a family. God continues to bless and redeem families. The family is important and precious in God’s sight. Our happiness and purpose is realised through our families, as happiness is largely the result of the health of our relationships within our households. Our life in our workplace and the social sphere also work on the same principle of a healthy relationship with each other.

However, our inter and intra personal relationships have become extremely complex and difficult to deal with. Therefore, the notion arises that it is a balancing act one needs to perform. Let us see how these relationships have become complex, taking the family example. It is an amazing experience when a child is born into a family. It is as if the kaleidoscope of family life has been given a good jiggle: husbands and wives become fathers and mothers; fathers and mothers become grandparents; then come sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, soon making brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts and so on, making the family into a web of relationships. The family is then joined by members of the extended family, and the web continues to expand. In a very profound sense, everything changes and none of the members of the family will ever be quite the same as time passes. The relationships within the family would also have undergone a complete change. The situation is no different in a person’s work and social life.

In all such relationships the main problem is that of hierarchy. As things change fast, our position in the hierarchy gets challenged. This was recognised by most of the authors of the Epistles. Paul made it a point to address the husband and wife, parents and children and employer and employee relationships in his writings. Do you recall the popular number by the Beatles entitled ‘I, me and mine’? Part of it goes like this:

‘No one’s frightened of playing it

Everyone’s saying it

Flowing more freely than wine

All through your life I me mine’

This is where the problem starts. This syndrome is so deep-rooted in our minds that it forces us to continue to adopt the military type structure in our homes, workplaces, at the Church and elsewhere. Then begins the ‘balancing act’ which we are unable to cope with. To make matters more complex, we have our spiritual life to deal with. Our life then gets thrown completely out of balance. Balance, to my mind, entails equitable sharing. So would you say 50% secular and 50% spiritual? I would say 100% to Jesus, and the rest will follow. The remedy, therefore, could lie in flattening the

structures to a matrix format. Here, each person relates to another based on the typicality of relationship and function appropriate to each relationship. For example man as husband to his wife; woman as mother to son or daughter; siblings as brothers and sisters, and so on. No one is above anyone and all are equal in the eyes of our Lord. Place Jesus Christ at the centre of it all and make every relationship in the matrix work through Him; through prayer and supplication. The results will be amazing. Rather than placing our lives on horizontal and vertical planes, place it in the circle where Jesus is at the centre of it all.

This is exactly what Paul suggested saying “Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; 16 above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. 17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; 18 praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints -- 19 and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, - Ephesians 6:11-19

Passages to ponder:

Matthew 6:33 “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

Romans 8:38-39 “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ^39^ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Galatians 3:28 ^”^There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

AMEN

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Be truthful and remain in Christ

I read this illustration recently, which I have paraphrased for this chapter. There was this young pastor known for delivering good sermons. Sunday after Sunday, the congregation would file past, complimenting the pastor for his message of the day. It went on for a couple of years, and the pastor became complacent until, on a Sunday, an old man walked up to him, shook hands and said “your sermon was too long.” Little later the pastor found the same old man coming back in the line and said “you used words most people did not understand”. This time the Pastor was puzzled but did not say anything. To his utter surprise he found the old man in line a third time. As he came to the pastor he said “Pastor, you should know that your sermon was wishy-washy, boring, and there was no takeaway for us.” The pastor decided to investigate the man and asked the deacon to find out about the old man. The deacon reported back saying: “This old man habitually eavesdrops and repeats what he hears others talking about.” Most people hesitate telling the truth upfront. But the truth eventually surfaces. We will not know if the truth changed the pastor for better or he just quit pastoring.

Truth is absolute and this is what Jesus said “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.” - Luke 16:10. There is no such thing as ‘half-truth or partial truth’. Some may become dishonest thinking it is being done for a good cause. ‘Good cause’ is a relative view and is determined based on the wisdom of each individual. If such understanding is deficient, the reasoning also becomes faulty.

Truthfulness is a ‘must’ attribute for anyone claiming to be a believer in Jesus Christ. Any nonconformity would be damaging not just to the person indulging in it, but to the entire Christian community. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” - John 14:6; making truth not just a matter of principle but the very person of Jesus Christ. Truth, therefore, is not a religion, a ritual, or enforcement of a personal behaviour. Jesus has made truth as something indwelling in Him. Jesus went on to say “Abide in Me, and I in you... ..” - John 15:4. He tells us that we have no life apart from Him and tells us that a believer must abide in Him. Reading into these profound statements, one tend to draw the conclusion that a believer has no option but to be ‘absolutely’ truthful to have a life in Jesus.

It is not an easy task to point to someone erring in truth. There are inherent perils in doing so. In Galatians 4:16 we read “Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?” The foolish and those who have only a surface-

level faith in Jesus will forthwith declare you an enemy. To be people of truth does not happen by default as we become Christians. We must be prepared to accept the truth and speak truth, stand-up for truth and be ready to be sacrificed for truth, perhaps much to our discomfiture or pain. A cost we should be ready to pay to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Prophet Nathan must have built up plenty of courage to make David realise that he was not truthful to God and was living in sin.

How do we know if we are truthful people of God or not? Just ask oneself these questions: Am I a truthful person?; Do I think nothing of a slight departure from the truth?; Do I sometimes feel threatened by the truth?; Do I think it is acceptable not to be truthful as long as I do not hurt anyone? How do I feel when I do not tell the truth?; How do I take it when someone is dishonest?; Even if I may not be so, do I want others to be truthful to me?

Let us briefly see what happens to those who are not truthful in Jesus: they will be misled and confused by false teachings; it is tantamount to deceiving themselves, and dishonesty becomes part of their lives; dishonesty or falsehood being a sin, it alters their personalities; it places an obstacle in their relationship with Jesus and soon they experience the ‘disconnect’; they will not be able to mature in Jesus Christ, as dishonesty cripples their spiritual growth; and above all it will grieve Jesus when He sees us indulging in dishonesty.

One needs to believe in his or her life in Jesus Christ. One needs to accept the fact that the aberrations from truthful ways had separated us from the Love of Jesus Christ. People may point you to several ways to gain the re-union with Christ. But the only truth is that Jesus is the only way.

Our choices are ‘be in Jesus and be truthful’ or ‘remain dishonest and be condemned for eternity.’ Take your pick.

Passages to ponder:

Psalm 119:160 “The entirety of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever.”

John 17:17 “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.”

Ephesians 1:13-14 “In Him you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, ^14^ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.”

Psalm 25:5 “Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You *are* the God of my salvation; On You I wait all the day.”

John 1:14 “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

AMEN

Jesus is my Shepherd!

Let me begin by saying that Psalm 23 is the best known Psalm of the 150 Psalms found in the Old Testament. Psalms are categorised as: Individual and Communal Lament-expressing need for God’s deliverance; Thanksgiving-being aware of God’s blessing and expressing thanks to God; Trust and confidence -- expressing the implicit trust and confidence in the Lord; Enthronement -describing God’s sovereign rule; Pilgrimage-establishing a mood of worship; Royal-portraying Christ as the sovereign ruler; Wisdom-instructions as to God’s will; and Imprecatory-invoking God’s wrath and judgment against enemies.

Psalm 23 as a hymn of confidence and trust, pictures the Lord as a believer’s Shepherd, King and Host. David progressively reveals his personal relationship with the Lord in 3 steps: Declaration-“The Lord is my Shepherd”; Expectations-“I shall not want” and “I will fear no evil”, and Joy-“My cup runs over.” This psalm is all about thanksgiving and explicit faith in God, in His abundant mercies and intimate care. It appears that this Psalm was composed when David had obtained possession of his kingdom, and lived in peace, prosperity, and peace.

There is a great lesson to be learnt from David. All his miseries were behind him. His sins, which were great -- adultery, deception, conspiracy and abetting in murder- have been forgiven, and he is at peace with himself and God. Unlike the worldly people, me and you included, David did not, in the time of his great peace and prosperity, bury Godly thoughts in forgetfulness. He abstained from all forms of luxurious indulgence and delighted himself in God, the author and provider of all blessings. Through this Psalm, David makes explicit declarations that the tranquillity he enjoys is entirely due to the abundant goodness of God. He further asserts that, through God’s providence he will continue to be happy even to the end of his life. To this end, he employed himself in continual worship of God.

David himself was a shepherd and, therefore, was quite familiar with what it takes to be a good shepherd. The opening

line of this Psalm is very important. David makes it clear that God was his shepherd, and, therefore, he would not be in want. There is a very important personal statement here -- “my shepherd”. The shepherd leads the sheep beside still waters where they can drink without any fear of the river sweeping them away. In Hebrew, the phrase is ‘waters of rest’. The image is of the sheep feeding beside a stream or a lake and then resting. A good shepherd not only leads his sheep to sumptuous pastures, but also leads them beside peaceful waters to refresh them, and guides them away from rugged and tortuous paths to paths that are direct, straight and easy.

The passage I cherish in this Psalm is David’s statement in verse 4: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” When there is danger the shepherds are usually in the front. David himself would have fought wild animals to protect his sheep. When David’s life was in danger --running away from Saul and hunted to be killed, he still trusted in the Lord. It may be a tunnel experience -- when we do not know what is coming out at the other end or whether we will walk out at all. Yet we should have the hope that in our most difficult situation the presence of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is always with us.

In our life trials and tribulations are bound to come. It may seem that we are facing a wall, and we tend to give up all hopes of rescue. There can be situations when we foresee no way out of trouble. David compares the unfathomable care with which Jesus protects the believers to a shepherd’s rod and staff, and makes explicit pronouncement that this protection is all that he needs all through the rest of his life.. A sheep, when it grazes through a dark valley, is protected from the attacks of wild animals and from any other form of harm, by the presence of the shepherd alone. As often as we are exposed to any danger, we will have sufficient defence and protection under the pastoral care of Jesus.

When Jesus is with us -- who or what can be against us?

Passages to ponder:

Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.”

Psalm 118:1 “Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.”

Psalm 118:8 ^”^It is better to trust in the LORD Than to put confidence in man.”

Psalm 95:1-6 “Oh come, let us sing to the LORD! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. ^2^ Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. ^3^ For the LORD *is* the great God, And the great King above all gods. ^4^ In His hand *are* the deep places of the earth; The heights of the hills *are* His also. ^5^ The sea *is* His, for He made it; And His hands formed the dry *land*. ^6^ Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.”

AMEN

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Why attend church? -- A perspective

Show me someone who is above sin or without any weaknesses. I am sure you will have a long search and at the end of it you may not find one such perfect person in the eyes of Jesus Christ. So we are not alone as believers with sin. Then show me a few people who are strong believers (church going should not be the only criteria for your search, though definitely one of the parameters). You will not find many. Let me tell you a story which I read some time ago:

There is this small church in one of the country areas in England with about 50 people worshipping. The Pastor of the church knows every person who worship at the church. During one winter season, he noticed that one middle-aged bachelor -- let us call him John for convenience -- had been missing for a few weeks from the church, and the Pastor decided to pay him a visit on a Saturday. So on that cold Saturday night he knocked on the door of the man. After a while, John opened the door and seeing the Pastor invited him into his house. The Pastor went in and both of them made themselves comfortable in front of the fireplace. However, both of them, embarrassed, did not exchange any words. After a while, the Pastor picked up the tong and took a red hot burning coal from the midst of the rest and kept it aside. The coal started to dim with the fire diminishing and little later became black with the fire totally gone. The Pastor then picked it up and placed it in the middle of the burning coal and it started to burn again. All this while John was intently watching the activities of the Pastor, but both remained silent. After some time, the Pastor got up and wished John “goodnight” and walked towards the door. At the door, John said, “Thank you, Pastor, for that fiery sermon you gave me a while ago. I will be at the church tomorrow.” And he was there, in his usual place.

We will never know why John stopped going to church. There could be many excuses he must have invented for himself. We are not interested in knowing his reasons. But we know why he went back after the demonstration given by his

pastor. The strong faith, we tend to declare, would diminish in strength if we stay away from other believers. There are lessons to be learnt from others. We need to practise our faith in a group who understand what faith is all about. Our beliefs are never complete or 100% accurate. It gets polished only when we are in the midst of other believers. I am not reasoning this any further; I let you do more reasoning yourself.

As far as Jesus is concerned, you can connect with Him anytime, anywhere and not necessarily only in the church. He has a passion for people, and He wants you to have a passion for others. Christianity is all about reaching out to others. Time you come out of your little shell.

Passages to ponder:

Hebrews 10:24-25 “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, ^{^25^} not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”

Acts 2:47 -- “Praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.”

AMEN

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Prayer is not a ‘head or tail’ game!

Do we set low expectations from God when we pray? Do we pray as a matter of fact, out of sheer habit or as a compulsive act? During such prayers we probably do not expect God to do anything radical for us. There are, perhaps, three reasons why we do that: (1) we have decided how God should deal with the matter, and that seems impossible to our minds; (2) we want to be benevolent to a God we love and would not like Him to fail and (3) we pray knowing well that what we ask is not rightful in the eyes of God. That, however, is not my line of argument here. We should not consider our appeal to God as a ‘head or tail’ game.

We cannot decide for God. We may have our plan ‘A’ plan ‘B’ to plan ‘Z’. God’s plans need not fit in with our plans. He has His mysterious ways of dealing with a matter, and we should leave it to His providence. Our faith should have taught us that there is nothing impossible for God. We have a case in Joshua. Joshua’s prayer asking God to make the sun stand still, so that the day extends and his soldiers can fight longer, seems quite impossible and improbable. Yet he did not hesitate to pray. He did not stop at that, he left to God to deal with the matter and continued to do what he had to do. God hurled hailstones on the Amorites while the Israelites chased and fought them. Joshua did not passively wait for God to do everything, but he trusted God to do what God could and would do. (Read Joshua 10:1-15.)

What God can do for us and how He does it is beyond the scope of our understanding. Therefore, we need not settle for doubt ridden prayers with low expectations. At the same time, we should not expect miracles as we have seen in the case of Joshua. Having said that let me also state that God continues to perform miracles, perhaps not the kind which is spontaneous and implausible, but miracles nevertheless. The problem is His miracles in our lives are so numerous, we tend to overlook them. When we pray with absolute faith, God would do for us what only He can do. He would mend broken hearts, broken relationships, pull you out of hardship of all nature, heal you spiritually, emotionally, and physically, all that with so much ease. We will see all that happening, though done in His own way and on His own terms. If our faith is as much the size of a mustard seed, perhaps like Joshua we will also see the sun stand still.

Let our prayers be not a game of chance.

Passages to ponder:

Isaiah 55:6 “Seek the LORD while He may be found, Call upon Him while He is near.”

Matthew 19:26. “But Jesus looked at them and said to them, ‘With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’

Matthew 17:20 “So Jesus said to them, “..... if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”

Philippians 4:6 ^{^”^}Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;”

Ephesians 6:18 ^^^praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints --"

John 15:7 "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you."

Colossians 4:2 "Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving;"

AMEN

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We are at equal distance from Jesus Christ!

The perfection pervasive in the creation by God, tells us that His providence also has to be perfect. I would have used a better word to describe His perfection, which is beyond all understanding, had there been such a word. (Incidentally the word 'perfect' is used from Genesis to Revelation 61 times in the New King James Version of the Bible.) If we accept this as the truth, we should also accept the fact that, nothing that happens, to the world, to countries, to societies, to families and to individuals, is outside of His providence. Everything has relevance, a meaning and learning, and nothing is an accident.

In Luke 23:33 we read "And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left." Gospel according to Matthew reports that they were 'thieves'. The fact remains that both of them were not considered good people. Did you ever wonder why they were crucified on either side of Jesus Christ, probably at an equal distance from Him? Do you think it was an accident? Or perhaps that the Romans wanted to rub in the insult they had already perpetrated on Him. May be, but God has a lesson for us in this too.

Luke tells us that one of the criminals "blasphemed Him." Our initial reaction to this would be 'what else do you expect from a criminal?', wanting to be righteous ourselves. But the Gospel tells us that those who were standing by and those who passed by also derided Him; so did all those learned people during His trial. We are no different from them, when we conveniently forget His teachings and allow our lives to be guided by the dictates of our time. We mock Him when we mock one of our fellow human beings.

The second criminal said to Jesus "..... Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." - Luke 23:42. He changed from within instantaneously and 'knew' Jesus Christ and accepted Him as his Lord and Saviour and became, virtually, the first Christian ever! Remember both were at the same distance from Jesus Christ. One distanced himself further from Jesus, while the other came very close to Him; perhaps closer than we ever got to Jesus.

We often forget that when we are in church for the Sunday worship, and on special days, all are at the same distance from Jesus Christ. We want to believe, we want to claim, that some are closer to Jesus Christ and others are at a distance. The scene at the crucifixion tells us that, no matter who we are, the good Lord is at the same distance, rather closeness, to each and every one of us. The fact that you are often seen in the forefront of church affairs does not take you closer to Jesus Christ, for the Lord there is no insider and outsider.

The quality of our prayer also matters. I have always wondered why we have to tell Him who He is and what He has done for us. It may sound similar to what one of the criminals mockingly said. We seem to be telling Him that, since He is who He is, He should do for us what we want from Him. Calvary tells us to be different, like the second criminal. We must undergo the change from within, like him, who received the first promise of Salvation. We must acknowledge what we are before the Lord and ask Him, for His Will.

The choice is ours, to be like one of the two criminals crucified on either side of our Lord. Take your pick.

Passages to ponder:

Luke 9:23 "Then He said to *them* all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me."

1 John 1:9 ^^If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Jeremiah 23:23-24 "Am I a God near at hand," says the LORD, "And not a God afar off? ^24^ Can anyone hide himself in secret places, So I shall not see him?" says the LORD; "Do I not fill heaven and earth?" says the LORD."

Psalm 34:18 “The LORD *is* near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit.”

AMEN

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Why do we crucify Jesus again?

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?” - (By: Negro spiritual)

No, my friends, none of us were there when the Servant King, the King of Kings, God the Son, Jesus Christ suffered physically, emotionally, spiritually and accepted death, even death on a Cross. Yes, my friends He suffered for you and for me. We do acknowledge this truth, but each time we do that, we just acknowledge an event, an event that took place over 2000 years ago. Something distant, something people who lived then did it to Him. We disclaim any part in their dastardly actions. We accept no responsibility for the death of God the Son but are eager to appropriate the benefit His death brought us - Redemption. All of us are oxymorons. We claim we follow Jesus, but we live our lives in contradiction to His teachings. We are not willing to accept this paradox and hasten to make deceptive appearances in public, in church. We proclaim His second coming. The question before us is, are we doing justice to the sacrifice of our Lord?

Yes, my friends we are there today doing to Him all that they did 2000 years ago, repeatedly. We do it for all the times we have failed to place Jesus first in our lives; for all the times that we skipped church simply because we were “too busy” or “need rest,” or any such petty reason; for all the times we pretend to be righteous and portray others as insignificant sinners; for all the times that we did not give our parents and elders respect and love, they deserve; for all the times that we have set a horrible example for our children to follow; for all the hate and all the lust and all the greed for power and money and all the pride that we have harboured in our hearts; for all the times we refused to extend a helping hand to someone in need; for all the times we refused to love our neighbour as ourselves; for all the times we drag our spouses to the divorce courts; for all of this and so much more, God the Son, Jesus Christ, willingly suffered and died for you and for me.

Let each one of us do serious introspection and purge ourselves of all things which causes us to make Him suffer again and again. Let our merciful Master grant us the wisdom and courage to seek Him, to cleanse our hearts and grant us the ability to walk with Him for the rest of our lives as His true disciples, worthy of the blood He shed for us. That is the way we should wait for His second coming.

Passages to ponder:

Hebrews 12:2 “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of *our* faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

1 John 2:6 “He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.”

1 John 2:2 ^”^And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

1 Thessalonians 4:16 ^”^For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first.”

AMEN

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The amazing makeover of Peter-a lesson for us

How often have you felt that, having progressed in life, there is no possibility of a change in your viewpoints or inner self? “You cannot expect me to change at my age”, is the statement I have heard many say. I must admit that I have, many a time, dismissed good suggestions making similar assertions. The Bible tells us that we are wrong.

Life of Peter has always fascinated me. Peter’s transformation from an impulsive fisherman Simon to Peter the rock is astounding. Peter’s life is a manifestation of God’s power to change what we think is unchangeable. Peter made himself like the soft clay and let Jesus remould him.

Remember the Peter who dared to jump out of the boat and walk on water and soon became terrified and began to sink? Even in those horrified moments he cried out to Jesus and Jesus promptly pulled him into safety. In a matter of moments, Peter went from being bold to being scolded for his unbelief - Matthew 14:22-32.

Then we have Peter who witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain along with John and James. The Divine exhibition was beyond their comprehension rendering them stupefied. Yet, Peter chose to speak. He suggested that they build three shelters, one for Moses, one for Elijah, and one for Jesus. Peter may have been suggesting that they just stay on the mountain, prolonging the epiphany and continue to enjoy this breath-taking moment. Impulsive as he was, Peter was probably thinking of making Mount Hermon as the base for the “Kingdom of God”!

It was Peter, because of his intense love and reverence for his Master, who did not hesitate to cut off the ear of the guard with his sword when they were taking Jesus away. Soon after that we find this same Peter denying Jesus three times.

How do you rate Peter? Unpredictable? Impulsive? That is not how Jesus saw Peter. Jesus saw him as a man who, when remoulded, would do what others would not. Jesus did not see Peter as he was but as he could be.

We see in the Acts of the Apostles the result of remoulding of Peter by Jesus. We see a Peter who is bold, assured, prepared to do the work of the Master. He is no more the impulsive Simon but Peter the rock. All he did was yield to the tender touch of Jesus, and allow himself to be remoulded.

We can change, provided we soften our hearts and be receptive to the touch of Jesus Christ. He knows what we should be, therefore, unconditionally yield to Him with prayers and supplication.

Passages to ponder:

Genesis 32:28 ^”^And He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

Isaiah 62:2 ” The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the LORD will name.”

Acts 17:29-31 “Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising. ^30^ “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, 31 “because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”

AMEN

Jesus Christ

The Person of Jesus Christ:

On Christmas day Christians all over the world commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. As a precursor, in many churches the Sunday school children would enact the Nativity play depicting the events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ. During the Services, the preachers would recount the events that took place more than 2000 years ago. As the world will then look forward to the dawn of a new year, it would be a good idea to pause for a while and ask who Jesus Christ is. How did a small bit of human history, the life and person of ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, become crucial for understanding God and Salvation for humanity?

Everyone would, unhesitatingly, accept Jesus Christ as the most endearing personality in human history. No one has difficulty in accepting Him as a spiritual and moral teacher of unparalleled significance. Jesus has been able to provoke astonishment; esteem, perplexity, and at times indignation in people who lived during His time, who heard Him and also who read about Him in the later years. Critics and believers alike have been unsuccessful in fully comprehending Him;

have been deficient in their thoughts and expression about Him. No one, therefore, had been able to do full justice to the Person of Jesus, in understanding Him, in portraying Him and even in worshipping Him!

The difficulty arises when Christianity talks of the doctrine of His dual nature, human and Divine at the same time. It is not easy to comprehend or accept this doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ, described as 100% human and 100% Divine, a concept the mathematicians would disagree with. This assertion straight away brings us to the subject of incarnation, the assumption of human nature of God, in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Matters become complex with such an assumption. There are severe limitations within which we try to understand God or express about God. That being so, our understanding of God is limited to our capacity to comprehend matters of God. Augustine, the philosopher and theologian, put it as: “if you can get your mind around it, it cannot be God.” The doctrine of incarnation falls in this category and is best described as a mystery of God which will be revealed in His own time.

Philosopher and theologian John Richard Illingworth (1848-1915) wrote in his work on Personality, Human and Divine: ‘But the belief in the Incarnation, while it intensified and emphasized the notion of divine personality, necessitated a further intellectual analysis of what that notion meant, and issued in the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity’ On Trinity, he observed: ‘Now the doctrine of the Trinity ... is, in fact, the most philosophical attempt to conceive of God as Personal. Not that it arose from any mere processes of thinking. These, as we have seen, all stopped short of it. It was suggested by the Incarnation, considered as a new revelation about God and thought out upon the lines in the New Testament. Upon this, this evidence of the Father is plain. They felt that they were in presence of a fact which, so far from being the creation of any theory of the day, was a mystery —a thing which could be apprehended when revealed, but could neither be comprehended nor discovered; and their reasoning upon the subject is always qualified by a profound sense of this mysteriousness.’

The doctrine of Trinity and the related doctrine of incarnation would demand detailed considerations in due course. A third concept that needs to be understood is that ‘we know Jesus, who is a personal God, by ‘experiencing’ Him in our personal lives.’

“41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, 42 saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” They said to Him, “The Son of David.” 43 He said to them, “How then does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying: 44 ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool” ’? 45 “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?” 46 And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore”. - Matthew 22:41-46

AMEN

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Jesus Reveals God

According to Wikipedia, ‘God is the eternal being that created and preserves the world.’ I get a notion that as He preserves the world, He is continuously engineering His creation. Internet throws up innumerable adjectives to describe the nature of God, such as, Supreme, Unique, Eternal, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Self-existent, Holy, Triune, Theistic, and Transcendent. What is your understanding of the true nature of God?

I have heard people say that God is a fiction; that God exhibits partiality, that God is a terrible God, God is greatly to be feared, and that God is vengeful and so on. Finally, when we are unable to figure out what God is all about, we make statements like ‘I do not believe there is a God, but I believe there exists a great force which cannot be defined. Someday science will crack this mystery.’ We are, perhaps, looking at wrong places to understand God. Whenever the Bible talks about God, it focusses on a single point -- Jesus. It is on Him we should be focused, because He reveals God to humanity.

When we observe the progressive decay in the world, we are forced to conclude that someday all this has to end. I am not one of those end-time propagandists, predicting the date and time of the last days. However, the end time is inevitable. When that happens, God will be revealed in His wholeness. The question that comes to mind is whether only those alive at that time will witness this epiphany and if so how it is that this is relevant to us today. The answer lies in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Viewed from that perspective, resurrection of Jesus gives us a foretaste of what is to come during the end-time, which was brought forward in history and is present in Jesus. Jesus is present in time and space and time and space are in Him. In effect, God revealed Himself in Jesus in His resurrection.

This leads us to the question, why God chose Jesus of Nazareth to reveal Himself in such an incredible fashion and not some other luminaries of the Old Testament. None of them, like Jesus, is of the same substance as God. Someone with

the same (not similar) substance as God only could have ‘contained’ God. The incarnation of Jesus also points us to this profound truth.

It therefore becomes incumbent that we try to understand Jesus as clearly as possible from the Gospel accounts and the Epistles. The scripture tells us of a God with whom we are able to relate to and establish a personal relationship with. Every word He spoke, every miracle He performed and His never to repeat sacrifice on the Cross reveal to us His nature and in turn the true nature of God, because Jesus is God the Son and none less.

In John 14:9 we read “Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? AMEN

Doctrine of Holy Trinity

“Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.” 9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. 11 “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves. 12 “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. 13 “And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” - John 14:8-13.

I have put together a short treatise based on the passage from the Gospel according to John. I am aware of the fact that many books have been written and sermons preached on this topic and to do justice to a subject of this nature, in a short chapter, will be a great challenge. While I write this with the firm belief in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, I do so in all humility, accepting the fact that it is well beyond human understanding, let alone the understanding of a laity like me. Having said that, I am also aware that this compilation of topical essays, on various aspects of Christology, will remain grossly incomplete if I do not present a perspective on this subject. The reader is well advised to refer to other works of Trinity by Biblical scholars.

The Passage from John depicts a conversation between our Lord Jesus Christ and one of His disciples, Philip. Disciples of Jesus Christ were simple folks drawn from every walk of life. Philip’s question can be interpreted as the utterances of an innocent person. He said “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” It is safe to assume that at that point in time Philip’s understanding of ‘Father’ must have been Father as an entity apart from Jesus Christ. He must have, like may do even today, imagined the relationship between Jesus and His Father is like that of an earthly father and his biological son, as many do even today.

The response of Jesus, which may seem pretty straightforward, to my reckoning, is one of the most complex statements of our Lord. He did not try to paint an explicit description of ‘Father’ for His audience, nor did He say anything to the effect where and how one can find the ‘Father’. The description came with indirect reference to Himself. He said “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? 10 “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. 11 “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves.”

Effectively Jesus was telling Philip that there is no difference between His Heavenly Father and Himself. They are one; how else can the Father be in Jesus and Jesus in His Father? Though God assumed dual nature in Jesus, Divine and human, Jesus reflects God all the time, because He is God. Then He goes on to tell His disciples that, even if they find this phenomenon hard to understand, they should have accepted His Divinity observing the miracles (including raising people from dead) He performed.

There is absolutely no ambiguity in the statement made by Jesus. He is stressing the point that there are no two different entities in Father and Son, but just one. In other words Jesus is the visible, tangible image of the invisible God. He is the complete revelation of what God is like. He is the Icon of God. Jesus explained to Philip that to know Jesus is to know God. The search for God, for truth and reality ends in Jesus.

Here is the classic illustration: water and ice. Frozen water is solid ice. Molten Ice is water. Nevertheless, whatever form it takes it is all through just water. We will see the extension of this illustration, when we bring in the third entity in the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit.

Humankind has two spiritual needs. One is for forgiveness and the other is for spiritual empowerment. Wilfully or otherwise, our inner beings long for both. There are times when the cry of humankind can actually be heard, even though in their restlessness, loneliness, fear and pressures they may not know what their cry is all about. Jesus heard

the cry of humanity, right from the time man fell from the Grace of God, through the ages and decisively answered it on the Cross. God the Son died to wipe out our sins.

Paul wrote in Colossians Chapter 1 verses 15 to 18 thus “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” What this passage tells us is that Jesus is the manifestation of the invisible God. He is the true image of God in all His fullness and perfection. He is the icon fully representing the Creator. As the image of God, the invisible God, He therefore is God. He has made known God to man; in Him we see what God is.

On the day of Pentecost, Jesus answered our second cry for spiritual empowerment. Jesus knew that, though redeemed by His blood, human nature makes them fallible. His sacrifice cannot go waste and the believers cannot be allowed to slide back to their old ways of sin, dejection and defeat. Jesus kept His promise. He had said as he responded to Philip thus: “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever -- 17 “the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” This statement would not have made sense then, but it does now. I see this as an extension of what Jesus said: “I am in the Father, and the Father in Me” -- John 14:10. The person of the Holy Spirit came from God the Father and God the Son. He completes the Trinity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Some say this manifestation of God in three entities has to do with time; during the Old Testament period it was God the Father who manifested and then came Jesus as God the Son and after His ascension comes the indwelling, God the Holy Spirit.

We now extend the illustration of water and ice and add to it steam. Condensation of steam will result in water. The substance being water, it manifests itself as water, ice and steam. I am happy to believe, in the doctrine of the Trinity, I know that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is of the same substance, while I do not know the dynamics of Trinity. I am happy to wait till this is revealed to us when the time comes.

I believe that any attempt to figure out, scientifically or otherwise how the Holy Trinity operates will be an exercise in futility. Like many other mysteries of God, this mystery will also be revealed to us in His own time. What we need to accept is the fact that as believers of Jesus Christ, if we are to live a triumphant life in Him, we need His Grace of forgiveness and spiritual empowerment through the indwelling God the Holy Spirit.

Let us not go forward with an impression that God the Holy Spirit came into existence on the day of Pentecost. If we go by that supposition it would almost make Holy Spirit an entity apart from God the Father and God the Son, which is not true.

In Genesis Chapter 1 verses 1 and 2 we read: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” We see that the Spirit of God or the Holy Spirit, as we know now, one in being with God, is very much the Creator as God the Father and God the Son is.

When we closely examine these facts, we see God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit took part in creation. Not as three different entities doing things independent of each other but three in fusion, with a single purpose, in three manifestations.

Most of us struggle trying to understand the dynamics of the Trinity concept and lose sight of the many blessings contained in that formulation. We have already seen how God blessed us by meeting our fundamental needs -- forgiveness through God the Son, Jesus Christ and goodness and sustainability in faith through God the Holy Spirit.

Let us spend a few moments examining some of the so-called classic misgivings about the Triune God. Critics say, “You are worshipping three gods, and have therefore identified yourself with the Romans, Hindus, and other religions who worship numerous deities.” That definitely is not the case. Imagine the chaos it would create if the universe is governed by more than one God! It will be as if the universe is run by a committee!

Throughout history there have been voices saying, “How can God be three and be one at the same time? That’s impossible.” What others would call impossible we Christians would call a “paradox”. A paradox can be described as ‘A statement that contradicts or seems to contradict itself, yet often expresses a truth.’

When we saw His holiness, His humility, His wisdom, His calling us to change from within, we thought He must be a prophet. And He is, but we know that He is more than a prophet. His proclamations about His Kingdom, His authority in speaking about God, His claims that He would make all things new, made us to think that He is the Messiah. And He is something more than what we understood a messiah to be. His claims of divinity seemed confusing, seemed

contradictory, seemed improbable; and as He hung on the Cross we thought He was a failure.

When we found the tomb empty we did not understand what to make of it. When He appeared to Mary, Peter, and the disciples, we did not fully comprehend the import of the event. We knew something wonderful had happened, but beyond that our comprehension failed. All through, to this day, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit had remained a mystery to us.

He fulfilled His promise at the time of His Ascension saying, “And you are witnesses of these things. 49 “Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.” - Luke 24:48-49. Through this, we perhaps understood the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit a little more.

Critics of Christian faith had raised the question, if the doctrine of Trinity is true, did God the Father suffer when God the Son suffered on the Cross? If we accept that God can be said to suffer, a point of contact is immediately established between God and the sufferings of the human race. The reason being, Jesus suffered in His nature as a human and not as a Divine Entity. We should then take solace from the fact that God cannot be thought of as being immune from the suffering of His creation. It therefore follows that God suffered in Christ. The cross must be seen as an event between the Father and the Son, in which the Father suffers the death of His Son, though what actually transpired on this side of the Cross and the other side will always remain a mystery for us.

Science is not willing to offer an explanation for these events. But science is deficient in providing explanations for many other matters. Take for example the findings on atoms. The eerie bond that two atoms develop and the identical behaviour of both, when subjected to action on one, even when these are separated by distance, is a typical example of something science is yet to find a convincing explanation for. We should have no hesitation in accepting the fact that a greater bond exists amongst God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This leaves no doubt in my mind, therefore, that God the Father, appropriating the sufferings of His Son, did suffer in Him.

As we continue to mature in Christ, our understanding of the Triune God will also deepen. Let us not get carried away by those who claim that they have figured out God. No one can, until we become citizens of Christ's new creation.

AMEN

Jesus in His Tweens:

We often hear parents of tweens (over ten but not yet teenagers) and teens complain that their kids have become rebellious. Such statements either could be exaggerations on the part of dominant parents or could be the result of parents failing to understand their growing children well enough. Having said that let me also say that one could observe a bit of rebellion in the youth and at times, their behaviour would border on disrespect to their parents and elders. In some extreme situations, we hear of children running away from their homes and some others associating themselves with people they are not supposed to. When I reflect back on my youth, I can recall many instances when I rebelled against my parents (mother especially), my brother, teachers, school principal and my peers. On the other hand, I loved my parents, I love my brother, I remember many who taught me, and had an amicable relationship with the school teachers and Principal even years after I passed out. From tween to the end of teenage are the years in which youth want to define themselves as unique and special, and this would manifest in the things they do or say.

We need to look at Jesus in His tweens in this light. Was He rebellious as a 12-year-old? One might want to say that I am stretching matters a bit too far. However, as we read about the twelve year old Jesus in Luke 2:42 -52 (the only report of His younger days found in the New Testament), we will observe that He seemingly rebelled against the mundane life He was leading. The narration would tell us how He longed to move on and define Himself.

Jesus did not run away from home as He had travelled to Jerusalem in a group which included His earthly parents. It is not easy to argue the point that He became so absorbed with the goings on in the Temple that He did not realise that He had missed the bus! Did Jesus choose to be ‘rebellious’ to remain in debate with the elders of the Temple? Then He is pictured as if He talked back to His parents. When they finally found Him, His response to His parents was that they should have known the obvious that they should have known where He could be found; kind of shifting the blame for the fiasco to the doings of His parents. How come they did not check to see if the child was in the group, before they left the town? What catches the eye is what Jesus said when they finally found Him. He is telling us that, like many parents of our time, His parents also failed to understand Him, His person and His purpose. Jesus knew what He was up to and I would assume that Mary would have guessed what He was up to. Seen in that light Jesus was not talking back to her but just reminding her of what she should have known or guessed.

Parents normally fail to allow space for children to define themselves. Parents want the child to be something the child is not. In many of the arguments between the parents and children, we see a thought process that goes somewhat like

this: “If you truly understood and accepted who I am, you would understand what I am up to.” - (Or words to the effect)

In all probability, this is exactly what Jesus conveyed when He said “How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” - Luke 2:49 Jesus as a 12 year old was worrying that His parents just did not understand him.

As an aside, let us look at this incident from the time of His ministry. Gospel accounts tell us that His struggle throughout His ministry was to make others know who He is. He had to deal with people’s fallacies and misinterpretations of who He is. Mary and Joseph, like normal parents, must have had their own expectations and must have worked out what they wanted Him to be. People who followed Him on the other hand expected Him to heal them; they expected Him to feed them; they expected Him to raise people from the dead; more than all that, they expected Him to liberate Israel from Roman rule, and some of them even expected Him to entertain them by performing miracles. However, these were not His objectives.

The incident in His teens also presents before us a difficult question to answer. Have we understood Jesus well enough? Each of us wants to believe that we have. Churches and Christian denominations think that they do and therefore, do not get along too well! At the end of it all the question remains, has anyone understood what Jesus is all about?

AMEN

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Did Jesus use reverse psychology?

My mother, who had an obsession for hygiene, used to be petrified when I would, defiantly, pick up a sweet dropped on the floor and quickly pop it into my mouth, despite her hysterical warnings. If she had said it was alright to do what I did, using a bit of ‘reverse psychology’ on me, perhaps, I would have never done that. Talking about reverse psychology, Wikipedia defines it as ‘a technique involving the advocacy of a belief or behaviour that is opposite to the one desired, with the expectation that this approach will encourage the subject of persuasion to do what actually is desired: the opposite of what is suggested.’

I had always wondered why Jesus was seemingly encouraging a dishonest steward in His Parable (Read Luke 16:1-13). Verses 8 and 9 read as: “So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. 9 “And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home” Quite contrary to His teachings, one could argue. Jesus was not encouraging dishonesty; He always wanted His believers to be children of ‘light’ and not of the ‘world’. I see two reasons why He presented this parable in this manner.

First, if we recollect the context, Jesus was speaking in the midst of the Pharisees, known for their hypocrisy. Effectively He was telling them (paraphrase is mine) ‘I know you liked what the dishonest manager did because you are one like him. You are bothered much about the materialistic security of your future in this life, like the ‘smart’ steward. You err in thinking so, as the ‘future’ you are planning is a short-lived one. You should be concerned about the eternal life I offer to all who believe in Me. Invest your time, energies and your mind space to secure your eternal life through Me.’ Jesus knew that this is the language they would understand. (Read Colossians 3:1 and 2.)

Secondly, if we read the verse 1 of Chapter 16 carefully we will realise that Jesus was addressing, at the same time, His disciples ‘also.’ Jesus was giving them and is giving us now, a lesson using contrast. He was using, maybe, reverse psychology in doing so.

Another profound truth that stands out in the actions of the steward is that he put his bet on people, hoping that, being birds of the same feather, they would stand by him when he is rendered jobless. Jesus wants us to invest in people. In Matthew 25:35-40 Jesus said: “for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 ‘I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’ 37 “Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 ‘When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 ‘Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 “And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’

Do you see people as an opportunity or a burden?

AMEN

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Peter's response to Jesus?

During the Last Supper Jesus made many revelations and prophecies, one of which was about His disciples deserting Him in a short while. This exposé came after He bid Judas to go and do what he had planned to do. Jesus, perhaps, did not want the remaining disciples to feel complacent. Most of them did not choose to respond to Jesus in any manner. They did not understand what was being said, then.

However, Peter, impulsive as he was, was quick to respond to Jesus. He was full of faith in Jesus and knew Jesus wanted him to lead others. His assertions came loud and clear that even if it meant that he would die he will not disown Jesus. Peter, like most of us, never doubted when he made that statement, though a few hours later he went ahead and denied Jesus, not once but three times. His remorse was immediate and Jesus forgave him for what he did.

Peter should have understood that the prophecy about his denial of Jesus was being made by none other than God the Son and nothing could stop it from being fulfilled. One may argue that Peter could have, instead, made a statement affirming his sincere love for Jesus and the fact that he has unwavering faith in Him, thus indirectly accepting the fact that being of this world he is inclined to fail.

One may also argue that he had to say what he said and fail. His introspection and the genuine remorse made him a stronger person in Jesus as is evident from his subsequent actions after Pentecost.

We are like Peter in many respects. We also affirm our faith in Jesus with, perhaps, genuine enthusiasm. But the weaknesses we harbour within us, the hidden sins in us, make us fail in our faith when we face up to challenges. We cannot live our lives hollow. Like Peter, we need to do serious introspection and purge out all that stand in the way between Jesus and us.

AMEN

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Lessons from the Olivet Discourse

On 'Palm Sunday' Jesus made His triumphal entry into Jerusalem. He then surveyed the temple and went to Bethany. The next day He entered the Temple and forcibly evicted the merchants from the court of the Gentiles. Members of every religious office and sect within Judaism were livid with anger. In the past, every time they confronted Him, they found themselves thoroughly confounded as He exposed their scheming for all to see. This time, however, they refrained from any direct confrontation with Him, probably because they perceived the danger in doing so, as Jesus had the support of thousands of people who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They, therefore, plotted to kill Him. In the midst of all this, Jesus was continuing to prepare His disciples for what was soon to come -- His death, resurrection and the events that would follow.

Mark reports the Olivet Discourse in Chapter 13. Here we get to sit at the feet of our Lord Jesus as we hear for ourselves what He had to say about the future. Every word uttered by Him had a clear purpose, a purpose that would take the believers a step closer to doing His Will. He spoke sitting on the Mount of Olives, directly looking at the Jerusalem Temple. Earlier Jesus had made a profound statement when His disciples spoke to Him admiring the magnificence of the Temple, saying, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down." - Mark 13:2. It was not just the destruction of the Temple He spoke about. He went into great detail about, what one could, without much speculation, term as the end times.

Until after His death and resurrection, His disciples were not able to fully comprehend His sayings. Jesus used the question they posed to teach them about what is to come. How much they really comprehended, or were willing to believe, when Jesus had on three occasions predicted His impending death and resurrection, is anybody's guess.

In response to two questions put to Him by the disciples, Jesus goes on to warn them about the destruction of the magnificent temple, the ravaging of Jerusalem by the Romans and about Jews getting dispersed into the four corners of the earth. All these were witnessed by many of His disciples, as a result of the events of 70 A.D. He mixes together images of an immediate event (the destruction of the temple), with an event about which the disciples could not even begin to understand, His second advent. This is what they call prophetic perspective or "double fulfilment."

The Jews could not have, in their wildest of dreams, imagined that their Temple would be razed to grounds, not too far off in the future. This building was the sign of God's blessing upon the Jews. To them the destruction of the Temple would have meant the end of times.

We also see Jesus had no time for appearances and outward splendour. He was focussed on inward purity. He wept for

the people for whom He was passionate, but we do not find Him looking with pity upon the ruin of a fine building. The destruction also demonstrates that nothing can prevail against the will of God. Jesus was in a solemn disposition of mind; He had started His resolute march towards the Cross to embrace death, in absolute obedience to His Father in Heaven. Those of His disciples, who lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., would assure them, and it should assure us too, that all His predictions would also come to pass.

Through these prophecies Jesus warned His followers about the future so that they could learn how to live in the present. Therefore this is a lesson for us too. Many predictions He made are yet to happen. The reason why some of these are yet to happen is to help us remain spiritually alert and prepared at all times as we wait for His return. Jesus will return on His own timeline and not according to our timetables.

We need to remind ourselves that Jesus, who spoke of the future, holds that future in the very palm of His hand. He will bring all His purposes to pass and one day, He will return to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. Maybe He is about to come, but if He does not, there is no need for us to lose heart. We should rejoice and be prepared knowing that He will come again. He has promised. His promises cannot fail.

AMEN.

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Three Commands of Jesus Christ

“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. - John 13:17

I do not intend to offend my fellow Christians writing on matters they already know. I am often amazed at the knowledge of Biblical passages many possess and how effortlessly they are able to quote from the Bible with references to Book, Chapter and verse. During Sermons when the preachers ask for a passage to be read from the Bible, several people begin to read even before I am able to open my Bible. Such is the depth of knowledge most Christians possess. It makes up for an ‘enlightened’ congregation and the churches seem to exist and flourish because of such devotees. But there is a flip side to all this, many congregations exist for themselves, lack vision outside of their church doors and have practically no compassion for anyone knocking on their doors!

The Bible is full of teachings of Jesus Christ, but let us look at 3 of them in the light of what is said above:

1. Do we recognise the second commandment as a Command?

Jesus said, “And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ - Matthew 22:39.

As we accept Jesus as our personal Saviour, we refuse to share Him with others, it is always ‘me and my Lord’. Whereas Jesus wants us to be selfless, we are selfish even in matters related to Him. Loving our ‘neighbours’ is not told to us as an option, but as a command, and we fail to obey it as it does not fit in with the scheme of things we have envisioned for ourselves. By failing to reach out to the world outside the gates of our churches, we disobey Jesus.

2. Do we feed the hungry, clothe the needy and visit the sick? (Matthew 25:35-40)

“And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.’ - Matthew 25:40. We do it out of compulsion of wanting to do something good in the eyes of the Lord. The often heard saying amongst believers is “We have many needy amongst us, why look outward” Such congregation is not going anywhere in the journey with Jesus. Yes, they too need to be tendered to, but we need to look out for the neediest, insecure, and uncared for, outside the confines of our churches. Remember, in doing so we are doing it to Jesus Himself. The Bible is not telling us to take care of all the poor in the world, but there is plenty to be found all around us.

3. Do we remember that Jesus had asked us to love our enemies?

Love is an emotion but Jesus wants us to practise our love; “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,” - Matthew 5:44. This is love in action and is what He has commanded us to do. It is not an easy command to comply with but we have to try hard.

If we are able to keep these three commands, we would begin our walk with Jesus.

AMEN

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Doing something beautiful for Jesus:

Doing something beautiful for Jesus begins with an understanding of all Jesus has done for us. If we have understood the impact of what Jesus had done for us, our desire to do something for Him will be in proportion to that understanding. So the challenge for us is to be aware of His gifts to us. We need to ask ourselves:

- Are we aware what it means to say that Jesus forgives us when we fall short?
- Can we remember the way He miraculously stepped into our life or the life of someone we love, in time of need?
- Do we try to remember Him when we receive those countless ‘small’ mercies? I am not happy qualifying His mercies as small or big. We do that just to avoid acknowledging His mercies and pass it off as ‘small’. I do not think what we do is right. When the mercies and blessings are from Jesus, none of it can be small.

The New Testament tells us about “..... a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.” (Mark 14:1-9). Her action is the testimony of unconditional worship. In Mark 14:3 we read “And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head.” John in 12:3 mentions that not only did she do that, but she also wiped His feet with her hair, as an expression of her devotion. The manner of her worship demonstrates the true worship of Jesus Christ with reverence, love and spiritual zeal. It also teaches us that when we approach Jesus, we should be prepared to give up all that we have treasured thus far.

In this account we also see a sudden concern for the poor. The perfume could have been sold, and the proceeds would have benefited many poor. Jesus, however, made a startling statement: “For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.” - Mark 14:7. Jesus was not saying that the poor should be neglected. He was in no way justifying an indifferent attitude towards the poor, when he said the poor will always be with us, and we will have enough and more opportunities to care for them. He was revealing the fact that there was a higher priority over any other earthly ministry; a priority that demanded glorification of God over everything else.

When Judas, the team treasurer, realised that a big opportunity to make money has slipped by, he did the next best he could. He went to the high priest and sold Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Therefore, the concern for the poor was not the real reason. The poor would have no part of it anyway.

I began by saying that we should try and reciprocate all the mercies showered on us by Jesus. One of the ways we can do this is by addressing the needs of the poor who are always with us. What does poor mean? Here are a few definitions of poor:

- a) Lacking sufficient money to live at a standard considered comfortable in a society;
- b) Of a low or inferior standard or quality;
- c) Lacking in a specified resource or quality;
- d) Lacking in value;
- e) Lacking fertility (for example, poor soil);
- f) Eliciting or deserving pity.

We see that, even by worldly standards, poor are not just those who have less or no money. Jesus Christ defined ‘poor’, in wonderful ways, in His Sermon on the mount. He said (Matthew 5:3-6, 10 and 11):

“3 Blessed are the poor in spirit.....”

“4 Blessed are they that mourn.....”

“5 Blessed are the meek.....”

“6 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.....”

And He went on to say:

“10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

“11 “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake”

The needs of all such people should be the concern of the believers. If we do that, to whatever extent we are able to, but

wholeheartedly, then we would be doing something beautiful for Jesus.

By the time I finished writing this I counted 3 blessings I received from Jesus. If you like, try keeping a log of all the blessings you receive from the Lord each day. Soon you will realise that you are unable to cope with the volume you have to write. That has been my experience too. If that is how we are blessed, how much should we be of some blessing to the ‘poor’? This is, perhaps, the best way to reciprocate Jesus, and this is what He expects of us.

What is your state of mind today? Are you ready to do something beautiful for Jesus?

AMEN

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God wants to talk to us through His creation!

When was the last time you intently watched a beautiful butterfly or a bird? How long ago was it when you keenly observed a plant grow and bring forth flowers in vibrant colours? Have you been sensitive to the changing weather and realise how amazingly it affects our lives?

I had spent several years growing up in a School built on a cliff overlooking the Arabian Sea. In all those years, I never saw the sea the way I am able to see it now. It will astonish you when you observe the changing colours of the water, the systematic rise and fall of the waves, the sea creatures that occasionally jumped out and arched back into the water, and the continuous humming sound the sea produces.

Scientists observe that human beings not only desire but have an instinctive need to be in nature. Nature, being God’s creation, has a healing effect on our body and mind. We often bring home flowers; have gardens full of fragrant flowers, create artificial waterfalls and running brooks and get attractive landscaping done, only to be close to nature as much as possible.

Psalm 19 begins with the statement: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork.’ We do not know when David wrote this Psalm. Perhaps it was one of those mornings, after he had spent a night with his sheep, that he witnessed the magnificence of sunrise. David must have reflected on the bright twinkling stars that he saw at night. It must have struck David in his new awareness that everything in nature is telling him about God. The nature seems to speak to him in a language without words.

God wants to talk to us through His creation, just as He talks to us through the Bible. What we should remember is God authored the Universe first and then inspired people to write about Him. Here is such an inspired statement: “The universe is like one giant choir that features a never-ending production of achingly beautiful melodies, and soaring crescendos of joy to the Creator.”

Be part of His creation and begin to listen to Him speaking to us through His creation.

AMEN

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The choice is yours

“Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. 7 And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion. 8 Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask him to do just as he had always done for them. 9 But Pilate answered them, saying, “Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” 10 For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them.” - Mark 15:6-11.

Over 2000 years ago, leaders of the religion and other learned people were asked to make a choice. A choice between a righteous person and a rebel. They chose the latter. It was not just a choice between good and bad. It was not even a choice between someone who led people on a spiritual path and the other one who led people on a path of bloodbath. While the former sought change from within, the latter wanted an outer change. The choice actually was between Jesus who changed the world and Barabbas who tried to change a small part of the history; who was not even successful at that.

Barabbas had his followers who believed that what he was up to was the right direction to take. They wanted the freedom that has been elusive for centuries. They wanted the Romans out. That was perhaps what even Judas wanted

and when he came to the realisation that Jesus had a different purpose, he did what he did.

2000 years later, we are no better than those who chose Barabbas. We continue to support all those who would, in our understanding, change the governments in power. We believe that countries which possess nuclear capabilities can change the world. We believe that the market forces and the world economy will change the course of our lives. The moot question is, has any of these and other forces been able to change everything that has to do with our lives forever?

The answer is a big 'no'. While all that may have had a passing effect on humanity, the Cross and Resurrection changed the world completely. Many might have been crucified before and after Jesus. But to none of them or to people who believe secular forces would change the world, the Cross would mean what it means to the believers in Christ. We need to look up to the Cross as the place where Jesus took upon Himself the entire sin of the humanity and offered us salvation. Through His resurrection death lost its sting and a glorified life in Jesus became a reality. The Cross and Resurrection of Jesus were not meant to change governments and the economy but to change the believers from within and make them citizens of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ.

It is time that we shift our focus from Barabbas-like powers and look upon the Cross of Jesus Christ. It is time that we make the right choice and finally it is time that we begin to walk with Jesus.

AMEN

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Jesus, grant me the serenity...

In 1943 Reinhold Niebuhr encapsulated the philosophy of Jesus in a prayer, which became a lighthouse prayer for people in various circumstances. Popularly known as the 'Serenity prayer' its applicability remains unchallenged to this day. There are several lessons to be learned from this prayer. Though it originated from Biblical teachings, it is not found as such in the Bible. Let me reproduce the prayer here:

God grant me the serenity

to accept the things I cannot change;

courage to change the things I can;

and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time;

Enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as He did, this sinful world

as it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that He will make all things right

if I surrender to His Will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life

and supremely happy with Him

Forever in the next.

Amen.

All of us yearn for serenity. Serenity is nothing but the peace we enjoy when we are content with life. We read in Philippians 4:11-13, "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Contentment will not come from an abundance of material possessions and worldly relationships. It comes from our acceptance of the fact that, no matter what we try, we cannot change everything that we want to change. We need to accept our circumstances on an 'as is where is' state, trusting only in Jesus Christ.

When we are in Christ, we have no reason to be fearful to do righteous acts. "Courage to change the things I can" the

prayer goes on. Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 1:7 “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” As we take courage to change matters that can be changed, we need to do that with love and thoughtfulness.

Knowledge is the application of information we acquire through our lives, appropriate to the situational variables. Application of acquired knowledge leads to wisdom. We need to seek Divine help for such wisdom. James wrote in chapter 1:5 thus: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

We tend to make plans for our future, the future of our children and grandchildren. And when things do not turn out the way we planned, we are greatly disappointed and sink into despair. We pray “Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time.” Try this, it works. Jesus said, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” - Matthew 6:34

The prayer continues and brings out a very profound truth. ‘Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;’ The reference is to Jesus. It is all about peace, the peace that passes all understanding. Even in harsh situations, if our trust in Jesus is absolute, we will experience this peace. In Philippians 4:7 we read: “and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

“Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will,” the prayer goes on. Most of us fail here. While we trust in Jesus, our trust is not unwavering. We doubt. We need to surrender to His will unconditionally, and know that He has the ability to change our situation, whatever it might be or how impossible it may seem. In Romans 5:1 we read, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,”

Our quest for happiness in this world should be reasonable. We need to learn to be happy with what we have and have the trust in Jesus that as we cross the river untold happiness awaits us. Our attitude should be as we read in Ecclesiastes 3:12, “I know that nothing is better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives,”

AMEN