



COMING HOME

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1172

Luke 15:11-24

First Message

John Hanneman

August 23rd, 1998

If you use a magnifying glass to examine a painting, you will notice that the area viewed through the center of the glass appears crisp and clear, but the edges are distorted. We could make the same observation about the spiritual life: it is easy to focus on godly things, religious things, but, at the same time, drift away from what is central. When we do this, we push God out to the margins of life. We lose focus. We fill our schedules with the critical things that must be done—paying bills, filling out applications, meeting with clients, taking care of the children, keeping the car running. Life can become so filled with activity, however, that an unexpected event can send us into a dither and our kingdom crumbles. When this happens, we discover that we have forgotten our first love. I confess that is where I find myself at times.

In the series which we begin today, I want to talk about the spiritual life, cultivating intimacy with God and placing him at the center of our focus. I want to tug on our hearts by having us think about our relationship with God as we explore sabbath and worship, singleness, marriage and parenting, bringing the many aspects of our life into spiritual focus. Life is not about money, success, and pleasure. Life, in all its dimensions, is about God. Marriage, parenting, rest, all have to do with God. We will not be given a spiritual assignment as homework; we will work out the problem here, in class. This will be labwork for the spiritual life.

As we begin, I must warn you of one thing: the spiritual life is a mystery. It cannot be reduced to a formula. We are speaking of a relationship that cannot be controlled, a journey that cannot be mapped, a life of many surprises, joys, and disappointments. In its essence, the spiritual life is a journey of the heart.

In *The Sacred Romance*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 7), Brent Curtis and John Eldredge write: “The true story of every person in this world is not the story you see, the external story. The true story of each person is the journey of his or her heart. Jesus himself knew that if people lived only in the outer story, eventually they would lose track of their inner life, the life of their heart he so much desired to redeem.”

So in this series we will talk about our heart condition. Each one of us is on a journey of the heart, involving a deep yearning for intimacy. While no two journeys are alike, the goal for each one of us is the same—finding the heart of the Father, centering ourselves on his love, and connecting to him in the most intimate

way.

As we begin this series, we will examine the story of the prodigal son. We will take three Sundays to do this, taking a week for each of the three main characters in the story. This is a very meaningful text for me. Like no other Bible passage, this story draws me back to what is central in the Christian life, helping me shape my understanding of God. My prayer is that it will encourage us to re-center our lives on Jesus.

The context of this well loved story is our Lord’s receiving and eating with sinners. Luke writes:

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near to Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (15:1-2, NASB).

In that society, sharing a meal amounted to sharing life with one’s guests. In the East today, as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of lesser, needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he does not eat with them. However, when guests are “received,” the one receiving them dines with them. Jesus was crossing cultural and religious boundaries by eating with sinners; perhaps he was even hosting them.

In response to Jesus’ hospitality, the scribes and Pharisees began to “grumble” about what he was doing. The verb, which is rendered in the present tense, means they were grumbling continuously. The word is used in Exodus 16:2 of the time when Israel was journeying to Canaan. Traversing through unmapped territory, they ran into trouble and began to long for the security of Egypt. To the Pharisees, Jesus’ eating with tax-gatherers and sinners in Samaria was like passing through unmapped territory. So, longing for the safety of religion and moral righteousness, they grumbled. The parables that follow, in verses 4-32, are a defense of Jesus’ actions.

The parable actually contains four stories of lostness: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. The stories spiral in intensification: a hundred sheep, and one is lost; ten coins, and one is lost; two sons, and one is lost; one son and he, too, is lost.

Let’s read the story together. Verses 11-24:

And He said, “A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ And he di-

vided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry."

As the account opens, the younger of two sons asks his father to give him his inheritance. This was an unthinkable, unheard of thing in that culture. Such a request would warrant a beating, since what it was implying was that the son wished his father were dead. In all of Middle Eastern literature, from ancient times to the present, there is not one instance of a son, old or young, demanding his inheritance from his father.

Demonstrating tremendous love in his response, the father grants his son's request, although that might leave him without provision for his later years. The son sells everything while the father is yet alive, quickly disposing of his possessions—an action which may indicate the disapproval of the community. Selling off the family estate is never a small matter. The older son goes along with the arrangement. He does not protest or try to reconcile his father and his younger brother. His own relationship with his father may not have been everything it should have been. We can only imagine the anguish of this father's heart.

The younger son departs to a foreign country and squanders all his resources in wild living. There is little doubt that his activities involved prostitutes (verse 30). A lone Jew in a far-off country without money or friends would have been especially vulnerable in a time of famine. The young man is desperate. He joins himself to a "citizen." Perhaps this is a reference to the tax collectors and entering the service of foreigners. He feeds

pigs, an unthinkable task for a proud Jew. He is in desperate need. He has barely enough to stay alive, but no one gives him anything.

Bernard Bell told me that during his recent visit to Indonesia he learned that that country has but four months of food left to feed the entire nation. Street sweepers make just two dollars, plus ten kilos of rice per month, for their wages. They are not worried about finding fresh fruit and vegetables. For them, finding enough rice to feed their families is their main concern. It is difficult for us to imagine such poverty.

At last, the young man comes to his senses. He had left home to find freedom, but instead had found servitude—a bondage far worse than anything his father's hired men had to endure. He comes to a form of repentance, but he still has a plan to escape his dilemma. He will be a hired servant to his father. As such he will be a free man, with his own income, living independently in the local village. His social status will not be inferior to that of his father and his brother, so he can maintain his pride and independence. He will also be able to pay his father back. He wants to admit his failure, but he doesn't feel useless, because he knows his father can fashion him into a good workman.

When the prodigal arrives home, he is met with a remarkable welcome from his father and his servants. The father runs to greet him, and the son makes full repentance. Filled with compassion, the father presents him with a robe, a ring, and shoes. A great celebration follows, and the fattened calf is killed. The son will not be a mere servant; he will be a son once more. While the father did not actively seek for his son, as in the case of the lost sheep and the lost coin, he was looking, nevertheless, with passive energy. He probably had already decided how to respond in the event his wandering son returned.

The story of the younger son is a tale about leaving home and coming home. It is a story about a conscious act of rebellion. For many of us, leaving home is the action that shapes our spiritual story. Thus it is important to understand why we leave home, and what we are looking for. It is essential for us to put our rebellion in the context of the father's love.

We can garner a number of spiritual principles from our text.

First, we leave home in many subtle ways and travel to a distant country in search of life.

We leave because our hearts are restless, we have deep yearnings, and we begin our search for something or someone who will satisfy our longings. We leave home because we want to escape the control of others. We run away because we want to be free. In essence, we leave home because we have begun a search for home, a place where we can find rest, peace, and contentment.

This is why people are drawn to see the movie “Titanic” over and over again. Their hearts connect to that story, because they themselves want to embark on an adventure where love will touch their souls. Think of the outpouring of love last year following the death of Princess Diana. People related to the pain of her life and her journey to find happiness.

Our leaving may be a physical leaving, perhaps not, but in either case it is something that takes place in our hearts. The road we take is a spiritual journey, because leaving home is a manifestation of not being home. The journey is not just about bad behavior or reckless living, or about rebelling against our parents or society; it is about the deep things of the soul. We leave home searching for something that is already ours, but we just don’t recognize that fact. We have to see what is “out there.” We are surrounded by voices that make us restless and draw us away from home, with the illusion that they can offer us home and life. And so we try one thing after another, forever looking and searching. We become the prodigal son every time we search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.

As a college freshman, I took the fifty-mile trip from Omaha to Lincoln, but it might as well have been five thousand miles. That is how far my heart was away from home. I can identify with the prodigal. I too left home seeking something I could hang onto. I remember wandering the streets of Lincoln late at night, searching for what, I don’t know. I was afraid to go to bed because I might miss something that would soothe the ache I felt inside.

Second, there are many manifestations of not being at home that indicate we are lost.

Perhaps the best word to explain our lostness from home is addiction. The addicted life is a life lived in a distant country.

When we are addicted to sex, we are lost, because we are dependent on someone giving us something to satisfy our heart.

When we are addicted to drugs and alcohol, that is a sign that we are lost, trying to escape the reality of our world or the ache in our heart.

When we are addicted to our job or success, that is a sign that we are not at home; we are trying to earn approval and acceptance so that we can get home.

When we are addicted to wealth or greed, we are trying to gather things as a way of satisfying our soul; we are not at rest.

We can even be addicted to “doing.” We can’t handle solitude, and we crowd our schedules so that we will not have to face painful realities. Constant busyness is a sign of lostness.

We can even be addicted to ministry. Our sense of worth is so wrapped up in doing religious things that we do them for all the wrong reasons.

Every time we fill our lives with things other than God that is a sign that we are lost; we are not at home.

Third, the road away from home very often leads to death and slavery.

That is rather ironic, isn’t it? We leave home looking for home, searching for freedom, but we find the opposite. Slavery and death result because sin controls everything we do. Self-pursuit leads us on a path of ever-increasing darkness.

This is what we see in the story of the prodigal son. His journey led to a downward spiral that left him famished, without friends, food, or home. Quoting again from *The Sacred Romance* (pp. 61-62): “For the most part, we don’t see ourselves as people who are deeply committed to following the path to death. The way we want to live feels so right—so much like life—the only problem seems to be the way others treat us and God’s indifference to our pleas for help... The truth is, we all come into this world with a predilection to live life under our own terms and according to our own understanding.”

Fourth, the road towards home often begins with an impure motive.

The prodigal really had selfish motivations. Henri Nouwen writes: “He didn’t return because of a renewed love for his father. No, he returned simply to survive. He had discovered that the way he had chosen was leading him to death. Returning to his father was a necessity for staying alive. He realized that he had sinned, but this realization came about because sin had brought him close to death” (*The Road to Daybreak* [New York: Doubleday, 1988] 72).

Like the prodigal son, we too offer explanations for our behavior so that we can keep our sense of self-respect. On the way home, we have doubts as to whether God will accept us. But we still think we have something we can offer. We will make a bargain: we will be a hired servant. Complete repentance and belief in total forgiveness is difficult. It is hard for us to come to the place where we can say, “I’m sorry. Forgive me.” We insist in offering explanations for what we have done.

Fifth, the story of the younger son shows that because of the Father’s love we can return home anytime, anywhere.

The son began the journey home with an impure motivation. But his father did not require anything higher than this. His love was so complete and unconditional that he simply welcomed him home.

Again, quoting Henri Nouwen: “This is a very encouraging thought. God does not require a pure heart before embracing us. Even if we return only because following our desires has failed to bring happiness, God will take us back. Even if we return because being a Christian brings us more peace than being a pagan, God will receive us. Even if we return because our sins did not offer as much satisfaction as we had hoped, God will take us back. Even if we return because we could

not make it on our own, God will receive us. God's love does not require any explanations about why we are returning. God is glad to see us home and wants to give us all we desire, just for being home" (*The Road to Daybreak*, 72-73).

When the prodigal returns home, the father's actions are dramatic. He expresses an unfathomable love that protects his son from the hostility of the village and restores him to fellowship in the community. The father runs to meet him. How humiliating! A nobleman dressed in flowing robes would never act this way. The son was totally rejected in a foreign land but totally accepted by his father. The father kisses him again and again in a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. He wants him to have the best robe, likely his own. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa 61:10). The ring is quite likely a signet ring, which means he has complete trust in his son. The shoes that are given to the son are the sign of his being a free man in the house, not a servant; and the fact that the servants put the shoes on him indicates they accept him as their master.

We make a plan to be hired servants, knowing we are not worthy to be called sons, but God's love reaches out to make us sons and daughters. The Father's desire is for us to repent, not to become slaves, but full-fledged

sons. If we insist on doing anything, however, we cannot be regarded as sons. Sonship, the robe, the ring, the shoes, the party, all are God's gifts to us.

This story tells us that the Heavenly Father has a reckless, relentless, pursuing, searching, passionate love for his lost children. He wants us to come home! Imagine the father in the story waiting and hoping for his son's return. The first thing he did in the morning and the last thing he did at night was look down the road for any sign of his return. In the same way, we have a Father who is waiting for us to return. When he sees us, he stops everything he is doing and runs to us, accepting us with open arms. He doesn't tell us what we have done wrong, he doesn't hold grudges and resentments against us.

We leave home searching for home. We come home when we allow the Father to embrace us and call us his son, his daughter. Home is the center of our being where we can hear his voice, and believe him when he says, "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well-pleased."

The story of the prodigal is a story about coming home. On our journey we can find ourselves drifting away from God. It is then that we realize the importance of returning home again and again to our loving Father. This morning, I invite you to walk down the road that leads to the Father's love.

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JOINING THE PARTY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Luke 15:25-32

Second Message

John Hanneman

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On New Year's Day 1963, USC played Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl. The Wisconsin quarterback, Ron VanderKelen, was one of the all-time great college quarterbacks. I was twelve years old at the time, and our family was gathered for New Year's Day celebrations. Pete Beathard of USC threw four touchdown passes in the first half, and USC was up by a score of 42-14. At half-time, I got upset about something and I marched off to the basement to sulk. I waited for someone to come and offer the sympathy I thought I deserved, but no one did. I thought it was no big deal, because the game was practically over at half-time anyway. After the game, my brother came downstairs and told me that Ron VanderKelen had gotten hot in the second half and Wisconsin had almost completed an incredible comeback. The final score was USC 42, Wisconsin 37. VanderKelen threw for 401 yards, and 11 Rose Bowl records were broken. But, because of my anger, I had missed it.

In our studies in the parable of the prodigal son we are considering our relationship with God, centering our lives on Jesus, and having intimacy with the Father. Oftentimes, our anger and refusal to "join the party," as it were, causes us to miss much of the joy of living the Christian life. Are we refusing to join in? If we are to connect our hearts to God's heart and become his sons and daughters, this is a critical element of the spiritual life.

Today, we will consider one who refused to join the party and enter into joy. I am referring to the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. In our last study, we looked at the younger son; today, we will consider the older son's response to what occurred when the prodigal returned home. Last week, I invited you to return to the Father; today, I am inviting you to join the party.

The four parables in Luke 15 spiral in intensification. We have stories about 100 sheep, 10 coins, 2 sons, and 1 son. The parables are told in doublets of 2 and 2. The parable of the prodigal son (vv. 11-32) is a double parable, like the story of the sheep and the coin (vv. 4-11).

This fourth story concerns the older son. Let's read the text together. Luke 15:25-32:

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he

has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found' " (NASB).

The older brother is in the fields when the younger son arrives home. Coming in from his labors, he finds a great celebration in progress, with music, dancing and laughter. When we arrived late one night in a small Mayan village in Yucatan last May, we heard the loud celebration of a wedding party. The celebration lasted all night. No one in the village slept, especially us. That is the kind of festive sight the older son encounters when he arrives home from a day working in the fields.

In response, he becomes extremely agitated and bothered. He feels left out. When he asks his servant what is going on, he learns about his brother's return. This angers him, and he refuses to share in the rejoicing. The father comes out to talk with him, but the older son chooses to humiliate him publicly by quarreling with him in front of the guests—a very serious matter. The conversation between son and father indicates that the older son is lost. In fact, he is doubly lost: he is lost to both his father and his brother.

The older son does not address his father with honor. He complains that he has served him for many years, thereby demonstrating the spirit of a slave, not a son. He thinks he has not disobeyed him, but this very action is disobedient. He accuses his father of favoritism. He declares he is not part of the family and would rather be merry with his friends—the same desire the younger son expressed before he left home. He also attacks his younger brother, calling him "this son of yours." The older son would rather forego fellowship with his father than accept his father's treatment of his brother.

The younger son was estranged and rebellious while he was absent from the house, but the older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was yet

part of the house. The estrangement and rebellion of the younger son were evident in his surrender to his passions and in his request to leave his father's house. The estrangement and rebellion of the older son were evident in his anger and refusal to enter the house.

The context of this chapter is Jesus' receiving and eating with sinners. He was crossing over cultural and religious boundaries by welcoming prodigal children home and receiving them at his table.

In response to Jesus' hospitality, the Pharisees murmured and grumbled, just like their forefathers in the wilderness on the way to Canaan. Jesus shared the first three stories for the sake of the fourth, because the older son was like the Pharisees: they were angry because Jesus was loving unclean people who wanted to come home from a far country. They refused to enter into the joy of the celebration. Their pretense of having their act together prevented them from experiencing intimacy with the Father. They felt they were religiously secure, but they were lost. They were not sons. They would rather forego fellowship with the Heavenly Father than accept Jesus' treatment of their prodigal brothers.

A number of spiritual themes arise from our text.

The first one is this: The older son was lost because he was living by the law.

The brothers illustrate two ways we try to satisfy the longings of our hearts. All of us have deep yearnings, desires for love, intimacy, and home. We want to be sons and daughters, and so we try to order our lives in a way that will satisfy those yearnings.

The younger son sought to satisfy his desires by leaving home and seeking his freedom. He rebelled and lived recklessly, looking for love in all the wrong places. Trying to escape the aches of his lonely heart, he became a slave of sin.

The older brother illustrates another way of satisfying those same longings. He stayed home and did what was expected of him. He was the good son. He worked hard at doing what was right, but became a slave of the law.

The younger son recognized his unworthiness, but the older son felt worthy. He was convinced that keeping the law and performing up to expectations would salve the restlessness of his lonely heart and connect him to his father. He tried to gain acceptance, value and love from what he could do, but he was just as wrong and just as lost as the younger son.

That is the problem of legalism. It is a disease of the heart. When we live under law, we base all of our relationships, those with God, parents, spouse, children, and friends, on our efforts to win their approval and acceptance. Legalism is a predator that feeds on the spiritual life.

For the first twenty years of my life, I identified with the younger son. I was headed far away from home and becoming more and more enslaved. Then I became a

Christian and entered into the wonderful celebration of being "found." I had come home. But soon I sank into legalism and living under the law. I began relating to God and to my church family in the same way I related to my physical family: I worked very hard at it. When I became a pastor, following a ten-year engineering career, I doubled my efforts to try and catch up with other spiritual leaders. I was being obedient: staying at home, doing good things. But I was acting like a slave, not a son. I had no joy or freedom. My anger and resentment were keeping me from joining the party. For the second twenty years of my life, I related to the elder son: I became a Pharisee. But I learned that didn't work, either.

Listen to these words from *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 30) by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge: "The orthodoxy we try to live out, defined as 'Believe and Behave Accordingly' is not a sufficient story line to satisfy whatever turmoil and longing our heart is trying to tell us about. Somehow our head and heart are on separate journeys and neither feels like life."

Here is our second principle: It is hard to recognize our lostness when we stay at home.

When we are competing with pigs for something to eat in a distant country, when we are getting drunk, taking drugs, stealing, and living on the streets, it is easy to see that we are far from home. It is much different, however, when we stay home and do everything that is expected of us.

Legalism is hard to recognize at times, because it looks so good on the outside. We convince ourselves we are doing what God wants. At times, pastors encourage us along the way, convincing us that we are obeying God. When we express doubts, confusion and restlessness, we are encouraged to redouble our efforts at doing Christian things. We suppress our longings and work harder. Legalism blinds us to our lostness.

Third, it may be difficult to spot Pharisaical lostness, but there are signs just the same.

For the younger son, the sign of lostness was his addictions, his outward sin. For the older son, it was the secret sins of the heart: resentment, envy, anger, jealousy, lack of joy. Sadly, this is what we see in many churches.

Another sign of lostness is perfectionism. We think we should be perfect and so we work at it, trying to do everything right. We seek to completely control our environment. We put great pressure on ourselves to live up to our own expectations and those of others. But gradually, the weight becomes unbearable. The guilt and shame of failure is a heavy load to bear.

Another sign of lostness is complaining and competition. The older son complained to his father that he was not receiving what he was due. Comparing himself to his younger brother, he felt left out and rejected. Angry that the father's grace extended towards such an undeserving wretch, he lashed out, asking, "What about

me?”

Henry Nouwen has a word for us here: “Often I catch myself complaining about little rejections, little impolitenesses, little negligences. Time and again I discover within me that murmuring, whining, grumbling, lamenting, and griping that go on and on even against my will. The more I dwell on the matters in question, the worse my state becomes... Of one thing I am sure. Complaining is self-perpetuating and counterproductive. Whenever I express my complaints in the hope of evoking pity and receiving the satisfaction I so much desire, the result is always the opposite of what I tried to get.” (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 72-73).

We think our complaining will enlist the sympathy of others, but the opposite is true: our self-rejection drives them away. We end up in the basement by ourselves. We miss the Rose Bowl game celebration.

When we find ourselves uptight, tense and angry, that is a sign we are lost. When we complain and feel resentful, that is a sign that we are lost. When we feel rejected or when we reject ourselves, that is a sign we are lost. When we find ourselves devoid of joy, that is a sign we are lost.

How can we throw off these chains of slavery?

Here is the fourth principle from our text: The Father’s love bids us to enter the house, join the party, and become sons.

There are two sons in this story, and both are lost. But the father demonstrates unconditional grace and love toward each of them.

When the prodigal son returns home, the father’s actions are dramatic. He runs to him, kisses him, and lavishes gifts on him. But then the father goes beyond what we might expect or imagine. When he speaks with his older son, we observe that for the second time he demonstrates unexpected love. He entreats him, absorbing his anger. He does not judge, criticize or reject him, but instead pours out his love on him. He does not scold or rebuke him. He does not accuse either son. And he does not compare them. He knows that each one of them is unique. He wants the older son to understand grace, and to rejoice with him. He assures the son that his rights are fully protected. He tells him that everything that he owns is already his.

We might think that one son is bad and the other good, but the father doesn’t see it that way. He loves them both the same. His desire for both sons is the same. To both he offers the gift of sonship.

Knowing that he is not worthy to be called a son, the younger man hopes he can return home and be a slave. But the father will have none of it. He gives him a robe, a ring, and shoes, he kills the fattened calf and throws a party—all because he wanted his son to experience sonship.

The father had the same desire for his older son. This

man lived in the house, but he was not a son; he related to his father as a slave. He thought he could save himself and so he insisted on remaining a servant. This was the hurdle for the Pharisees. Would they accept the Father’s love of sinners? Would they enter into the sonship that God wanted to give them? We face the same choice. Will we let go of our anger, pride and resentment in order to be sons?

Here is what Paul says in Galatians 4:1-7: “Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything...But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons...Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

On our journey to find intimacy with God, law never touches our hearts. Doing good things and avoiding bad things never brings us into the great romance. Something much deeper and more powerful is at work. The kind of intimacy that our hearts long for comes only in receiving God’s love. The kind of freedom and joy we seek comes through receiving sonship, not earning it.

This parable teaches us that sonship is at the heart of intimacy with God. This is not an easy journey, especially for legalists. It is hard to accept a relationship that is so contrary to anything we experience in life; that God doesn’t require anything from us in order to love and accept us. But that is what Jesus is saying throughout this story. Through Jesus we become sons and daughters of God. The spiritual life is the journey where we disconnect from all of our activity to earn what the Father wants to give us as a gift.

Philip Yancey tells this story in one of his books: “I remember a long night sitting in uncomfortable Naugahyde chairs in O’Hare Airport, waiting impatiently for a flight that was delayed for five hours. I happened to be next to a wise woman who was traveling to the same conference. The long delay and late hour combined to create a melancholy mood, and in five hours we had time to share all the dysfunctions of childhood, our disappointments with the church, our questions of faith. I was writing the book *Disappointment with God* at the time, and I felt burdened by other people’s pains and sorrows, doubts and unanswered prayers. My companion listened to me in silence for a very long time, and then out of nowhere she asked a question that has always stayed with me. ‘Philip, do you ever just let God love you?’ she said. ‘It’s pretty important, I think.’” (*The Jesus I Never Knew* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 269).

Many of you are infected with the disease of living under the law, but you find it hard to recognize it. It is hard for you to open up and expose what is really going on inside your heart. It takes a lot of courage to let down your guard and become completely honest with

yourself and with God. But, despite the pain, it is more than worth it. The Father is waiting with open arms to love you. Everything he has is yours. The joy of being a son or a daughter is beyond compare.

I am conscious of the fact that without the working of the Spirit, my words are fruitless. With that said, I want to invite you to join the party. Will you let go of your anger and resentment or whatever it is that is preventing you from entering into the house? Will you let the Spirit drill a hole through the crusty wall that guards your heart? Will you let God love you?

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BECOMING A FATHER

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1174

Luke 15:20-32

Third Message

John Hanneman

September 6th, 1998

I want to begin our third study in the parable of the prodigal son this morning by reading a story from Philip Yancey's recent book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, pp. 49-51):

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him "Boss"—teaches her a few things that men like. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline "Have you seen this child?" But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping" is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in down town Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She

no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. *My dog back home eats better than I do now.* She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with the lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *Oh, God.*

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smoothes her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

The message of this modern-day prodigal daughter story is that we can come home. But the thing that draws me into the story is the father's response. It forces me to ask myself, would I be that kind of father?

In our studies in the familiar parable of the prodigal son we have already looked at the story from the perspective of the younger and older sons. Today, I want to cover these verses from the viewpoint of the father. Actually, the father is the main character in the story. The parable might well be called the parable of the father's love, for this is the central point of the text. The power of a father's love is one of the most dynamic forces in the universe.

Let us read the text together. Luke 15:20-32:

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving {anything} to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion {for him,} and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry.

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and {began} entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found' " (Luke 15:20-32, NASB).

I want to begin by making a number of observations about the father.

He is willing to let his children go. He will not hold them back, forcing them to remain at home. He knows it is more important for them to find home in their hearts rather than in their bedrooms.

The father is willing to be taken advantage of, even humiliated. When his younger son asks for his inheritance, he gives it to him. When his older son quarrels with him in public, he responds to him softly and tenderly.

The father is always initiating. He runs to his younger son while he is still some way off; he goes outside and initiates a conversation with his older son.

The father loves in extravagant and unexpected ways. He offers his best gifts, a robe, a ring, and shoes, to his younger son. He kisses him again and again. He prepares a banquet. He tells his older son that everything he has is his.

The father wants his children to become sons, to grow into adulthood. He has a clear purpose in mind for his relationship with them, even though he knows how costly that will be. The younger son wants to be a slave but is granted the status of son, and he embraces his sonship. The older son refuses to accept this gift and chooses to remain a slave.

The father rejoices. The anguish he has felt for years only serves to increase his capacity for joy. Three times in chapter 15 we read that when something that is lost is found, that is an occasion for rejoicing:

"...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (7);

"...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (10);

"Let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (24).

This is the same joy that Jesus anticipated, according to the writer of Hebrews: "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at

the right hand of the throne of God” (12:2).

The story of the prodigal son is the story about the heart of the heavenly Father. “George Buttrick, former chaplain at Harvard, recalls that students would come into his office, plop down on a chair and declare, ‘I don’t believe in God.’ Buttrick would give this disarming reply: ‘Sit down and tell me what kind of God you don’t believe in. I probably don’t believe in that God either.’ And then he would talk about Jesus.” (Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 264).

That is what this story does for us: it explains the Father’s love for lost people. It sets out the hardship he is willing to endure so that he might enjoy us. It explains the hardness of our hearts that keeps us from enjoying the Father’s love. It illustrates how difficult it is for us to find home. It speaks of the joy when a son or daughter connects to the heart of the Father.

Now I want to point out a number of spiritual truths from this parable.

First, the ultimate call of our Christian life is to become like the father.

As we grow older, we become more like our earthly fathers and mothers. We look like them, we speak, walk, and dress like them. We tend even to adopt the things that we don’t like about them. If we are God’s children, part of his family, shouldn’t we grow into his likeness as we mature and develop?

This is what John hints at in his first epistle when he talks about three stages in spiritual growth that follow the natural process of human growth: “I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name’s sake. I am writing to fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you children, because you know the Father” (1 John 2:12-13).

This is what Jesus prayed in the upper room: “I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, are in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:20-21).

Ultimately, our goal is to become like the Father, to be one with the Father and the Son through the Spirit, to share the very heart of God. This means that as we grow and mature, we will offer the kind of grace and love that we see pouring forth from the father in the story of the prodigal son. And when I say father and mother, I am not just thinking of physical seeds. I am speaking of the body of believers, the world in which we live.

In my own spiritual journey, I can relate to the three characters in this parable. In my first twenty years, I, too, like the prodigal son, went to a distant country and squandered all my resources. Then, for the next twenty years, I lived like the older son. I worked hard in the church, but I was not really at home. I was not acting like a son. I refused to enter into the celebration. When I lost both of my parents, I had to deal with the fact that I would never have the kind of relationship with them that I desired. I was never able to acquire the true status of “sonship” in my own family.

But then, as I opened my own heart to my deepest pain, I began to experience my place as a son in my heavenly Father’s embrace. I could hear his voice saying to me, “You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased.” But that wasn’t the end of the journey. As I began to understand my sonship, I felt a deeper call—the call to be like the father in the parable. Now I know that for the next twenty years I will be trying to become like that father, relating to my own children and to others in new ways.

Before we become fathers and mothers, however, we must first become sons and daughters rather than children and slaves. There is no way to short-circuit this process, although we try at times. We work hard putting off the old man, renewing our mind, and putting on the new man. We try to imitate Christ, to be godly. This is all well and good, but if we never fully claim our divine sonship, we will not become fathers and mothers from the heart. We will not be controlled by the Spirit from the inside. We will relate to people like children and slaves. We will live under the law and we won’t be free. But when we become free in our God-given sonship, then we in turn can become healthy mothers and fathers to others.

So the order is crucial. We become sons and daughters, and then we hear the deeper call to become fathers and mothers.

Here is a second principle: Becoming a father is not about power and control; it is about compassion.

Being a father means that your guts will get turned inside out. This is what the word “compassion” means—to be moved deeply in the gut. This is the key word in verse 20. When the father saw his son, he felt compassion, and the actions he took as a result of that were an automatic response of his heart. In fact, “compassion” is one of Luke’s favorite words:

7:13: “When the Lord saw her, He felt compassion for her, and said to her, ‘Do not weep.’”

10:33: “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion...”

15:20: “So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.”

Being a father does not mean you have perfect children and do everything right. It isn’t about order and efficiency. It isn’t about controlling and putting adult children under the law. It isn’t about performance. Sadly, however, some fathers and mothers try to control and humiliate their children, acting out of their own selfish motives. Listen to this story, told by Philip Yancey: “I know of one AIDS patient who traveled eleven hundred miles to be with his family in Michigan for Thanksgiving dinner. He had not seen them in seven years. The parents welcomed him warily, and when dinner was served, everyone got a heaping portion of turkey and all the trimmings on the best Wedgwood china plates—except for their son the AIDS patient, who was served on Chinette, with plastic utensils.” (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, 172).

Being a loving father means having the kind of heart that welcomes home a prodigal, a heart that loves unconditionally. A good father is not threatened when his children act childishly. He never stops initiating. He loves

without holding a grudge. He forgives without resentment. He is generous beyond measure. He believes in his children. His love communicates total acceptance. He listens and does not preach or give unwanted advice. A true father allows his children to become what God wants them to be. As Henri Nouwen writes: "Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of the compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian. Such acts do not stand beside the moments of prayer and worship but are themselves such moments...So worship becomes ministry and ministry becomes worship, and all we say or do, ask for or give, becomes a way to the life in which God's compassion can manifest itself." (Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison & Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion* [New York: Doubleday, 1982] 120-121).

Jesus said, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Paul wrote: "And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion..." (Col. 3:12).

Here is our third spiritual principle: Being a father means accepting loneliness.

If compassion means getting your guts ripped apart, you can be sure that your heart will ache. Grief and loneliness are part and parcel of fatherhood. It can be very lonely waiting up for your children to come home at night. It can be very lonely waiting for them to come home from a distant country. It can be painful watching people you love travel the wrong road, getting hurt and disappointed. It is hard to not try and fix their problems.

But in accepting this, we become like our heavenly Father. God knows the kind of ache we feel. Imagine how he felt when he created the first man, Adam, and Adam sinned. I am sure that broke his heart. Did God make a mistake? Did he turn his back? No. He clothed Adam and promised a seed who would bring salvation. All through the Old Testament, we know that God wept over Israel. Over and over, that is the image that is presented to us concerning how the Father related to his son Israel. Think about when he sent his son to a distant country to be beaten and killed. God is a Father who knows loneliness and sorrow.

A godly father is so secure in his relationship with God and so filled with his love that he expects and accepts loneliness. He deals with grief in a godly way. He does not try to make himself a victim. He does not try to push his pain off on other people. He hurts, but he does not take out his hurt on others. A father gives, and even in the midst of pain he does not take. A father doesn't bury his grief, but it doesn't control him, either.

Finally, the joy of a father is blessing others and setting them free.

Divine fatherhood includes both sorrow and joy. He prays. He lets go. He hurts. But he also looks forward to that day when he can relate to his children freely and give them everything he has. His joy is in seeing lost children return home, in having sons and daughters who can love him freely, not as slaves and children. This is God's joy and it can be our joy, too.

Last May, my 21-year-old daughter Sara accompanied our singles group to Yucatan. Knowing that she didn't want my advice, I tried to stay out of her way and let her do what she felt inspired to do. At the end of our visit, we had a time of sharing what God had taught us. After several people had shared, Sara spoke up and expressed her thanks to me as her father. We had our times of trial during her teenage years, so you can appreciate how this was a very moving time for me when she expressed her appreciation of me as her father. I can think of no greater time of joy in my life.

And this kind of joy isn't limited merely to family, it can be experienced in community, with friends and spiritual children. On the cross, Jesus looked at Mary his mother and his disciple John, and said, "Woman, behold, your son!" And he said to his disciple, "Behold, your mother." In our own community there are many children who long for spiritual fathers and mothers. You may have blown it with your own children, but God will give you another chance. You don't have to go anywhere; there is ample opportunity right here. There is nothing more fulfilling than mentoring spiritual children, giving them a taste of the Father's heart, embracing them and helping them grow into the sons and daughters he wants them to become. At the end of your life, you will not want to be remembered for the money you made or the companies you built. Your joy will be remembering the relationships you nurtured.

The call to be a son will lead to the call to be a father. The call to be a daughter will lead to the call to be a mother. The issue is, will you accept the call? Henri Nouwen asks these penetrating questions: "Do I want to be like the father? Do I want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives; not just the one who is being welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers it as well?" (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 122).

Do you want to be the kind of man or woman who greets a sinner in a bus station with a sign that says "Welcome Home"?

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SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1175
 Various Scriptures
 Fourth Message
 John Hanneman
 September 13, 1998

This fall marks the 50th anniversary of Peninsula Bible Church. In 1948, five businessmen, Gus Gustafson, Ed Stirm, Bob Smith, Cecil Kettle, and Harry Smith, began meeting together to talk about ministry on the peninsula. They formed a fellowship which began meeting at the Palo Alto Community Center for Sunday worship. Some time later, three letters were delivered to a post office box for Peninsula Bible Fellowship. These were written by three different men, without prior knowledge, and independent of each other, recommending a young man who was graduating from Dallas Theological Seminary to pastor the fledgling ministry. His name was Ray Stedman. Ray and his wife Elaine came to Palo Alto in 1950 to take on a work of the Lord, one that has had far reaching impact in the world. PBC grew under the teaching of Ray and other godly men. Many of us have our roots in that work in which Ray and others laid a foundation for life and ministry that has helped shape and mold us.

Now we move to 1984. That year, we learned at a PBC all-day staff meeting that there was a church building for sale in Cupertino. We were not actively seeking to plant another church, although at times we had looked for a different location to alleviate the crowded conditions on Middlefield Road in Palo Alto. At lunch time we decided to look over this property we had just heard about. When we returned to resume our meeting, the Spirit moved us to pursue the purchase of the site. By God's grace and leading we were able to do that without incurring any debt. Following renovation work, we opened the doors of PBC/Cupertino on March 10th, 1985. Peninsula Bible Church continued as one church for several years but gradually, we became two separate churches.

We have a marvelous heritage here at PBC. I am humbled when I think I have been able to be a part of it.

In our preaching schedule this fall we are spending some time on spiritual basics, refocusing our lives and centering on Jesus, seeking to bring the different aspects of daily living into a spiritual dimension. One of the most important of these is church, the place where we gather to worship. That is what I want to talk about this morning.

I have titled the message "Spiritual Community," but it really is a "state of the union" message. I follow this practice every year with our singles ministry. I talk about the ministry, my vision for it, and share a little of who I am. I thought it might be helpful to do this for the

entire church, for two reasons. First, our church year begins in the fall. Fall is when school starts and most of our church programs get under way. As a pastor, for me fall is like spring is to the farmer. This is the time to plow the soil, sow seed and cultivate, and see what God grows.

The second reason why it is helpful to have a "state of the union" message is that there are many people among us who don't know a lot about Peninsula Bible Church. There is no definitive "owner's manual" for this church. It will be helpful to learn who we are and what is our philosophy of ministry. So I want to spend some time talking, first, about the universal church, and second, our church here in Cupertino.

The New Testament has several passages describing the church. I will briefly mention five references, all by the apostle Paul, which we find there.

A. The church is the body of Christ.

Writing in Ephesians, Paul makes the following statement:

And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph 1:22-23, NASB).

"Body" is the word the apostle uses to describe the nature of the church. Christ is the head, says Paul, and the church is his body. In other words, believers in Jesus Christ are the ears, eyes, arms and legs of the risen Lord. We are connected to one another and to our head. The church is not an institution, it is not an organization. The church is a living organism. It has an organic rather than a static nature. This is why we seek to lead through relationships, not through organized programs, detailed structures or organizational charts. We are a living body, and relationships define the church.

B. The head of the church is Jesus.

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything (Col. 1:18).

we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ (Eph 4.15).

The Commander-in-chief responsible for leading and guiding this living organism is Jesus Christ. He is the head, the brains of this operation. He has risen from the dead and is actively directing the affairs of his church.

We have one Lord and we are all brothers and sisters.

One implication of this principle for PBC is that we don't have a senior pastor, one person who is in charge. Another implication is that we are governed by a board of elders who are committed to unanimity in decision making. The elders believe that Jesus is Lord of this church. We are convinced that if God wants to move us in a certain direction, then he will bring each elder to a common mind, free from influence by perhaps more dominant board members. This means that matters take longer to accomplish at times, but in the end, we have confidence that Jesus has guided and directed.

C. The church is the dwelling place of God.

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).

In the Bible, the church is referred to as the body of Christ, but it is also referred to as a building, and more specifically, a household, a home, a temple, the place where God dwells. The temple of the Old Testament has been replaced with the church in the NT. When Paul refers to the "house of God," he is not speaking of the physical structure, the walls and windows, etc., but the people. People are the walls and windows. Believers in Christ are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. The church is the place where God dwells, because his people are the church.

What an amazing truth this is! God has called people from all walks of life, preaching peace to people far and near, rich and poor, male and female, slaves and free, brilliant and ordinary, successful and broken. He brings this conglomeration of people together and declares that this is where he is going to live. God is not to be found in a building; he dwells in our hearts. The world sees God in the lives of believers who are indwelt with his Spirit.

And not only the world, but the heavens are watching as this unfolds. Listen to these words of the apostle:

so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:10).

The church is God's display case for all the heavens to watch. What a high calling this is!

D. The church is the pillar and support of the truth.

I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

"Pillar" here refers to the columns that hold up a

building; "support" refers to the bulwark, the mainstay. The church has been entrusted to maintain and proclaim the truth as it is in Jesus to a confused society. This is what sets people free from the power of sin and death. The church is not a collection of people who meet together and decide what they are going to believe; it is a collection of people who are given God's truth to understand and proclaim. The cornerstone is Christ; the foundation is the apostles and prophets who have spoken God's word and deposited it for us in the scriptures.

This is why we are committed to expository teaching here at PBC. We believe that God's word has the power to change hearts, so we are committed to systematically teaching through the books of the Bible, illuminating what God has to tell us.

E. The church is one, but the gifts are many.

Reading again from the words of Paul:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift... And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ (Eph. 4.4-7, 11-12).

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many (1 Cor. 12.12-14).

So there is both unity and diversity in the church. It has a common Lord, a common Spirit, and common goals, but each person in the body functions differently. Every believer has spiritual gifts designed for the common good, for the maturing and building up of the body. Pastor/teachers are given to equip the saints and train them to use their gifts; and then the body does the work of the ministry. So it is imperative that each member functions as God has designed.

This then is the nature of the church as it is defined in the New Testament.

Now I want to talk about our vision for PBC and the things that we hold near and dear because of these truths.

A. Vision for maturity.

When PBC was founded, many churches held to the evangelistic model, in which Sunday mornings were given to leading people to Christ. But the elders of PBC,

based upon the NT principles we have discussed, decided that their calling was to build up the body of Christ to maturity. Our goal is that our people be conformed to the image of Christ. Our calling is to train and equip believers. Thus we give high priority to teaching the word, discipleship, evening study classes, and an intern program which trains teachers and leaders for ministry.

Over the years, God continues to bring men and women to the Bay Area to be trained at PBC and then depart to other places to use their gifts and training. Actually, many of our staff have been trained here. Our goal isn't to increase in numbers, but to train the people who are already in our midst.

B. Commitment to community.

More than ever before, the need for community is what people feel most acutely today. We live in a fragmented, fast-paced society. A sense of community is hard to find. People are looking for a place where they can connect with others.

The older I get, the more I see how important community is to our spiritual life. The church is made up of many members who are in the process of becoming one. When we connect in community we are more likely to connect to God. The goal is not for us to grow individually, but together. Spiritual growth occurs in community. It is hampered when people remain independent of each other. The important thing here, however, is that community be seen as "real." It is imperative that people's hearts become open and exposed. The risk is great, but the rewards are much greater.

At times I wish we could use our Sunday mornings to share with one another in small groups. This is what we long to see occur in our adult elective classes. And this is what we want for home fellowships—to have people become part of a small circle where they connect with others and with God.

There are no techniques that will bring this about. Community is a gift that is created by the Holy Spirit.

C. Importance of the ministry of the saints.

A bedrock principle here at PBC is our commitment to the ministry of the saints. Each one of us has been given spiritual gifts for the work of the ministry. In fact, we cannot function as a church without this. The work of the church requires all the gifts of the body, not just those of the staff and elders.

Just think of all the ministries that have come about through this ministry of the saints: our children's and women's ministries, worship, music and sound ministries, our ushers, the Guatemala ministry, the ministry

to the Vietnamese refugees, Crisis Pregnancy Center, etc.

The most exciting ministries come from members of the body as people follow the Lord's leading. We find that when leaders come up with a vision and then try to get people to follow, the ministry diminishes after a while, because such ministries can easily become fleshly pursuits. But when God lays a vision on someone's heart and they act on that, it flourishes, because it is a ministry of the Spirit.

The elders are delighted when the saints do the work of the ministry. We do everything we can to encourage and support those efforts. Speaking for the staff and elders, we want to give you permission to use your gifts! Don't wait for someone to ask you to do something. If you see a need, God may be calling you to a ministry. And if you want to find a place to try some things out, read the insert in the bulletin today which lists all kinds of opportunities for ministry.

D. Importance of New Covenant lifestyle.

Basically stated, this principle is, everything coming from God, nothing from us. God indwells and empowers his church through the Spirit. As the apostle has written, we are clay pots, ordinary vessels. We are not adequate in ourselves to consider anything coming from us; our adequacy is from God. His strength is perfected in human weakness. Our brokenness releases the life that is inside us. When we find that we are powerless, that is when God does his best work. No other way of living is adequate in the long run. The law kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Sadly, what we see more often than not in the church, however, is "old covenant" ministry, where everything depends on the power of the flesh. At best, this produces a slick facade, but there is always death on the inside. So we seek to be authentic. We don't worry about polished performances. We concentrate on trusting the Lord, not ourselves. It is his church and his ministry.

This is what PBC is about. We are not perfect. Far from it. We are always growing and learning. PBC is not the only church, nor is it the only good church model. There are wonderful churches that function differently according to how God has called them. Here at PBC, we have a clear vision of what God has called us to be. I feel privileged to be a part of it. As we begin this year, our prayer is that we will share this vision, and that as a body we will strive to build ourselves up in love, to a mature man, to the fullness of Christ.

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SABBATH: A TOKEN OF ETERNITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1176

Genesis 2:1-3

Fifth Message

Bernard Bell

September 20, 1998

For the past four weeks we have been taking a sabbatical from our usual preaching routine. A few months ago, Brian Morgan expressed concern that he was tired—too tired to preach a series this Fall. These sentiments of weariness struck a chord with other staff members, and we became concerned lest we fall into the trap of merely “turning the crank.” After discussion at both staff and elder level, action was taken to preserve spiritual vitality. Brian was granted a sabbatical from both preaching and eldering. This is why for a few weeks this summer he was listed in the bulletin as “on leave” from the board of elders. Of course, now that he has returned from Romania he is full of life, energy, and vision. He is now back on the board, but his Fall preaching series on Mark has been postponed to next year, as has John Hanneman’s continuing series in Joshua. In their place we have substituted a series on getting back to the basics, on addressing areas of the Christian life where, as the saying goes, “the rubber hits the road.” Our desire is to give you a vision of God amidst the routine of your daily life: amidst your sexuality, your singleness, your marriage, your parenting, your work. We want to lift your gaze above the mundane, to give you a larger picture, to raise you out of the ruts into which you might have fallen. You have a Father who loves you, as John Hanneman has reminded us for three weeks from the parable of the prodigal son. This Father invites you to his party. We want to help you enjoy the party.

Today in our sabbatical series, we come to the topic of Sabbath. As I have reflected on this matter over the past few weeks, it has struck me that the words Sabbath and sabbatical evoke different emotions. A few of you are still fortunate enough to enjoy a paid sabbatical from work, a benefit that was once more common in this valley. Now, about the only people left with sabbaticals are academics and pastors. A sabbatical is not a period of doing nothing, it is a break from the normal routine. A university would take a dim view of a professor who used his sabbatical to stay home as a couch potato. No, he is given a sabbatical so that he can continue his work, free from the pressures of his usual mill of teaching, grading, and meetings.

A sabbatical is a welcome break, but Sabbath more often arouses guilt or resentment. Consider one of my favorite movies, *Chariots of Fire*, in which the hero, Eric Liddle, chides two young boys for playing soccer on Sunday, and says, “The Sabbath’s no a day for playing football.” Are those boys likely to be attracted by Sabbath?

Sabbath is a confusing issue for the Church. How easy it would be if the Apostle Paul had given us in one of his letters a convenient guide to Sabbath living. How are we to figure out how to live when we haven’t been given detailed instructions? Tom Wright makes a helpful analogy. Suppose we found a long-lost play of Shakespeare’s, but the final act was missing. How would we complete the play? Wright suggests hiring a troupe of the best Shakespearean actors, have them thoroughly immerse themselves in the existing acts, and then tell them to improvise the final act. In Scripture we have the

first few acts of the great drama of redemption. The first Act is Creation, the second is the Fall, the third is Israel, the fourth is Christ. We have a glimpse of the final Act, the New Heavens and New Earth, in Revelation 21-22. But Act 5, the Church, is rather sketchy. Wright proposes that we immerse ourselves in the acts that we do have, then improvise. Today I will seek to immerse you in the Acts of this Drama as they pertain to Sabbath. We start in Genesis 2:1-3, our primary text for this morning.

1. Sabbath the climax of creation

Genesis 1 describes how God created the heavens and the earth. He took a formless and empty earth, and spent three days forming it, then three days filling it. God formed the world by creating boundaries, by separating the light from the darkness, the waters below from the waters above, and the sea from the dry land. He imposed temporal and spatial order onto what had been an undifferentiated cosmos. On the second set of three days he filled these temporal and spatial realms with their appropriate creatures. Day and night he filled with the greater and the lesser lights. The waters above and those below he filled with flying and swimming creatures. The dry land he filled with livestock, creepy-crawlies, and wild animals.

There was temporal order with the orderly succession of evening and morning. There was spatial order with each creature in its appropriate realm. Each day the Lord saw that each component was “good.” On the sixth day he saw that the whole assembly, the whole cosmos was “very good” (1:31). The Hebrew word *tov*, “good,” means that something is functioning the way it is supposed to function. So in Gen. 1:31 we are being told that the cosmos that was called into being is exactly what God had in mind.

But 1:31 is not the end of the creation account; there is a stage beyond the very good. In 2:1-3 we read,

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. And by the seventh day God completed His work which He had done; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen 2:1-3, NASB)

After the six days there is a seventh, a day of rest. But look how many verbs there are on this day. For One who was at rest, God had a busy day, such a busy day that many modern translators have tried to help him out by moving some of his work to the sixth day. So, both NASB and NIV state that it was “by” not “on” the seventh day that his work was completed. The Revised English Bible is more explicit: “On the sixth day God brought to an end all the work he had been doing.” But the Hebrew is quite clear: it was on the seventh day that God did all these activities. On this seventh day, four verbs are predicated of God: he completed, he rested, he blessed, and he sanctified. We’ll look at each in turn.

1.1 God completed on the seventh day

We've seen that many of the translations are afraid of attributing even the work of completion to God on the seventh day. But it is vital that this work of completion be on the seventh, not the sixth day.

What helped me understand how one can complete something on a day of rest was a book by the Norwegian theologian, Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*.¹ Boman argues that Hebrew verbs are dynamic whereas Greek verbs are static. The Western world with its Greco-Roman origins has inherited the static verb forms of the Greeks. Take, for example, the verb "stand." In static thought, the verb "stand" denotes the state of standing as opposed to the state of sitting or lying down. In a static frame of reference, God is either working or he is not working. If he is completing his work, then he cannot be resting, and it becomes difficult to conceive of God still doing something on the seventh day. Hebrew verbs, by contrast, are dynamic, that is, they are verbs of motion. The verb '*amad*, "stand," denotes not the state of standing, but the end result of a motion: the act of rising so that one is standing up. Likewise, "complete" is a dynamic verb of motion. It incorporates within it the activities of the first six days. It is on the seventh day that God brings his creation into the state of completion. Otherwise the seventh day becomes a mere appendage, rather than the climactic day that lends meaning to the other six.

1.2 God rested on the seventh day

Having brought his work into a state of completion, God rested. Again, we will have trouble if we conceive of this in static rather than dynamic terms. In static terms, rest is the absence of motion. Its extreme form is found at the temperature of absolute zero, the temperature at which all motion ceases. But as a dynamic verb, rest is the result of, not the absence of, motion. The OT uses two distinct verbs for rest. The verb here, *shabbat*, is temporal rest, rest in time. The other verb, *nuah*, is primarily spatial rest, rest in space. Each is the result of motion.

The spatial verb, *nuah*, is first used in Gen 2:15, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it." That verb "put" is literally "cause to rest." The verb cannot be interpreted statically, for God immediately gave this resting human two jobs to do, cultivation and keeping. A few chapters later, the verb is used of the ark landing—coming to rest—on the mountain tops (Gen 8:4). Later, God "landed" his people in the Promised Land. He brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, from a land where they did not belong, and he settled them in the Promised Land, where he gave them rest. Rest did not mean that they did no work, but that they lived out their lives settled in the place where they belonged.

It was when I saw *shabbat* as a temporal analogy of this spatial rest that I was finally able to make theological sense of Sabbath. God moved his creation through six days, and he "landed" on the seventh day. He is still active on the seventh day. If he were to stop his activity, this universe would cease functioning instantly. But he carries out his activity within the settled, landed state of the seventh day.

1.3 God blessed the seventh day

The third activity that God does on the seventh day is that he blesses the day. Previously he had blessed the sea and winged creatures on the fifth day (1:22), and man on the sixth day (1:28). In each case the word of blessing was, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." To bless is to endow with abundant and effective life. By blessing the seventh day, God

marked it as an arena of abundant and effective life.

1.4 God sanctified the seventh day

God's final activity on the seventh day was to sanctify the day. To sanctify means to make holy. The concept of holiness is fundamental to the Bible, but is frequently misunderstood. The Biblical worldview distinguishes between two realms: on the one hand is the ordinary, the common, the profane. On the other is the extra-ordinary, the sacred, the holy. Rudolph Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy*, reminds us that the fundamental idea of the holy is that it is "other."² God is Holy; therefore, God is Other. Genesis 1 shows that God is altogether other than his creation. By the end of the sixth day there are two fundamentally different realms: God the Creator in the realm of Other, and his Creation in the realm of the common. But on the seventh day God does something of enormous, but little remarked, significance. By sanctifying the seventh day, he transfers it from the realm of the common into the realm of the holy.

Ten days ago (Tuesday, Sept. 8), Mark McGwire broke what many consider to be the most important record in American sports. Passing Roger Maris' record that had stood since 1961, he hit his 62nd home run of the season. The very next day the ball, together with McGwire's bat and uniform, and even the uniform of his son, an honorary batboy, were taken to the Hall of Fame. They were removed from the realm of the ordinary, the common, and transferred to the realm of the uncommon, the hallowed. Never again will they be used in a baseball game. That would be to return the uncommon, the sacred to the world of the common, the profane.

The climax of creation is the consecration of time. This is unique, for all other ancient creation accounts lead up to the consecration of space. Like the ancient Babylonians, we exalt space over time. Abraham Joshua Heschel observes,

Technical conquest is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. In technical civilization, we expend time to gain space. To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.³

The seventh day is not only the day after the sixth day, it is also the stage beyond the very good. God had more in mind for his creation than just that it be very good. The seventh day is the *telos*, a word that means "goal, end, final purpose." The Bible is unique in having sacred time not sacred space as its *telos*. On the seventh day, God pulled part of the creation into the Other, alongside himself. Is this an indication that he intends to pull the other six days into the realm of the Other, to bring all Creation into this *telos*?

In a sense that is an imponderable, because the Fall got in the way and spoilt things. But, as we will see, there is plenty in Scripture to suggest that Sabbath must be interpreted teleologically, that is, that it must be seen as a goal towards which other things move.

2. Israel called to Sabbath observance

In Act Two, "The Fall," mankind, through his disobedience, threw the "very good" world out of kilter. Curse replaced Blessing. Adam and Eve were thrown out of the garden, out of sacred space, and they forfeited their privilege of enjoying sacred time, of living in the seventh day.

But God is not content to leave his world out of kilter, and his image estranged from sacred time and sacred space. In

Act Three, he calls Israel to be a new human race. He gave her his law so that she might know how to live. He gave her Sabbath as a picture of the seventh day. Sabbath observance is the fourth commandment. In Exodus 20 it is based on Creation:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Exod 20:8-11)

But when Moses repeats the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 5, Sabbath observance is based on God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt:

“And you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.” (Deut 5:15)

So which is it? Is Sabbath observance based on Creation or upon Redemption? The answer must be both. It is predicated on Creation, because the seventh day is the *telos* of the six days of creation. But it is also predicated on Redemption, for fallen humanity must be redeemed if it is to be brought into the seventh day. Israel was to keep Sabbath because she had been both created and redeemed for the seventh day, for the realm of the Other.

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a picture of the seventh day. On the Sabbath, Israel was to fall into the pattern established by God when he completed his work and rested. This established a rhythm to the week: for six days the Israelites labored, then for one day they rested. Each week, the Israelites took a journey through time. The Sabbath was the goal of the week, the day that gave meaning to other six days. But after each Sabbath they had to start the journey over again.

This rhythm that Israel observed each week was itself contained within two larger rhythms. Every seventh year, Israel was to give her land a sabbatical year, a year of rest from being cultivated (Lev 25:1-7). After every seventh sabbatical year, i.e., every fiftieth year, Israel was to celebrate a Jubilee Year in which slaves were set free and land restored to its rightful owner (Lev 25:8-55).

These cycles of a week, of seven years, and of fifty years, were powerful reminders that there lay something beyond the mundane life of the daily routine. Beyond the common lay the sacred, the holy. Beyond the six days lay the seventh. Beyond the six years lay the seventh. Beyond the forty-nine years lay the fiftieth.

Alas, Israel rarely lived up to her calling as the new humanity, the people through whom God would restore blessing to the world. She rarely kept Sabbath. The two major reasons given in Scripture for Israel’s exile are her idolatry and her failure to grant the land its sabbatical rest every seventh year. While the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, the land enjoyed its backlog of Sabbath rest (2 Chr 36:21). The exile cured the people of both idolatry and Sabbath neglect. Neither has been a recurring problem in subsequent Judaism. Indeed, through the past 2500 years, Judaism has exalted Sabbath in two different ways: by intensification and by spiritualization.

1. *Intensification of Sabbath.* One strand of thinking, repre-

ented by the Pharisees, Rabbinic Judaism and modern Orthodox Judaism, sought to legislate Sabbath observance down to the level of minutiae. At Sinai, the Israelites were commanded, “You shall not kindle a fire in any of your dwellings on the Sabbath day” (Exod 35:3). Twentieth century rabbis have been kept very busy transposing this verse into the world of electricity. They have determined that a Jew must not operate anything electrical on the Sabbath, lest a spark be caused, which would be the kindling of a fire. On my two visits to Jerusalem I have stayed in a hotel with a Sabbath elevator. Throughout Sabbath, it stops automatically at each floor and the doors open. The sparks are still being created across the electrical contacts, but no person is pressing the buttons and thus kindling a fire. Other hotels get around the problem by hiring a *goy*, a Gentile, to come in and push the buttons. This sort of attitude to Sabbath was prevalent among the Pharisees in the days of Jesus.

2. *Spiritualization of Sabbath.* Fortunately, not all Jews reduced Sabbath to casuistry. Some of the early rabbis came to see Sabbath as a “token of eternity.” Medieval rabbis looked upon Sabbath as a queen. Near sunset on Fridays, they would lead their followers out onto the hillside to greet the arrival of Queen Sabbath. A beautiful liturgy developed, extolling Sabbath. We get a glimpse of this liturgy in another of my favorite movies, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Here Sabbath is not the interruption to life that we saw in *Chariots of Fire*. For Tevye and Golde, Sabbath is the goal, the *telos*, toward which they have been heading all week. It is a day of heaven on earth, a token of eternity.

3. Sabbath broken by Jesus?

Jesus lived in a Jewish world much concerned about the proper observance of Sabbath. Why did Jesus choose the Sabbath for so many of his healing miracles, such as the one in Mark 2:23-3:6? Was it to thumb his nose at the Pharisees, to get them upset? Or did he see something else in the Sabbath day? We have seen that the Sabbath is to be interpreted teleologically. The seventh day was the goal toward which God moved his Creation, the day in which God brought creation into completion. The Sabbath was his gift to Israel, the goal towards which both creation and redemption moved. Surely then, Sabbath is the most appropriate day for Jesus to heal people, to lift them out of their pits in which they wallowed with their mangled arms and broken lives. Sabbath was the day for being made whole, made complete so that one could enter into rest.

4. Sabbath superseded in the Early Church

The first Christians recognized that with the death and resurrection of Jesus, something dramatic had happened to Sabbath. These Jewish Christians quickly moved their assemblies to the first day of the week. Paul, formerly the most fanatical of Pharisees, and therefore punctilious about Sabbath observance, came to realize that Sabbath was just a shadow of a reality that had now arrived. He told the Colossians,

Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. (Col 2:16-17)

We have the fullest treatment of Sabbath in Hebrews. The writer to the Hebrews, in 3:7-4:13, engages in a lengthy discourse on Psalm 95:7b-11. This psalm is a call to Israel to worship Yahweh and to avoid the disobedient example of the generation that came out of Egypt. The psalmist urged the worshipers, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” (Ps 95:7b; Heb 3:7). The first generation had hardened their hearts, provoking God’s judgment, “They shall never en-

ter my rest” (Ps 95:11; Heb 3:11). The argument through the rest of Hebrews 3-4 is that, just as God appointed the seventh day as a day for himself to enter his rest, so he has appointed another day, which he has called “Today,” as a day for us to enter into his rest.

There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest... (Heb 4:-11)

5. Sabbath Expanded in the New Heavens and New Earth

In Revelation 21-22 we are given a glimpse of the final act of our play. In Act One, God differentiated time, and created the heavenly bodies as timekeepers. But in the final act, God will remove the timekeepers. In the new heavens and the new earth there will be neither sun nor moon (Rev 21:23), nor any night (Rev 21:25). This can only mean that all of time will be holy. The seventh day will have expanded to fill all of time. The whole cosmos will be in the realm of the Other. Furthermore, far from being the end of the play, we will find that this is just the end of the prologue. Only then will we fully enter the realm for which God has made us.

6. Living Sabbath Today

These are the Acts of the play that we have recorded for us in Scripture. In Act One, “Creation,” God pulled the seventh day into the realm of the other. In Act Two, “Fall,” mankind forfeited its share in God’s rest. In Act Three, “Israel,” God invited his people to act out in time the rhythm of the seventh day. In Act Four, “Christ,” Jesus made people complete on the Sabbath. How do we live out Sabbath in Act Five, “The Church”?

On the negative side, we observe neither Saturday nor Sunday as Sabbath, not even a Christian Sabbath. Sabbath has given way to Today, the day for entering God’s rest. How, then, do we observe Today? By making Today a picture of the seventh day, a day of completion, rest, blessing, and sanctification.

6.1 Day of Completion

On the seventh day, God made creation complete. On the Sabbath, Jesus made broken people complete. Today is the day for being made complete. This is true whether it’s Saturday, Sunday, or Tuesday. Today is the day for finally acknowledging that it is awfully wearying trying to make it on your own. Today is the day for accepting Jesus’ invitation, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). God has not made you to live out your life in the common world of the six days. He has made you for the seventh day, to live with him in the realm of the Other. Today is the day to enter that realm.

6.2 Day of Rest

Secondly, Today is the day of rest. It is not a Sabbath day, for the Sabbath was a copy of the seventh day. We must beware of falling into the trap of thinking of rest in static terms. It is not a day for not doing things. It is a day for living life in a different way. We cannot live life this way until we have been made complete. In making us complete, God gives us eternal life. “Eternal life” is an unfortunate translation, for it conjures up images of living forever, in which case salvation becomes a life insurance policy with no term. God’s salvation is not an insurance policy. Eternal life is literally “life of the ages,” the ages being the ages to come, i.e., eternity. God

gives us here, in this age, the life of eternity. This is rest. For all of our toys and our conquest of space, we are a restless people. Even if we have our own patch of real estate we are still looking for somewhere to land. God has made us to land in himself. As Augustine put it, “Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.”

6.3 Day of Blessing

Thirdly, Today is the day of blessing, the realm in which God gives abundant and effective life. Silicon Valley’s definitions of the abundant and effective life have nothing to do with reality. Surely there is more to life than the adage, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” The abundant life is life in eternity.

6.4 Day of Sanctification

Finally, Today is the day of sanctification. God has transferred Today to the realm of the Other. After each Sabbath, Israel had to leave the Other and return to the ordinary. But when God brings us into his rest, there is no end. He has expanded holy time to fill every day. Therefore, in seeking to live out the principle of Sabbath, we treat every day as holy.

The walls that demarcated Sabbath have been blown down. Unfortunately, too often the walls have fallen in the wrong direction. God has blown the walls outwards so that Sabbath has expanded to every day. But the evangelical world has not been very good at living with the walls blown out. In our desire to avoid Sabbath-day legalism we treat all days alike. But what usually happens is that the walls fall inwards so that the six days expand into the seventh. Rather than live every day as holy, we live all days as common. For all our conceit that we are living under grace, we are in a worse state than the Jews. At least they live one day in Sabbath.

Today is not Sabbath; it is what Sabbath pointed to. In turn, both Sabbath and Today point towards the Seventh Day that will fill all of time. Both are tokens of eternity. Sabbath was one day in seven. Today is seven days in seven. Go out today and live it as a token of eternity, but then carry on living that way on Monday and on through the week. Improvise however you see fit, but do so within the framework established by the rest of the plot. Then it will be a day of completion, of rest, of blessing, and of holiness. Sabbath is not the place we’re not allowed to play football, but the place where we enter God’s teleological rest through Christ, and live a foretaste of eternity.

Can any praise be worthy of the Lord’s majesty? How magnificent his strength! How inscrutable his wisdom! Man is one of your creatures, Lord, and his instinct is to praise you. He bears about him the mark of death, the sign of his own sin, to remind him that you thwart the proud. But still, since he is a part of your creation, he wishes to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.

Augustine, *Confessions* i.1.

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SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Corinthians 6:12-20
Seventh Message
John Hanneman
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Our nation is immersed in a political crisis over a moral scandal involving the leader of our country. We have read the reports, watched the testimonies, and listened to the experts. All of us should be willing to admit that something is terribly wrong. As the crisis continues, the weeks and months ahead will be very interesting.

The thing that amazes me about all of this is the opinion polls. The president's approval ratings are still very high. Many people are expressing the opinion that what the president does in his private life is none of our business. They urge us to get over it and move on. What does this say about the state of our society?

It indicates to me that not only our president, but the whole nation is on trial in this moral dilemma that is being played out before our eyes. A situation that is centered on sexuality has led to a national discussion of spirituality. But there is something terribly wrong with our spirituality if we have become so callous as to simply dismiss so easily the issue that confronts us. The problems in the White House are a signal that we have business to attend to. What is God trying to tell us in all of this?

As a church we are in the middle of a series dealing with the spiritual life. In recent weeks we have talked about worship, sabbath, and our church. In the coming weeks we will hear about singleness and marriage, among other things. Today I want to talk about sexuality and spirituality. I will not have anything to say about politics.

There is nothing more confusing to our spirituality than our sexuality. We live in a sensual and sexual world. Following a visit to a Third World country, re-entering the United States has the effect of hitting you like a blast furnace. Sensuality oozes out of every nook and cranny, and the senses go on overload. Almost every appeal made by Madison Avenue is directed towards our sexuality. Our world is bombarded by sexual temptation. The things that are available on the Internet today make Playboy magazine seem benign. We are told that sex is no big deal. It is part of our humanness, we hear, so we are free to engage in it whenever we desire.

It is obvious that what we need to hear is truth, not relative truth or cultural truth, but the absolute truth of God's word. That is what will clear up the confusion and set us free. God's word clearly teaches that there is a close connection between sexuality and spirituality.

Mankind's problem is that we often get the two confused.

Our text this morning is taken from chapter 6 of the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Corinthian society was rather like ours in that the worship of sex had infected all of society. In the city of Corinth in Paul's time, a thousand priestesses/prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, entered the city every night to ply their trade. Sex was a part of the cultic worship that was ingrained in that society. "To live as a Corinthian" meant to live in luxury and immorality. We could probably say the same today about living as Californians.

Paul himself had founded this church in Corinth and taught that these activities were wrong. But some people were misinterpreting the apostle's word in an effort to support sexual immorality and cultic prostitution, to the confusion of the church. In response, Paul wrote this passage to clear up the issue. As we will see, his words could hardly be more relevant for us today.

A. The truth about grace (12)

At the outset, Paul wants to clear up something he was reported to have said. We begin reading at verse 12 of chapter 6:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything. (1 Cor 6:12, NASB)

This phrase, "all things are lawful," is surrounded by quotation marks in the RSV. It is quite likely that Paul did use this phrase. It was part of his teaching on grace. In Christ, we are saved by grace. We are no longer under law, but under grace. But some people in Corinth were using this argument as a pretext to spread license and engage in wrong sexual practices. Here we should say that "immorality" means any kind of immoral sexual practice, any kind of behavior that is outside of God's design for marriage, including prostitution, fornication, adultery, and pornography.

Paul explains that there are limits to grace. Certainly, grace does not give us the freedom to sin. "All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable or helpful," says Paul. If we engage in activities that hurt ourselves or others, that is not grace. Grace creates wholeness. It does not seek to destroy. All things are lawful, yes, but we should not be mastered by anything. Grace leads to freedom, but sin leads to slavery. We lose our freedom in Christ when we engage in sin, because we become

enslaved by it. In other words, immorality, or any other sin, will have power over our lives. Paul says that the goal of grace is freedom, not slavery.

B. The truth about our body (13-14)

Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food; but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. (6:13-14)

Here Paul becomes more specific so as to clear up any confusion about the body. Food is for the belly and the belly is for food. There is a one-to-one correspondence between them. We satisfy our natural hunger by eating. However, there is not the same correspondence between immorality and our body. When we feel sexual desire, do we automatically act on that desire just as we do when we are hungry? The world would say yes, but God says no. The apostle declares that the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body.

Paul is saying that there is a big difference between our appetite for food and our sexual appetites, between our belly and our body. Food and the belly are temporary; they will both be done away with. But that is not the case with the body. There is something much deeper going on with the body.

Men and women are very different from the animal world. Animals simply follow their sexual desires by instinct. But that is not the case with us. We are not to live by the motto, "if it feels good, do it." Our bodies are not to be used for self-gratification. God has a permanent, eternal plan for them. They are designed to be an eternal instrument through which we declare the glory of God. Just as Jesus was raised up bodily, so also will the Christian. God has a purpose for our bodies in this life and also in the life to come. The body is for the Lord. It is a sacred place that is indwelt by God.

What Paul is beginning to hint at is that there is a close connection between the expression of our sexuality and our spirituality. Both are very powerful forces in our lives. It is easy to confuse the desires of the body and the desires of the soul. But the body is designed for something very special. Immoral sexual practices interfere with how God wants to use our bodies.

C. The connection between sexuality and spirituality (15-17)

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one with her? For He says, "The two will become one flesh." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. (6:15-17)

What then is the connection between sexuality and

spirituality, and why do we get these confused? Paul goes on to explain.

When we come to Christ, our body becomes part of his body. We become one with him. However, if we join ourselves to a harlot, we become a member of a harlot. Our bodies unite, because we have become one flesh. The word "join" here means to cleave, to be glued together. Paul reminds us of the verse in Genesis that gives the goal for marriage: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). Sexual intercourse always brings about a complete union of two people, body, soul, and spirit. To join oneself to a harlot, to engage in wrong sexual activity, is to involve Christ in that sin, destroying the union that we have with him.

Paul is saying that the connection between sexuality and spirituality is oneness. This is the crux of the issue.

Both sexuality and sensuality go to the very core of our beings. They both touch the same place. Sexuality and sensuality are mysteries. They are centered in our desire for worship, which is a form of sexual expression. We worship God with our bodies because we are one body with him.

God has given each one of us a deep desire for intimacy, for oneness. We desire to possess and to be possessed. All of our spiritual and sexual quests are efforts to satisfy these deep longings. The reason we pursue so many different spiritual paths, why we pursue sexual intimacy and marriage, why we have the urge to merge, is due to our God-given desire for oneness. Our deep desires for sexual intimacy point to the greater reality—our desire for oneness and intimacy with God.

This is what Jesus prayed for his disciples in the Upper Room. He used the language of intimacy so that they might experience oneness: "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us" (John 17:21a). What wonderfully intimate language! Jesus prayed that his disciples would experience the same sense of oneness that he had with his Father.

Oneness is at the heart of the Godhead. God exists in three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet God is one. The three Persons of the Trinity share oneness. And God in his infinite wisdom wants us to share in that oneness. He has made us male and female, sexual beings, in order to lead us to this greater reality.

The Old Testament Song of Songs was given originally to express the beauty of love within the context of marriage. But many church fathers held that this book is an allegory that speaks of intimacy with Christ. During medieval times, this text was studied more than any other by the monastic orders. It was the source book for intimacy with God and devotion to Christ.

A world without God will seek to satisfy these longings for oneness in sexual immorality, sexual pervers-

sion, and unnatural relationships, because mankind yearns to worship. For the non-Christian living in our sensual society, sex becomes the highest form of intimacy. The bedroom becomes the place of worship. So it should not come as a surprise to us to see our world enslaved to immoral sexual practices, to find pornography so tantalizing and so available, or to see the leaders of our country entangled in illogical and unwise relationships. This has been going on since time immemorial. The world is seeking to worship because this is what God made us for. The fact that some are willing to give the president a pass in this whole matter indicates that we live in a country that is spiritually bankrupt, a nation in desperate need of God, a land that is not worshipping God.

But, let us not fall into the temptation of pointing our finger at President Clinton and the world. Sexual temptation can be a problem for Christians, too. Remember that this letter was written to Christians. Even as Christians, our sexuality and our sexual expressions can override and take priority over our spiritual life. Even as Christians, this can be the place we go to for worship, where we seek our greatest intimacy. Even as Christians, we can struggle with pornography and unhealthy physical relationships prior to marriage. This is why we give ourselves to lustful fantasies.

We can even do this in our marriages. We can look for our marriage partner to be the one who gives us our greatest sense of intimacy. Even as married Christians, sex can be our primary source of worship. This is natural for us, because this is how we acted prior to becoming believers. Thus we find it difficult to re-channel these God-given desires into a relationship with Christ. The challenge is find the kind of intimacy we desire with God and cultivate a relationship with Christ that becomes our first love and our place of primary worship, where all of our soul and all of our body is engaged.

I have found in pre-marital counseling that if the couple involved are having sex, that is symptomatic of a deeper spiritual issue. Christ is not first in their relationship. Instead, they have unhealthy dependencies on one another. The affection they receive from each other is more important than the affection they are receiving from Christ. Invariably I ask them to be pure for a season prior to marriage, not so that they can look right to the world, but so they can first cultivate oneness with Christ. Then they will be free to enjoy the physical relationship within marriage that God intended.

D. The cost for misdirected sexuality is severe (18-20)

Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body. (6:18-20)

The apostle indicates that the cost of immorality is severe. There is something that differentiates sexual sin from any other kind of sin. All sin is damaging, of course. Sin can destroy our physical body. We can damage it with drugs and alcohol. We can cause stress to our bodies with over activity and workaholic tendencies. But sexual sin is particularly devastating, because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Notice the reference to the Trinity here: Our body is for the Lord, our body is a member of Christ, our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So when we engage in sexual immorality, pornography, and sexual fantasy, we are abusing God's dwelling place. Sexual sin affects us deep in our soul. It affects our oneness and intimacy with God. It inhibits our worship of God. It destroys the very purpose for which we were made.

I want to say here that I abhor what Hollywood has done with sex. They have cheapened our sexuality. They have made sex impersonal by their efforts to eliminate the differences between male and female. They dehumanize us as people. They try to reduce us to the status of animals with their philosophy that sex is just another physical act, like eating and drinking. If you are hungry, satisfy your hunger by eating something. If you are sexually hungry, indulge yourself, we are told. Many among us bought into these lies and deceptions in the past, with the result that we suffered much hurt and pain. Anyone who has experienced this knows very well that sexual sin affects you inside your body. The picture that Hollywood paints is a lie. Immorality leads to the giving away of part of our soul. Instead of oneness we experience division.

But I also hate what the church has done with sex. We too have cheapened sex. The church has portrayed it as evil, ugly, and cheap. We have cast all kinds of doubt and darkness on the mystery of our sexuality.

When we understand this biblical concept of oneness and intimacy, sex in marriage becomes a very beautiful and sacred thing. God elevates sex and gives it to us as a gift. But it is a gift that is designed for marriage. That is where we can learn about intimacy and oneness. But, remember that it points to a greater reality—oneness with the Father. God has given us these desires so that we can share a wonderful intimacy with him. Even if we are not married, we can still experience the kind of intimacy for which we were designed. That is the greater reality. In heaven, marriage will end, because everyone will be married to the Lamb. We will be the bride of Christ, in a relationship of intimacy that will last for all eternity. But if we twist our sexuality and seek self-gratification, and indulge our bodies for self-pleasure, we thwart God's longings for us and our longings for him.

How should we respond to what Paul has said?

E. The exhortations are to flee and glorify

The apostle gives us two commands: flee, and glorify. The negative command is, flee immorality. Run away.

Get out of town as quickly as you can. It is never wise to dabble with fantasy, to stay and fight, to try to overcome. The one who is wise changes the channel, walks out of the movie, throws away the magazine, and refuses to go down the road that leads to danger. As the proverb says, do not go down that road, because that is the way that leads to destruction.

But it is never enough to simply try to suppress these physical desires. The positive command is that we glorify God in our bodies. The solution to controlling our sexual drives is to deepen our spirituality. The solution is not found in legalism, where we try to control all of our desires by rules and regulations. The solution is to allow these desires to lead us to the greater reality of oneness with God and intimacy with Christ. The solution is to allow our bodies to become the sacred dwelling of an awesome God. The solution is to give our bodies to God for his use and his glory, to allow him to fully possess us.

The reason we are called to do this is, as Paul writes, "you are not your own...you have been bought with a price" (6:19-20). It cost God dearly to purchase your body. He owns it and he wants to use it. We do not have the final rights to our bodies. Jesus is Lord of our life, Lord of our bodies, and Lord of our sexuality. The amazing truth is that what was once common, profane, something that we thought nothing of has become sacred and holy. Christ lives in our bodies. Our bodies are the new holy of holies. Involving ourselves in sexual sin is taking what is sacred and making it common. It is a desecration of the temple of God. To glorify God in our body is be who God intended us to be. We can live without sex, but we cannot live without God. We can satisfy physical hunger with food, but we can never satisfy our desire for intimacy and oneness until our hearts and bodies are filled with Christ.

Now my purpose this morning is not to make you feel guilty or condemned or judged. My purpose is to center your worship, your oneness on God. Remember that even if you have been involved in some of these things in the past, God forgives. He cleanses us and erases all the records when we come to Christ. Keep in mind that Paul wrote these words to a people who had been involved in some very nasty and hurtful things. Yet, his word to them was, "Glorify God in your bodies." This too is my desire for us as a church: that we will be a place that is holy and set apart for God, a place where we can be intimate with Christ.

I want to say a particular word to the men now. I know that for men, the issue of sexual temptation can be very powerful. Are you willing to be the spiritual leaders of this community? Will you put away all the fantasies that are thrown your way every day? This is not easy to do. But remember that any sort of sexual perversion diminishes your ability to be a spiritual leader. Remember Paul's word to Timothy, when he called on men to pray, to be spiritual and lead the way. Find a place where you can share the deep hungers of your soul and expose the desires of your heart for intimacy and love. Then you will have found the resources to be the spiritual leaders in your homes, your church and your work places. This is what the world longs to see.

As we come to the communion table, we glorify God through sharing the bread and the cup. Our bodies are sanctified when we feed on the body of Christ, and purified when we drink the cup that cleanses. Through him we have been resurrected to newness of life so that we no longer live for ourselves, but for him who is our hope of glory.

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THE GIFT OF SINGLENES

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Corinthians 7:7-40
Eighth Message
John Hanneman
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Society today has a large population of singles—people who have never been married, the divorced, and those who have lost their spouses. Singleness is quite common in the world of our day. People are marrying later and living longer. And yet, marriage is considered the more exalted state. Singles can easily begin to feel like second class citizens, that there is something wrong with them, that they are incomplete and missing out on something.

This hasn't always been the case. In the history of the church, at times the state of marriage was frowned on. Believers were taught that being single and living alone was a superior state of spiritual progress. Back then, married people were regarded as second-class citizens.

It is important for Christians to understand singleness. When you think about it, singleness makes up a large portion of life. Supposing you were married at 25, that your spouse died when you were 65, and you lived to be 80. You would have been married for 40 years, but you would have been single for just as long. Would that mean that your years of being single were less important than your married years? The fact is, many will spend a significant portion of their lives unmarried, either at the front or the back end of life.

To learn more about the state of being single, it is best to get our understanding from the truth of God's word and not some television show or best selling book. Turn with me to chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians. In this section of his letter, the apostle Paul addresses several concerns about marriage raised by the Corinthian church. Evidently some in the church who practiced asceticism taught that marriage was a sin. They held that Christians should remain single. In his response, Paul assures the Corinthians that marriage is not a sin, and in the process gives some helpful insights into singleness. Let's begin reading in verses 6-8.

But this I say by way of concession, not of command, Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. (1 Cor. 7:6-8, NASB)

Paul states that he has no command from the Lord, but is expressing his pastoral advice as an apostle. (He repeats this thought two more times in the chapter.) What he is saying is that neither singleness nor marriage is an issue of moral concern. Divorce and immorality yes, but not singleness and marriage.

Paul considers both states, singleness and marriage, to be a gift. Twice he says that if it were up to him, his desire for the Corinthian church would be that they were all as he was, i.e. unmarried. Paul may have been married once, but he certainly was not married at this time. Can you imagine the apostle Paul standing up in front of our church today, urging everyone who was single to remain in that state? His presence would have a dramatic effect on how we view singleness.

We can draw a couple of conclusions from these verses. First, being single should not be considered a diminished state of existence. It doesn't mean you are a failure or that you are cursed. Paul calls singleness a gift. A single person has the same value as any other member of the body.

A second conclusion we can draw is that if we are single, we are not missing out on anything. At times, singles feel excluded from a large part of life. But obviously, Paul did not feel that way. He didn't act as though he lacked joy or standing simply because he wasn't married.

If we look to marriage to fully satisfy us, to make us happy, bring us joy and give us a sense of value, then it is not a gift and we will be sadly disappointed. Marriage is fulfilling, but so is singleness, because, whether we are single or married, we are fulfilled in the Lord and we derive our sense of worth from him.

Now there are some distinct advantages to being single. For example, when you are single, you can bypass the long lift lines on the ski slopes; you have a much better chance of getting on the golf course; and, if you are taking a plane trip and the flight is full, you are much more likely to take advantage of that free ticket offer! Paul doesn't mention these advantages, but he does list a couple of his own, beginning in verse 25.

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. (7:25-28)

Here it is likely that Paul is addressing young be-

trothed women who along with their fiances were trying to decide whether to go ahead with their wedding plans in light of the ascetic teaching that marriage was sinful. Paul tells them that marriage is not a sin. But he also points out certain advantages to remaining single.

I. ADVANTAGES OF SINGLENESS

A. When you are single, it is easier to deal with calamity and distress.

The words “present distress,” in v. 26, and the word “trouble” (or “affliction in the flesh”), in v. 28, probably refer to the same event. Commentators differ over what Paul was referring to. Some say he was speaking of the coming of the Lord and the accompanying tribulation prior to that event, described in Matt. 24 and Mark 13. Others think he was referring to a coming persecution or military siege.

It seems, however, that the Corinthians were presently experiencing some sort of hardship. There is firm archaeological and literary evidence indicating that there were food shortages in the city during this period. As a result, there was panic buying, social unrest, and uncertainty about the future. In such times it would certainly be better to be single and not have the responsibility to provide food for a family.

Every generation faces some sort of crisis or calamity, whether it is war, depression, famine, earthquakes or floods. Perhaps the current economic turmoil and uncertainty we are experiencing is such a crisis. In such times there are clear advantages to being single. You can be more flexible, you can adapt more easily to uncertainty, you can pick up and move if you are forced to. If you lose your job, you can go to the hardware store or the gas station and get work. If the stock market crashes, you have less need for those paper profits.

Paul’s preference for Christians is that they remain single so that they might be spared the difficulties, the hardship and the pain brought on by various crises.

B. When you are single, it is easier to stay free from the cares of the world.

The apostle goes on to refer to another advantage of singleness, in v. 29.

But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on both those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things

of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And I say this for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. (7:29-35)

We are all faced with the temptation to amass our personal kingdom, building in this world a life that we think will be permanent. Paul says that marriage will increase this tendency. Married people are concerned about the things of the world. Husbands worry about pleasing their wives, and wives about pleasing their husbands. The word “concern” conveys the idea of care in a positive sense, but it also is used to describe anxiety and worry. Concern is the natural reaction of man to poverty, hunger, and other troubles which befall him in life.

Paul says that the time is short; the world is passing away. Nothing about this world is permanent. A time is coming when marriage, possessions, and circumstances will have no meaning, when the things that seem so important today will be counted as trivial. Christians are not to live in this world as if it were permanent. We are to live as if what is, is not, so that we can be devoted to the Lord. All of us struggle in doing this, whether we are single or married. But when you are married, it is harder to maintain the right priorities. Married people are more likely to be anxious about their future or their family. Paul encourages singleness so that we can free from the entanglements of the world.

Consider how much responsibility goes with being married and having a family. As a young person, I never wanted to accumulate more than would fit in my car so that I could move at the drop of a hat. All I needed was a football, a basketball, and a few clothes. Before I got married, I never knew I needed furniture. Then I got married and I learned that every so often you have to change your furniture. I thought a couch lasted a lifetime, but I found out that wasn’t true. I was deceived.

Consider how much time, energy, and money it takes to maintain a home and a family. Something is constantly breaking around the house and it invariably takes multiple trips to the hardware store to find the right part. That can easily chew up a whole day, especially if you are as handy at fixing things as I am. Cars are my worst headache. In an effort to keep things simple, my wife and I had only one car until the kids came along. Then when they grew up, the first thing they wanted was a car. I’ve lost track of how many cars I have. Have you ever had your child call you from college to say that their car’s engine just blew up? Talk about anxiety.

At last, when two of my kids went away to college, I thought things would settle down. But now I have begun to think about what is still ahead—trying to manage finances to help them get through school, and per-

haps pay for a wedding or two. Then there will be grandchildren and the concerns I will have for them! I get tired just thinking about it. These are all the things that cause married people concern, worry and anxiety.

Now don't get me wrong. I have a wonderful wife and children. I wouldn't trade them for anything. My wife gives me all the freedom I need. If I want to go to the Yucatan, that's never a problem. I can watch football on TV any time, night or day, and she never says a word. But Paul says that when you are married, there will be a lot of things to distract you and take your time. There are advantages to being single. For example, if I were single, I could be out most nights discipling, teaching, and meeting with people. I could read and study more. There would be more time for quiet and solitude. The older I get, the more I crave time alone with the Lord. Singles have a wonderful opportunity to learn and value solitude, time to reflect on the deep things of God.

Just because you are single doesn't mean you will be occupied doing these things, however. You will be tempted to accumulate the possessions of the world, to fill your time with things that are not eternal. But you will have more opportunity to be undivided in your pursuits and have a simpler life.

Think of some of the more notable single people who have contributed greatly to service of the Lord. John Stott through his preaching and writing ministry has given the church a wonderful repository of truth. I read everything I can find from the pen of this great Christian. And what would we do without the writings of C. S. Lewis, who didn't marry until he was in his sixties? Think about Corrie Ten Boom's wonderful ministry. I think of our own Carleen Brooks, who never ceases laboring among us here in this church. She loves people, and she loves serving the Lord. Karin Stahl, from 20 Something, has begun a faith ministry among four hundred school children in Guatemala that has tremendous implications for the church there. All these are examples of single people who have used their gift of singleness to honor and serve the Lord.

Paul lists two advantages to being single: it is less painful to survive in times of crisis, and it is easier to remain free from the cares of the world.

However, there are pressures that come with being single. Just because you are single doesn't mean that life will be all fun and games. Paul goes on to list some of these.

II. PRESSURES OF SINGLENESS

A. Sexual pressures

But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decid-

ed that in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, will do better. (7:36-38)

These verses are a bit confusing and hard to decipher. Some commentators think that what Paul has in mind here is a father-daughter relationship. But the word "daughter" doesn't actually occur in the Greek text. I think it is likely that the person who is called a virgin is the same one whom Paul mentions in the previous verses. The best explanation of this is that Paul is again addressing young men and women who are engaged to be married. If they marry they do not sin; if they do not marry they will do well.

What is clear is that these betrothed couples might face sexual temptation. In order not to marry, Paul says that they must have authority over their sexual desires and not be under any compulsion from family or relatives to marry. If they are convinced in their minds that they should remain single, then that is the appropriate thing to do.

Sexual pressure is a clear temptation for single people. That is why Paul says "it is better to marry than to burn" (7:9). However, I would have to say that one should not marry just for sex. Those who do will have struggles in marriage. I would also say that at some point in your life, whether you are single or married, you will have to deal with your sexual desires. Marriage does not eliminate this problem. Fantasy and lust may still have authority over your life. The way we deal with these desires is to grow deeper in our intimacy with the Lord and find our life in him. And if you learn this as a single person, you will be much better prepared for marriage or singleness. You will be free to give love to your spouse rather than seeking to have your sexual desires satisfied. But you will also be prepared to be devoted to the Lord and to serve him if you decide to remain single.

B. Companionship

A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. (7:39-40)

Another pressure singles face is the desire for companionship. Here Paul addresses widows. A widow is bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if he dies, she is free to remarry. For a widow, the temptation is to marry anyone who comes along, because she desires companionship. Paul says she needs to be careful to marry a Christian.

Single people can struggle with the pressures of loneliness. For a widow or a widower, this can be particularly painful. After many years of companionship, it is difficult to find oneself suddenly alone.

Again, I would have to say that you can still experience loneliness after you are married, so it would be wrong to marry just to alleviate this problem. Someone

who is older has a wealth of wisdom to impart to others, simply because he or she has lived longer. If an older single person can deal with the pressures, then he or she can be a tremendous gift to the community to help teach the next generation the things of the Lord.

According to Paul, marriage is fine, but so is singleness. We should never look down on someone who is single and think them odd. On the other hand, we should never elevate marriage to something it is not.

III. REFLECTIONS

I want to conclude now with three reflections on this text.

A. Whether we are single or married, we need to learn contentment.

To be single is not a sin; to be married is not a sin. If you are single, don't be in a rush to find someone to marry. If you are married, don't seek ways to get out of the marriage, imagining there is someone else out there who will suit you better. Each state is a gift from God. Each has its own set of advantages and disadvantages. God wants us to learn how to be content, whether we are single or married. Do not be deceived by thinking that the next season of life will be better than the present one.

Marriage is not the ultimate goal in life. It is much better to remain single than to marry the wrong person. So, don't put your life on hold until you get married. Involve yourself in the community and begin to serve the Lord. If and when he wants you to marry, he will bring that about in his time. And when he does, it will be a gift, not an antidote to frustrations and disappointments. For most people, that comes about when we stop trying to make it happen.

B. Whether we are single, or married, our goal should not be to please ourselves, but the Lord.

If we stay single to please ourselves, that is wrong. If we get married to please ourselves, that is wrong, too. Whenever we are motivated by selfish desires, whenever we try to find life in the world we will be pursuing the wrong goals.

In verses 29-31, Paul writes in a very poetic way that we are not to be absorbed or engrossed in this world. Time is short; the world is passing away. And the older you get, the faster time goes. And so we marry, we weep, we rejoice, we buy, we live in the world, but always with the view that it is soon coming to an end. We are marked by eternity and are no longer under the dominating power of the things that dictate the existence of others and determine the quality of their lives.

Now Paul is not saying we should abandon our spouses or our jobs. He is encouraging us to be faithful, diligent, sober, and watchful, knowing that it is foolish to place our hopes in a world that is only temporary. And in particular, he says that marriage is part of a world that is already on the way out. So we are to set our sights on the things that are eternal.

C. Whether we are single or married, we should seek a balanced community.

Christians tend to gather in groups—singles, young marrieds, marrieds with young children, marrieds with older children, widows, widowers. Much of that is natural and good, but we will miss out if we don't have some balance in this area. It is good to have relationships with both younger and older people. To the married, I would say that you will experience much joy if you welcome single people into your circle. If you are single, you can learn much from married people.

My wife and I have been very blessed through working with single people for almost 20 years. The young people who have come through the doors of our home have added much to our lives. This ministry has had a tremendous impact on my children. They measure life by the character of some of these single people. And they have gone on to measure marriage by what they have witnessed in the lives of those who have gotten married. So my advice to you is, don't miss out.

It is my prayer that our community will experience this kind of balance and connectedness. I know that many of these things which the apostle is encouraging us to do as Christians are much easier said than done. But by God's grace and power, we can overcome until that which he has promised will come to pass.

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A VISION FOR MARRIAGE

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1180

Genesis 2:24-25

Ninth Message

John Hanneman

October 18th, 1998

Most people begin thinking about marriage at an early age. We build expectations for our future partner and for marriage based on movies, plays, books, and family experiences. We fill our closets and our minds with love songs, hoping that our fantasy will come true. Then one day we fall head over heels in love. We feel overwhelmed when our feelings are reciprocated. Romance can be intoxicating and addictive. Before we realize what has happened, we find ourselves repeating vows at an altar. The marriage adventure has begun. We spend years anticipating this event, we think we know exactly what is in store for us, and then we spend years trying to figure out what we have done.

Unfortunately, marriage has become one of the great areas of struggle in our communities and in our own church. Many marriages are in a state of crisis. Young couples are having their hearts ripped apart by divorce. The young singles I work with are scared to death of marriage, having witnessed the pain of unhealthy relationships in their homes. Their hearts are fragile because they too have experienced the wrenching results of divorce.

How does a relationship so promising, so filled with anticipation, become confusing, destructive and painful? Perhaps we have had the wrong vision and the wrong goals for marriage. We need to correct our thinking and learn what God wants us to experience in marriage.

I want to set forth a biblical vision for marriage this morning. I do not claim to be an expert on this subject. Much of what I have learned has come through God's grace breaking down my stubborn and proud heart. I don't want to give you a set of rules or a fix-it primer. I want to give you God's vision for marriage from a familiar text in the book of Genesis. I believe this is the source text for marriage. It takes a lifetime to work out what is packed into these two verses from the second chapter of Genesis.

For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Gen. 2:24-25, NASB).

What is the goal of your marriage? What do you hope to accomplish and experience with your mate?

We don't think much about this question when we are contemplating marriage. Then we have stars in our

eyes. We are in love. We imagine that our relationship will be magic and we will be the one in a million couples who can say their union is total bliss.

We come to marriage with different hopes and dreams which we formulate into goals. We do this either consciously or unconsciously, and yet these things shape the way we live and relate. Your goal might be to have a happy life; to have a big home and a perfect family; to live comfortably and securely; to get something from someone else so that you don't have to feel loneliness, pain, rejection or sadness. Your goal might be to gratify your hormones and rid yourself of sexual frustration. Perhaps your goal is to change your spouse into the person you want him or her to be and remove all their imperfections, so they can be perfect, as you are! Maybe your goal is to get your spouse to love you the way you want to be loved.

Isn't it interesting that God doesn't mention any of these things in the Bible? Our text says that God created man and woman, and the goal he had in mind was that "the two shall become one flesh." God's purpose for marriage is that two people whose orientation to life is completely different, male and female, might experience oneness.

What do we mean by oneness? Ephesians 5 says that oneness is a divine mystery, something that can't be put in a formula. Oneness in marriage reflects the oneness that believers have with God. As such, oneness is a relationship of holy union and intimacy, "I in you and you in me," as Jesus put it. It is a shared life, a one-flesh relationship in which two souls and two hearts become inextricably bound together. It is as if the contents of two containers are poured into one and mixed together. You possess, you are possessed; you know and you are known.

So, according to Genesis, when two people marry they become one. More accurately stated, they begin the process of becoming one. They don't arrive at a final destination on the day they tie the knot. One season ends and another begins as they embark on a journey of love and discovery, joy and disappointment. They set out on a road that is not well marked, a path of many detours and dangers. It is not a journey for the faint of heart. When viewed correctly, marriage can be a great adventure. An incorrect view of it, however, will leave you feeling lost and confused, like out-of-towners. But this journey becomes the essence of what God wants to do with you. In the journey lies the destination.

To begin this journey towards oneness, two things are required, according to our text: leaving father and mother, and cleaving to one another. Leaving speaks of new loyalties and new priorities. No relationship, apart from your relationship with God, is more important. Wise children, when they marry, abandon their dependence on parents and learn to depend and trust in each other. Wise parents allow their children to go on to experience God's fullness in their marriage.

But that is easier said than done. Leaving can be a difficult process. Our attachments to our parents go very deep, affecting us long after we leave home, and even long after they pass away. Difficulties arise when parents try to control and manipulate their children after they are married. They are trying to get them to meet all their own selfish needs for love. Parents can actually rob the lives of their children to fulfill their own selfish desires.

Do you know that once you get married, actually when you become an adult, you have God's permission to disappoint your parents? Do you know that you are not responsible for their happiness? Some people are fortunate to have parents who let them go so that they can enjoy an adult, free relationship with them, but others have to face the task of achieving freedom from emotional control. They have to learn to stop trying to earn the love and acceptance they never received as children. Leaving home is an essential element of starting a new family unit and becoming one in marriage. It may be helpful do something drastic to disappoint your parents early on in your marriage to set the pattern for the years ahead. Then you can enjoy a much freer relationship with them. They will have learned that you cannot be depended upon to fulfill their every emotional need.

The second aspect of becoming one flesh is "cleaving" to one another. The word means "to adhere." The idea is to apply adhesive and become glued together. You are super-glued together! This is why divorce is so devastating. No matter how unhealthy the marriage, that state of oneness is still present. If you tear apart two people who have been bonded together, the break is never clean. Our hearts do not have perforated edges. The tear is uneven, and it leaves scars. We are deceived if we think that we can go back and be the same person we were before we were married.

Cleaving means that you must take great care to cultivate oneness. You allow yourself to open up emotionally so that you bond together at the deepest level. You carve out time to communicate, to share your lives, build history, and plan memories. You commit all of yourself and all of your heart to this relationship. You cannot coast along and expect everything to turn out right. If you do, you will grow apart. The world will work against you. Sin will work against you. Satan will work against you. You have to fight distractions and temptations. This relationship is so precious and so valuable you must guard it at all costs. Sometimes we

guard our diamonds and our cars with more care than we do our marriages. Maybe what we need is an alarm system for marriage that goes off when anyone tampers with it.

A great help to cultivating oneness is spending consistent time together. Years ago, my wife won a weekend trip to Monterey in a raffle. We already had two children and we had not yet set a pattern of getting away and spending time together. After spending that weekend away, we both decided we should do this twice a year, making it a regular part of our life together. I do the planning each time, months in advance, even the baby sitting, because something always seems to come up if we leave it too late. This is a good way of demonstrating how valuable we are to each other, and I commend it to you.

So you leave and you cleave and you become one flesh. This state of oneness is described in these words: "the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Here we come to the heart of oneness, the very core of what God wants us to experience in marriage.

This state of being naked and unashamed indicates that Adam and Eve were completely exposed, vulnerable, transparent and open with one another. They hid nothing from each other. They could see each other for who they were, with all their limitations, weaknesses and imperfections, yet they had no shame, no guilt, no self-awareness, no fear of being completely seen and known, no fear of being rejected. The first couple experienced complete acceptance and freedom together. Oneness, then, is found in an intimate relationship where we experience love and acceptance with one who knows everything about us, and we communicate the same acceptance and love in return.

But there is a problem with experiencing this kind of oneness and intimacy. That problem is sin. Notice that this scene in Genesis 2 takes place before the fall. After the fall, the man and the woman hide from God and one another, covering themselves with fig leaves. They become self-aware and untrusting. They recognize their nakedness and they feel ashamed. The result of sin is that we become private people. We erect barriers around us because we don't want to let others see who we really are. We don't feel loved and accepted, so we try to be someone we are not in order to be approved. We put on an act to gain another's love and acceptance.

Another consequence of sin is that we dream up ways of relating, of trying to get love and acceptance. Our emotions betray us, deceive us and control us. We get hurt and we hurt in return. We hide our pain and become resentful. We try to control our circumstances. This becomes a crisis in marriage and a stumbling block to oneness. We wall off our hearts and settle for other goals that we think will take away the pain. We lose God's vision for what he wants for us.

What God wants is to get us back to the garden. His

desire is to redeem our lives and our marriages. Oneness does not come naturally, but this is how God wants us to grow in the marriage relationship. This is what he wants us to experience—the joy of becoming one flesh, in a relationship where we can experience freedom, acceptance and unselfish love.

In pre-marital counseling I have come to see that mutual acceptance is foundational to starting this journey toward oneness. I always ask the couples I counsel whether or not they accept one another just as they are. I ask them if they are holding back part of their heart out of a sense of fear or lack of trust. I ask them if they are trying to earn acceptance in any way. If they do not completely accept one another, I will not proceed with the wedding, because I know that their road to oneness is in great jeopardy. But if they can look each other in the eyes and say they accept one another and that they feel accepted in return, then I have a great confidence that they are on the road towards oneness.

Once we have God's vision for marriage a greater vision comes into focus. Marriage here on earth is a lens through which we can see and experience a heavenly, eternal reality. This is what we see promised in these verses from the book of Hosea. God is speaking to his people Israel:

**“And I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice,
In lovingkindness and in compassion,
And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness
Then You will know the Lord”** (Hosea 2:19-20).

And in Revelation we see the fulfillment of this promise:

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready... ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’” (Rev. 19:7, 9a).

God wants to relate to us as his people in the same way that he wants us to relate in marriage. Scripture says that the church is the bride of Christ. When the new heavens and earth appear, there will be a great wedding ceremony. The state of marriage here on earth parallels this marriage in heaven. God has designed marriage so that we can experience with our spouse what he wants to experience with us. In order to help us understand this invisible relationship, he gives us someone we can see, touch and feel so that we might more fully understand the wonder of intimacy with him.

Do you realize the goal of marriage and the goal of our spiritual life is the same? The goal is oneness and intimacy. This is why we can say that marriage is so important to God. Being married here on earth is not the ultimate reality. Marriage in heaven is. Marriage on earth is part of a world that is passing away, but marriage to God and oneness with him lasts for eternity.

But we have the same difficulty in our relationship with God as we do with our spouse. Oneness does not come naturally to us. Adam and Eve hid themselves from each other, and they hid from God. Our sin makes us feel guilty and ashamed and we try to hide from God. We do things to gain his love and acceptance, but we already have these in Jesus. The goal of our spiritual journey is oneness with God. We leave the world, we forsake our idols, and we cling to God so that we might become one with him.

And so marriage with a spouse and marriage with God become part of the same journey. One is temporary, the other is eternal. But they reflect back on each other. When you experience acceptance and love in a marriage, that begins to reflect back into your relationship with God. When you experience freedom and joy with God, that begins to reflect back into the way you relate to your spouse. It could well be said that marriage is God's workshop for intimacy.

So, practically speaking, what does all of this mean?

1. Marriage is a very special relationship.

God loves marriage. When we recognize the heavenly significance of marriage, our unions here on earth take on much greater meaning. We elevate marriage, and it becomes holy and sacred. We value it more and take it more seriously. We are willing to invest more time and energy and money into having a healthy marriage, not as an end unto itself, but as a means to an end. We don't want to miss out on what God has to teach us.

2. Marriage takes time.

It takes a long time to understand and cultivate oneness in marriage. When we first get married, we hold back part of our hearts, because we don't trust our spouse with all of our weaknesses and foibles. We need time to unravel the emotional disconnects we feel from our family background and from sin. We need time to finally give up what we are trying to get for ourselves. We need time to die to our own selfish desires. We need time to leave and to cleave. For me, the first twenty years of marriage were merely prep work for what was to come. Most people give up too soon. Everything starts with having the right vision of what God's wants us to experience.

3. Marriage deepens through all of our joys and struggles.

If we have the right goal in marriage, then everything that comes our way, every struggle, every pain, can become the means through which we grow in oneness and intimacy with our spouses. If the goal of our marriage is happiness, however, then we have eliminated all the things that can help lead us into a deeper relationship.

How do we grow in our relationship with God? By having a perfect life? No. We fail, we cry out, and we find that God is there with us, right in the midst of our

disappointment and pain. This is how we grow with God and how we grow in marriage. He uses everything in life to deepen our intimacy and oneness. When we can find acceptance and love where there has been hurt and pain, then we will experience the joy of oneness. This is why I say that the journey is everything. Actually, the journey is the destination. It is in the journey that we experience a growing oneness.

My wife and I have been married almost 24 years, by God's grace. We met in a whirlwind of romance, a very immature young couple. We have come through many struggles and a lot of painful personal and family issues. And we have been completely unsuccessful in trying to change each other! We are both very passionate. We hurt easily, but express ourselves quite differently. We have had our share of highs and lows. But God has used every single experience to bring us to a place where we can enjoy and accept one another. And he has used these things to demonstrate his love and his grace toward us. When I sit in the presence of God or in the presence of my wife, I experience the same joy and the same sense of oneness. To me, sharing deeply with my wife and praying feel exactly the same.

I want to conclude this morning by reading the words that I read at every wedding ceremony I perform:

Oneness is the goal of marriage. Have no other goal before you.

The goal of marriage is not to take away your loneliness, your sadness, your incompleteness. The goal is not successful circumstances or painless existence.

The goal is to experience a holy oneness with another and through this oneness experience the oneness of God, "I in you, you in me." This is not just physical oneness or emotional oneness. It is the oneness of your very souls. Bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh. It is a mystery, and we cannot understand it for many years.

The world tries so hard to gain this intimacy, but the love we see in the world is joyless, selfish, clinging. It is based on fear, the fear that I cannot live alone.

The blessing of knowing God is that we can love another and experience a oneness of freedom and joy and vulnerability. It is based on acceptance, not fear.

The glory of marriage is oneness. Oneness creates a new sacred place where we experience God.

What goals do you have for your marriage? Are you willing to accept God's vision for it? Are you willing to die to yourself so that you can find freedom, acceptance and love? God will help you do this if you let him. It is never too late to begin to function in our marriages the way God intended from the beginning.

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HUSBANDS AND WIVES: APPRECIATING THE DIFFERENCES

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1181
Ephesians 5:22-33
Tenth Message
John Hanneman
October 25th, 1998

When I got married, I thought I knew my wife fairly well. We viewed life from much the same perspective, I imagined. There were a few differences between us, but those were minor, I assumed. I was very mistaken! Over the years I have discovered that we are not just a few degrees apart, we are utterly different. We view life from a different completely perspective and we respond to circumstances very differently.

For instance, not long after we were married, I discovered that Liz could read my mind. She knew everything I was thinking—always. And I was to discover that I could never read her mind. She was a complete mystery. I learned that I was predictable, but she reserved the right to be unpredictable. I discovered that the rules that applied to me one day didn't apply to her the next. She reserved the right to change them without informing me. I learned that when she was too tired or too busy to talk, then I had better be quiet. But I learned then when she wanted to talk, I had better listen, no matter how tired or busy I was. I learned that when she said she didn't want anything for her birthday, I shouldn't believe her.

My wife, for her part, learned that when we are lost, I never stop to ask for directions. She discovered that when I am sick, I want to be babied. She found out that I did not have a natural taste for clothes and color. Many times she had to say to me, "You're not going out looking like that!" Before we got married, she told me she liked camping. After we were married, we went camping, and it was obvious she didn't like it. She explained that she thought "camping" meant going to summer camp for a weekend where someone else did all the cooking!

Sometimes it seems like men and women come from different planets, as the title of the best selling book put it, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*.

We have already discussed the goal of marriage, from Genesis 2:24. God's vision for marriage, we discovered, is oneness: "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother; and the two shall become one flesh." But how can this process come about when men and women are so radically different? If we are going to grow in oneness, we need to understand and appreciate the differences between men and women. And we need to learn how God would have husbands and wives relate in order to experience this one-flesh relationship that he has designed. This unity does not come about naturally. Sin, pride, and our natural inclinations get in

the way of oneness. However, when we walk in the Spirit and allow him to guide us, then God leads us into supernatural mysteries.

Our text today is taken from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5. I am not going to strictly expound the passage. Rather, I will share around the apostle's general theme to speak to husbands and wives, sharing words for women and words for men.

We find the apostle's instructions for wives in Ephesians 5:22-24:

Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything (Eph 5:22-24, NASB).

Paul is writing about how wives are to relate to their husbands. The exhortation is, "*Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.*" The apostle's transition, in verse 22, comes from his general instruction, found in verse 21: "and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ." Thus in verse 23 Paul writes, "*For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church.*" God desires a husband and his wife to relate in marriage in the same way that the church relates to Christ and Christ relates to the church.

The notion of submission is not considered culturally acceptable or relevant today, however. But let's be clear about what the apostle is saying. The word "submit" means, "arrange yourself under." A wife is to arrange herself under her husband's headship. In the relationship she is to "see" the Lord right behind her husband, and relate to her husband accordingly. Submission does not mean that she loses her personhood, individuality, gifts and talents, her value or equality. A husband and wife are in the process of becoming one. This automatically excludes any semblance of hierarchy or inequality. Nor does submission mean that a wife is required to fit into some pre-conceived demand. This would run contrary to the description of an excellent wife in Proverbs 31.

How a husband and wife function in marriage, the tasks that each takes on, is determined by their particular gifts and talents, not their gender. Every couple must work this process out for themselves. We know that when we submit to the Lord, as we should, we are blessed. This should be our foremost calling in mar-

riage.

It is noteworthy that in verse 33, Paul repeats his exhortation for the husband and the wife:

Nevertheless let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself, and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband (5:33).

Paul does not use the word submit here, rather, he uses the term “respect,” the same word he uses in verse 21, where he exhorts, “be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (which led into a discussion of wives and husbands). The apostle is not referring to a role, but, rather, an inner attitude. The wife is to have an inner attitude of respect toward her husband—the same attitude she has for the Lord. She is not to be critical of him, blaming him, harping on his weaknesses, cutting him down in public and belittling him. She must listen to him, value him and take him seriously in the same way that she takes the Lord seriously. The husband is to be the head, like Christ, and the wife is to respect his headship. She must trust and believe that the Lord will work through her husband for her good. Of course, it is much easier to put on an appearance of submission than to have an inner attitude of respect.

This idea of submission in marriage is a difficult concept to understand, let alone put into action. Submission is an emotional issue for women. Yet I would say, based upon my own experience, that most wives want their husbands to take the lead. A woman longs for an advocate, a champion, a leader, someone who will fight for her honor and take up her cause.

But herein lies the problem. Although we know that submitting to the Lord is designed for our good, we resist doing so. A wife may desire one thing in her heart—she can be convinced in her mind—but her flesh will not go along easily. My wife would readily agree with this concept in theory, but her natural inclination is quite different.

Genesis 3 identifies the root of this problem. Part of the consequences of the fall is that a wife’s “desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). There is a conflict. A wife will seek to dominate and run the relationship, but God has ordained that the husband be the head.

Let’s consider our relationship with the Lord. What are we doing when we submit to the Lord? We would say we are giving up control of our life and giving God control of it. I have come to regard this as one key element in the issue of a wife’s submission, of her not trying to control her husband or the circumstances of their life. My wife would say that this issue of control is the most important thing she has had to deal with in our marriage. It has to do with basic spiritual issues in her life. When I talk about giving up control, I am not referring to a relationship in which a husband is demanding his wife do something immoral or unethical. That would be a different situation entirely.

Let’s go deeper still. Why does a wife seek to control? At times, this is a cover for deeper issues. In our relationship, I have seen that underneath the issue of control lie fear, hurt and pain. It is hard for a wife to learn to trust her husband. And if she has been abused or mistreated in any way in the past, her fear and pain can go very deep. My wife doesn’t really want to control me, but she finds herself doing so because she does not want to get hurt. To protect herself, she has learned to be strong. When I see a strong or controlling response from her, the issue is not how can I gain control of the situation or how can I prove my point, it is, what is behind her fear? The circumstance itself becomes secondary to what is causing her pain.

Now let us consider the dynamics of a woman’s natural tendency to seek control and man’s greatest area of weakness, his sense of adequacy. This is what explains Adam’s silence in the garden when he was tempted to disobey God’s command. Men fear not being able to make it in this world. They fear losing their jobs and being unable to provide for their families. Headship is the most difficult assignment given to men. We just don’t know how to go about it. So, when a wife is critical, controlling and disrespectful toward her husband, she undermines him at his weakest point. She reinforces everything the world is telling him: that he doesn’t have what it takes.

However, if she is willing to let go, to trust him and encourage him, despite the risk of getting hurt in the process, she helps him become the leader that God wants him to be. Wives may not know how much an attitude of disrespect hurts their husbands and how much their support means to them. My wife tells me all the time that she loves me, but when she says she trusts me, that has a much greater impact on me.

So God’s word to wives is, “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” Treat your husbands with respect. Release control of your life. Enjoy a relationship where you can expose all of your heart, your fears and hurt, one in which you can experience trust and safety. Wives are uniquely designed by God to encourage their husbands in their greatest area of weakness—their sense of adequacy.

The apostle now turns his attention to husbands. Verse 25:

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church (5:25-29).

The exhortation to husbands is to love their wives. Paul uses two analogies to qualify the kind of love that husbands are to have for them. They are to love their wives as Christ loved the church, and they are to love them as their own bodies. What a high calling—to love your wife in the same way that Christ loves the church.

Paul is speaking of an unselfish, sacrificial love, the kind that Jesus demonstrated when he gave up his life for us. This is a love that is based on long-term commitment, not feelings. It is purposeful, not aimless. Christ died that he might sanctify the church, that it might be holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle. Christ wants the church to reach its intended glory, to become what God designed it to be from the beginning. Husbands are to love their wives in such a way that they blossom and grow to become all that God intended. Thus a husband provides an atmosphere for his wife's gifts and talents to flourish. He desires for her to grow spiritually and personally.

The love that is described here is active, not passive. A husband initiates speech. We are cleansed and saved both through the Word and through the words that God spoke to us. God is always initiating speech. Husbands are to do the same by providing a supportive atmosphere of listening and sharing. I have learned that when my wife wants to speak to me, she will not come out and tell me up front what is on her mind. She takes a more roundabout approach, circling the field before she lands. She is testing me to see if I am fully available to her. When I am, I have found those times to be cleansing and refreshing.

The love of a husband is to be generous and unselfish, not limited. He is to love his wife as his own body. The reason he loves so extravagantly is that he is one flesh with his wife. She is part of him, and he cares for her body in the same way he cares for his own body. He nourishes and cherishes her. "Nourish" conveys the idea of nurturing. "Cherish" is used in 1 Thessalonians 2 to describe the care of a mother for her children. Literally, it means to "keep warm." A wife always needs more blankets on the bed than her husband. A husband wants his wife to be nourished with food, rested with sleep, healthy with exercise, encouraged with friendships, warmed with care. And he is willing stay home and take care of the children while his wife exercises or meets with a friend.

Now just as submission does not come naturally to women, loving as it is described here does not come naturally to men. Men resist commitment and responsibility. Fear of inadequacy and fear of failure drive this tendency. A man does not look at a woman in terms of the shepherding care he can offer; rather, he looks at her for what she can give him. He is likely to have a checklist mentality when he is considering a relationship. He is looking for a woman who will meet all his criteria, many of which are based on external things. He looks at a woman as a trophy for his mantle rather than a person to love. Generally speaking, a husband will have a more

difficult time relating, communicating and just being with his wife. When he wants to get to know other men, he plays basketball or golf with them, he goes hunting or builds a fence. That is how men bond together. This doesn't work with a woman, however.

But perhaps one of the greatest difficulties for men is that oftentimes they enter into relationships and get married to receive love rather than give it. A wife is not called to love, but to trust and respect her husband. A husband is not called to receive, but to give love. A man's natural inclination is the very opposite of what God calls him to do. When these get reversed, a husband is likely to submit to his wife. He becomes dependent on her love, physical and otherwise, so that he can feel adequate. In the process his headship is diminished. A husband can give sexual pleasure, of course, but that is not the same as love.

In my ministry I interact with many young men who are in the process of deciding whether they should get married. Some explain that they are not sure whether they should marry a particular woman, and they go on to list her positive and negative traits. I tell them they are asking the wrong question. The real issue for a man is whether God is calling him to love the woman in question as Christ loves her, for the rest of his life.

Now, just as there is a deeper issue for wives, there are deeper issues for husbands, too. One is that husbands have never experienced love and acceptance in their homes, especially from their fathers. This empty feeling is perpetuated by a man's tendency to perform and find success through achievements. He is empty of love and so is unable to offer the kind of affection that parallels the love of Christ, because he doesn't know what that love looks like. When he marries, therefore, he tries to gain love and acceptance from his wife. This is why men become possessive. They are not supportive of their wives' interests and friendships, because they feel their wives' capacity for loving them is diminished by other interests. Such a love can become stifling, demanding, coercive, manipulative, conditional and selfish.

Now consider the dynamics of a husband's natural tendency with respect to his wife's greatest area of weakness, her need for security and trust. What happens when she is in a relationship where her husband is looking to her to constantly give him what he needs, where she feels threatened and pulled at, where she cannot trust that her husband has her best interests in mind? She is just going to shut down emotionally and protect herself. Her husband has undermined her at her weakest point.

However, if a husband begins to love his wife sacrificially, unconditionally, then she will experience the love of God through him. She will feel the blessing of knowing security, trust and care. She will be able to let down her guard and open up all of her heart. Just as a woman has unlimited potential to bless her husband, so a hus-

band has unlimited potential to bless his wife. Men are uniquely designed by God to bless their wives so that they can experience trust and security. A husband who begins to express a Christ-like love, a love with no strings attached, will experience the heart of God who loves us in the same way. A wife will learn to trust in the love of God through her husband. And not only that, the husband will find that the love of his wife comes freely as a response, even as he loves and worships God because of Christ.

I want to say an additional word to husbands at this point.

1. You need to know that the heart of your wife is very, very tender.

It took me a long time to learn this. I misread all the signals. I kept looking for fast balls and my wife kept throwing curve balls. My wife is a strong, independent woman; I am the typical passive male. But I have discovered that my wife has a precious, tender heart. Men, your wives are more tender than you can possibly imagine. Don't let externals fool you. Your wife wants your love. She wants you to care for her tender heart. Wives, forgive us for being so slow to recognize this.

2. You need to know that marriage is not an equal deal.

It took me a long time to figure this out, too. Marriage is not a relationship in which we give a little and expect a little in return. If we are to love like Christ, we must love our wives, expecting nothing in return. We must love because Christ loves. This demands that we initiate and never stop initiating. We forgive and never stop forgiving. We love and never stop loving. That is what Christ does. Don't worry about who is right and who is wrong. One act of kindness, one act of sacrificial love will speak louder than many words. If you expect marriage to be an equal deal, then you will never love your wife like Christ loves the church.

3. You need to look for love from God first, not your wife.

If we are going to offer the love of Christ, then our hearts must be filled with God's love. We need to be in relationships with other men where we can pour out our hearts and help one another on our spiritual journey. We need to read books like *The Silence of Adam* (Larry Crabb; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); *The Sacred Romance* (Brent Curtis & John Eldredge; Nashville: Nelson, 1997); *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Henri Nouwen; New York: Doubleday, 1992); and *Abba's Child* (Brennan Manning; Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1994). We need to pursue the love of God at all costs, because that is crucial for our marriages. When we know the love of our Heavenly Father, then we can begin to love our wives as Christ loves the church.

So we could paraphrase God's word to husbands in these words: "Husbands, sacrifice your freedom and put aside your irresponsibility and fear in order to love your wives as Christ loves the church. I want you to know what it is like to love in the way I love you; to experience a relationship where you are completely free to give; to feel the inner tenderness of your wife and the joy of her trusting you. And know that I uniquely designed you to encourage your wife in her greatest area of weakness—her sense of security."

In marriage, God wants us to learn a way of relating, a way of being, a way of spirituality. He asks us to do something absolutely contrary to our nature so that we can enter into a divine mystery. If we do what comes naturally, then we will undermine our spouse in his or her greatest area of weakness. But if we learn, by God's grace, to do that which is unnatural, then we will be a blessing to our mates.

So we must choose. We can be frustrated and annoyed and complain about the differences between men and women, or we can accept these differences and enter into the joy of discovering the heart of our spouse. We can enter into the wonder of how God created us male and female. We can encourage one another's gifts and build upon what each has to offer. If we insist on getting what we want in marriage, we will reap frustration and death. But if we are willing to die to our own desires, we will discover marriage to be an adventure of wonder, joy, and life.

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HANNAH: A MOTHER'S HEART

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Samuel 1

Eleventh Message

Gini Bunnell

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What comes to mind when you hear the word mother? Most people would say they think about qualities like love, devotion and sacrifice. They think about a generic mother person with an infallible sense of humor, amazing patience and persistent good will, a selfless person who puts the needs of others before her own, sacrificially giving of her life, energy, time and sleep.

We tend to equate mothers with saints and to assume that, as one writer puts it, "immediately following birth, every new mother drags from her bed and awkwardly pulls herself up on the pedestal provided for her..." The dictionary, however, defines the word mother, despite all its added meaning, as "a female parent, especially one of the human race."

Erma Bombeck, that much beloved and much missed voice for all mothers, wrote: "Motherhood is the biggest on the job training program in existence today. Motherhood is not a one size fits all. It's not a mold that is all-encompassing and does not mean the same thing to all people. Some mothers have so much guilt they cannot eat a breath mint without sharing it. Other mothers feel nothing when they tell a kid his entire pillowcase of Halloween candy got ants in it, and eats it herself. Some mothers cry when their thirty-year-old daughters leave home and move to their apartments. Other mothers sell their twelve year old son's bed when he goes to a long scout meeting."

When I became a mother at the age of 23, I had a lot of good things in my mother heart. I had youth, energy, some very good role models for parenting, and a super amount of untested confidence. But I had no relationship with Jesus. Although I had been raised in a church, I didn't know what it meant to have an alive and vibrant relationship with the Creator of the Universe who loved me and was intimately involved in the mundane details of my life. I never had prayed for our sons. I never had called on God's unlimited grace for strength, wisdom or creativity. Instead, I depended on my own power, cleverness, insight and instincts and did what I thought was right in my own eyes.

My active, energetic godless life was a modern micro picture of what life was like in ancient Israel eleven hundred years before Christ. The nation was confident of its own ability to get things done. The phrase that is used to describe Israel (it is used numerous times in the book of Judges; indeed it's the very last word written in that history), is, "*In those days Israel had no king. Everyone did as he saw fit.*" They did what was right in their own eyes.

And I did what was right in my own eyes all through our two sons' pre-school and most of their grade school years: I relied on my own counsel and did what I thought was right in my own eyes. That continued until our sons, Doug and Scott, were 12 and 10. Then, thanks to God's unfailing mercy and the persistent prayers of a good friend who had prayed for our family for eight years, I asked God to take up residence in my heart. I asked Jesus to be my King, and I've never regretted it.

I have regretted, though, that I never rocked my babies and sang hymns of praise to them. I have regretted that I never read them stories from the Bible. I have regretted that I never modeled for them how a godly woman deals with stress, difficulty and irritation. I have regretted that when they were toddlers fresh out of the bath-tub and ready for bed, I never taught them to pray.

But, the wonderful good news is, God restores the years the locusts have eaten. After my husband and I came to know Jesus, other people came into our teen-aged sons' lives: camp counselors, church youth leaders, high school pastors, young life leaders, football coaches, all wonderful people who poured their lives into our sons.

One of my treasured possessions is a paper that Doug wrote in high school about a typical day in his life. He began, "It's early in the morning...I can hear my brother, Scott, taking a shower, soon it will be my time. I can hear my parents in the kitchen, getting breakfast and discussing scripture..." We never discussed scripture at that early morning hour. More likely we were shuffling around, talking about things like coffee and cereal. But Doug's perception was that we were in the kitchen, alertly and lovingly discussing scripture. Oh the grace of God, to give him that perception!

And God has given me another chance with our grandchildren. I've been blessed to do with them all the things I didn't do with our own young sons. My young mother heart and my older grandmother heart are very different, and what makes the difference is my relationship with Jesus: knowing that he is in control and I am not. Knowing that he is able, available and adequate. Knowing that he loves my children and my grandchildren even more than I do. Knowing how much I need him every minute of the day.

I can identify with the mother's prayer that a friend shared with me: "Dear Lord, I've had a good day so far and all on my own. I haven't said an unkind word, or thought a jealous thought or ignored the needs of those around me. I haven't coveted anything my neighbor has or felt one ounce of envy. I haven't barked at my children or snapped at my husband or used your name in vain. But Lord, it's 6 a.m. now and in a few minutes my alarm is about to go off and I'll need you to get out of bed. Would you please be with me the rest of the day?"

This grandmother heart has learned and continues to learn, sometimes painfully, what it means to have utter dependence on the Lord.

This morning we're going to look at a mother heart from the opening chapter of the book of First Samuel. Hannah, a mother who had utter dependence on God, lived about eleven hundred years before Christ. She has words of wisdom for our contemporary world.

The time is the end of the period of the Judges, when everyone did what was right in his own eyes. God was looking for a person to lead his people in the corrupt conditions of the day. Externally, Israel was dominated by the Philistines; inter-

nally, they were polluted by moral degeneracy. The high priest was Eli, and his sons, Phineas and Hophni, were the acting priests. The sons were flagrantly degenerate. They committed adultery, exploited and denigrated the sacrifices presented to God and taught the people to dishonor the Lord. In 1 Samuel 2:12 they are described as, “wicked men who had no regard for the LORD...”

God needed a person he could trust, but no such person existed in Israel. Therefore, God set about preparing a mother. He chose Hannah, a woman of faith and prayer. Today, we would prepare such a woman by making sure she knew all about nutrition and exercise. We'd enroll her in a Lamaze class, have her study the latest books on child rearing and child psychology, get the baby on the waiting list for preschool and set up a trust fund for college education. That's not the way God did it, though. God prepared Hannah through suffering.

Hannah, whose name means “grace,” probably was the first wife of Elkanah, a responsible and righteous man. But Hannah was barren. Childlessness was a sign of reproach, a symbol of condescension and heartbreak. In the practice of the time, if the wife was barren, the husband was permitted a second wife, and so enters Peninnah.

Envy entered the home. Division entered the home. Misunderstanding entered the home. The passage says Hannah was loved more than Peninnah by her husband, but Peninnah had children and status, and she used this to mock, provoke and irritate Hannah.

Hannah's barrenness was a painful disappointment. Her greatest desire was to have a child, to be a mother. Disappointments make some people hard and embittered. But not Hannah. She knew God and believed in him. Her solution to heartbreak was prayer. And God prepared her through her disappointments. He disciplined her through her unfulfilled desire, and taught her patience and faith through perhaps twenty years of longing. God prepared Hannah to be the mother of a son whom he could use.

Hannah's solution to her unhappy situation was to pray, to put her trust in God.

The setting in chapter one of First Samuel is Shiloh. There Elkanah's family is worshipping and offering sacrifices at the permanent tabernacle. Despite the auspicious “religious” occasion, there still was tension, discomfort, deep disappointment and subtle digs among the family. Following the worship celebration and feast, Hannah excuses herself. Outside the temple, all alone, weeping and praying in bitterness of soul, she vows:

“O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used on his head” [a sign of dedication and service to the Lord]. (1 Sam. 1:11, NIV).

Eli, the high priest, seeing Hannah praying so fervently, her lips moving but no sound issuing forth, her body swaying in intensity, assumes that she is drunk. What a sad commentary on the spiritual state of the time! Eli thought Hannah was one of the women who lounged about the tabernacle with his sons. So he asks her,

“How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.” “Not so, my lord,” replied Hannah. “I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer. I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been

praying here out of my great anguish and grief” (1:14-16).

Eli had been critical of Hannah, but here he softens. There is a sweetness in his answer in verse 17:

“Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him” (1:17).

And Hannah, having bared her heart before the Lord, experiences peace. She is able to eat, and her countenance is changed. Her face is no longer downcast. She leaves in gladness, even though her situation has not changed. There is no guarantee that things would ever change, yet she has given her problem to the Lord. She has laid her hurt and disappointment and grief, as well as her frustration, irritation, and heart's desire, right into the hand of God and left it with him.

Next, we learn that her prayer was heard. Verse 20:

So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel, saying, “Because I asked the LORD for him” (1:20).

God does indeed give her the desire of her heart, a son. She names him Samuel, which means “name of God, God hears.”

Is God preparing you through suffering, disappointment and unfulfilled desires? Perhaps, like Hannah, your greatest desire is to have a child but that has been denied. Then you know and understand Hannah's heartbreak, anguish and grief. Perhaps your desire is for a husband or a wife, a companion to share your likes and your love, and your love for Jesus. Perhaps your greatest desire is for your spouse, a child or loved one to know the Lord, to trust and to obey him.

Each one of us has a great desire that has remained unfulfilled. Do you desire peace in an unhappy home situation? Maybe you understand only too well the disharmony and bitterness that Hannah experienced and you too long for peace and resolution. Perhaps your heart's desire is for balance and harmony in a demanding work environment. Is it wisdom from God? For self control in destructive habits? What is your heart's desire?

Has suffering and disappointment made you soft and tender and patient before the Lord or has it embittered you and made you hard? Are you willing, like Hannah, to pour out your heart in prayer before the Lord, to take your problem and your heart's desire and put it into the outstretched hand of God and leave it there with him? James 5:16b says, “the fervent prayer of a righteous man [or woman or parent, female or otherwise] availeth much.”

How often in our deepest pit we realize our deepest need and turn and seek after the Lord! Don't despise those desperate times when God gets your attention.

I take much comfort in the story of Hannah. She didn't have a perfect home. It was a respectable, God-fearing home, but not a happy one. There was strife, disharmony and irritation in that place. And what could be worse than irritation? It's those little gritty things that get us down. Someone said, “It isn't the mountains ahead that wear us out; it's the grain of sand in our shoe.”

Verse 6 of chapter 1 tells how Hannah's rival, her husband's other wife, provoked her to irritation, “because the LORD had closed her womb.” When I read that, I thought, “If she was provoked to irritation before she had children, just wait until she has them.” Parents well know the inherent, persistent power of little ones to provoke to irritation.

Hannah believed in God. She knew he was the source of all her blessings. She worshipped him in her home and in the

tabernacle. But, in spite of all her commitment and faith, Hannah experienced trouble in her home.

Don't look around you and assume that everyone but you has got it together. We all struggle. We all have at least one thing, and probably more, that wrenches our hearts. People like to put on a spiritual mask, but don't buy it. We all have our deep hurts, needs and disappointments. What we need to learn is not how to hide them, but what to do with them. Hannah shows us: take them to God in prayer. Pour your heart out to him. Trust him with your pain, your heartbreak, your desire. And then trust him with his timing. Perhaps he is preparing you. It may not be the thing you desire, it may be something better. It may be what he most desires for you.

Hannah didn't come from a perfect home situation, and she didn't send her son into a perfect situation, either. True to her word to God, she gave him back to the Lord. Hannah models for us what we know to be true but don't always want to admit: our children are just on loan. Henry Ward Beecher wrote, "When a child is born into the world, God draws His hand near his heart, lends something of Himself to the parent, and says, 'Keep it till I come.'" We are just God's in-house representatives.

But there is comfort in knowing that God loves our children even more than we do. In Isaiah 49:15, God says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget." The psalmist says, "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Psalm 27:10). God knows the depth of our imperfect hearts, our inadequacies. But his love, his heart, is infinitely deep, wide, high and long. He loves our children even more than we do—and he loves them perfectly. Our job is to cling to the Vine. We are the branches, desperately in need of his life-giving power.

Hannah waited until Samuel was weaned. For three to five influential years she cared for him, taught him and rooted him in her love and God's love. And then, in what must have been heart-wrenching obedience, we learn, in verse 24,

She took the boy with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour and a skin of wine and brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh. When they had slaughtered the bull, they brought the boy to Eli, and she said to him, "As surely as you live, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD" (1:24-28).

What an unselfish act! She gave her beloved firstborn to the Lord. And what a rotten environment! Not a great situation by any stretch of the imagination. Eli, old and obese, had raised two sons, wicked men who were presently the acting priests. Would you leave your precious firstborn child, or any child, with men with that kind of reputation?

Did Hannah not know the condition of Israel at that time? The immorality in the temple? The transgressing of the law of the Lord by Eli's own sons? She could have argued with the Lord that bringing this tender child into such a corrupt environment was a huge mistake. But instead, she trusted God. She put her faith in God and his promise and left Samuel in the center of corruption, believing that God would reveal himself to him.

And we know that God did exactly that.

Samuel was probably a young teenager when God called him to be his prophet. It was just before dawn. The flame of the golden lampstand was growing dim. Samuel was sleeping

in a cubicle near the holy place, where the ark of the covenant was kept in the temple. And the Lord called, "Samuel." Samuel woke up and thought he'd heard Eli.

You know the story.

"...here I am," he called. "I didn't call you. Go back and lie down." And the third time, instead of being provoked to irritation, Eli finally realizes what is happening. He tells Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening'" (3:9).

And God does speak directly to Samuel. A phenomenal thing! The sound of God's voice had been rare during the three hundred years of Judges. God had spoken to Moses and Joshua, but that was three centuries earlier. During Eli's time, there were no prophets speaking God's message to Israel. There was only silence from God, so corrupt had the system become.

God needed someone to be his man, so he prepared a mother.

And Samuel, although raised from the time he was three or four in an imperfect situation, separated from his mother except for yearly visits, had a mother who prayed, who had a relationship with the living God. And because of that relationship, there was a love and a power that reached beyond the reality of the imperfect situation and impacted Samuel's life, and the history of Israel, for eternity.

As mothers we want to set all things right. We want to make it all good. We want our children cared for in the very best way. In short, we want to control. The challenge of any parent is to draw these lines of protection around their children and then enlarge the boundary as they grow up and learn how to assume responsibility and become mature, independent adults.

The healthy process of progressively giving up control is the ongoing challenge of the mother heart. Do it right and it will strengthen family relationships. Fail to give up control and it will cause great pain. It's an inherent mother tendency. We want to intervene, arrange all situations, pull all the strings, cover all bases and make our children's world as perfect as we can. It's the prerogative of a mother: we want to be in control.

I can identify with the mother who tried hard to make sure her college-bound son would be living in the very best environment. She decided to write the college president in an effort to exert control and make everything safe. She wrote, "Dear Sir, my son has been accepted for admission to your college and soon he will be leaving me. I am writing to ask that you give your personal attention to the selection of his roommate. I want to be sure that his roommate is not the kind of person who uses foul language or tells off-colored jokes, smokes, drinks, or chases after girls. I hope you will understand why I am appealing to you directly. You see, this is the first time my son will be away from home, except for his three years in the Marine Corps."

Mothers, we can't make it perfect. We can only put our faith in our perfect God.

In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the New Testament, Jesus is speaking in John 8:23, "You're tied down to the mundane, I'm in touch with what is beyond the horizon." As mothers, so much of life is tied to the mundane. What could be more mundane than everyday existence, dealing with all the details and the demands of parenting?

Hannah had to deal with the mundane details of school clothes. Once a year she brought Samuel an ephod, a little

garment just like the one the big priests wore, made with her own hands, as a way to care for him. A mother's life is tied to the mundane. Yet there is no greater investment of time and energy, for the daily mundane is poured into the making of the life of a child and to his or her future.

What a relief and what an exercise, to put all the mundane and all the imperfections of life into the hands of the One who is in touch with what is beyond the horizon.

When we bring the mundane to Christ, he is able to make a difference. A relationship with him can imbue the mundane with the transforming power of God and make the mundane marvelous. Because as mundane and thankless as it is to be a mother at times, it is the most important job you will ever have. You are dealing with eternal things. What you do has eternal value.

Once in a while, in the midst of the marvelous mundane, God opens our eyes and we get a glimpse of the glory that is beyond the horizon, a glimpse of the things of eternity. It doesn't happen often. It is a treasured gift to be protected and valued. And though it can happen in many unexpected and wonderful ways, it almost always occurs at the moment of the indescribable miracle of birth, when that new life finally appears and nothing is ever the same again. You experience God in a new depth and wonder and you never want to forget it. You want to hold it close and remember.

Earlier this year I was a part of that most amazing new gift of life, and I caught a glimpse of glory. I was privileged to go to Vietnam with our son, Doug, who is a college pastor in Berkeley, his wife Laurie and their four-year-old son Zachary. We went to Hanoi to claim a gift, a precious gift of life. Doug and Laurie were adopting a baby girl and I got to go along as the nanny/granny for Zachary, because they didn't want him to miss out on this big brother opportunity.

We arrived in Hanoi on February 16th. Doug and Laurie had already spent 18 grueling months accumulating paper work. There had been devastating delays, but finally the day had arrived; it was "all systems go." We had only a few photographs to assure us this nine-month-old baby girl existed, yet this baby Zoe had long been a reality in our hearts.

Laurie and I had hung a pair of delicate baby shoes in a prominent place in our homes. We called them our prayer shoes—a tangible reminder to pray without ceasing for our Zoe. And finally, though the baby had long outgrown the shoes, finally, we were going to hold her in our arms.

Hanoi was like nothing we had ever experienced, yet it seemed like every movie we had ever seen of bustling South East Asia. We expected it would be a few days before they would bring the baby to us. But on the first night we arrived,

the proprietor of our little hotel, Mrs. Twee, who was the liaison with the adoption agency, announced that our baby would be there in just 30 minutes.

Jet-lagged and breathlessly excited, we gathered in the tiny front area and stared through the plate glass window out into the street. Myriads of bikes, scooters, and cyclos (the Vietnamese version of pedi cabs), and a few cars and taxis flowed by in ceaseless activity through the narrow, crowded Hanoi street.

I watched in dazed wonder as a man and woman come by on a motor scooter. They pulled up to the curb and started to unroll a blanket that was wrapped around a bundle balanced between them. A little head appeared from out of the blanket, and in shock, I realized that it was a baby! They had a baby on that motor scooter. Then it hit me. I grabbed Laurie and shouted, "It's Zoe!"

As the foster mother and father started in through the crowd milling around the streets, we could see that this was the precious little face that had stared up at us in the photos we had cherished all those waiting months. They entered and, without ceremony, came up to Doug and Laurie. Laurie rested her hands gently on the baby's little body so as not to frighten her, and then lifted her up and held her close. And that was it. Zoe was delivered.

We took a few quick pictures, but since we didn't speak each other's language, there was no communication except the language of love. Then the kind foster parents kissed the baby good-bye, got on the motor scooter and were gone. It wasn't until weeks later that Laurie's mother, who was looking at the pictures, realized that the foster mother was wearing a cross.

In the northern province of Vietnam there are two young women to whom I will be forever grateful. One is this lovely foster mother whom we were privileged to meet for that brief, transcendent moment; the other is Zoe's birth mother who kept this little baby girl for the first two weeks of her life and then gave her up to be adopted.

All we know of her is what she wrote on the form: "born out of the marriage lines. I can't afford to feed her." But because of her gift, there is a lively little girl who now lives in Berkeley, wonderfully enveloped in a family who adore her. The first Bunnell girl for three generations! Every time I look at her, I think my grandmother heart will burst.

On Doug and Laurie's kitchen wall hangs a plate that I painted for them soon after we returned. It simply says what they believe: "*For this child we prayed for as long as she lives, she shall be lent to the Lord.*"

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A FATHER'S HEART

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1183

1 Thessalonians 2:5-12

Twelfth Message

Gary Vanderet

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We have many young fathers in our midst. It's easy to recognize them. They're the tired-looking ones! I smile as I watch them adjust to life with children. They try to remember why they decided to give up quiet evenings with good books, lazy weekends listening to their favorite music, and intimate meals with their brides, those long ago times when they could finish entire sentences without interruption.

Bill Butterworth shares a story from his early years of fathering. A few weeks after his wife had given birth to their fourth child, the late Joe Bayly, a gifted speaker, came to their church for a week of evenings meetings. Since Bill and his wife both couldn't attend, he suggested that she should go and he would stay home with the children. This was his first time alone with all four of them, who at the time were 5, 4, 2, and one month. I will read an excerpt from his journal entitled, "The Week Joe Bayly Came to Town":

My four-year-old wants to know why it is when Mommy goes out, the kids have to go to bed when it is still light. I tried to feed them dinner, a real disaster; tomorrow night I'll feed them in the back yard; they'll eat off paper plates, and they'll be dressed only in underwear and shower caps. The kids always want me to read the alphabet book, because they know with that book I can't skip pages. Never close your eyes when you pray with four kids. I always wanted to ask my four-year-old what it is like to sleep on the top bunk with his big wheel. 60 Minutes wouldn't even do a story on our house; they're safer in the Middle East. The kids are all mad at me now because cup cakes don't float in the tub. My two-year-old has special powers; he can look at a glass of juice and it will spill. I just made a big mistake. I lifted the lid off the diaper pail. That one act clears sinuses, kills roaches and ticks, and effectively discourages would-be burglars. I got angry. I said some things I shouldn't have. My five year old wants to know who's Joe Bayly and why do I hate him!

What does a father's heart look like? Hearing the word father, some of you feel your stomachs tighten and your blood pressure rise. Even hearing about God as your heavenly Father is difficult for you. You view God through the lens of your earthly father, a father who battered you, shamed you, abandoned you, flew off the handle at the smallest slight and never gave you the time of day. But, as many among us have learned, our heavenly Father is not like that at all. It has taken a long time to change my understanding of God. For many, the Christian life is a journey of being re-parented by God and learning about the father heart of God.

I never knew my father. He died when I was 11 months old, leaving my mother to raise my two older brothers and

me. She never quite recovered from the void left by his death, and drank quite heavily. And even though I always believed there was a God, I viewed him mainly as a judge, not a loving Father. I entered marriage and parenting with a lot gaps as a result. I didn't have many healthy role models.

This morning I want to make some observations from a passage in the New Testament that has meant a great deal to me in my ministry both as a pastor and father. My text is taken from the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians. This letter was written to a young church facing perilous times. Paul himself was the subject of strong criticism. His enemies claimed he ran away from Thessalonica when things got tough, and said he was insincere when he failed to return there. They charged that he was in the ministry merely for what he could get out of it.

In this passage, the apostle defends his ministry. His response, a very tender passage, gives a model for ministry as he opens up his life and reveals his motives and methods. Since leadership in the church is to model leadership in the home, I think you will agree that the principles we draw from this passage will be helpful to fathers. Further, Paul himself uses the metaphors of both a mother and father in describing his ministry. Though the message today is addressed to fathers, I believe that the observation I am about to share will have application to mothers and single parents, indeed anyone who longs to have a significant ministry with others.

Tucked away in this passage are three principles that have been the foundation of my life and ministry. My first observation is this:

A father's heart has a humility that seeks to lead as a servant.

We pick up Paul's words in verse 5 of chapter 2:

For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children (1 Thess. 2:5-7, NASB).

In the previous verses, Paul had written about the purity of his motives; here he discusses the gentleness of his manner. He says it is wrong to manipulate people or dominate them. Notice the contrast between an apostle's authority and a mother's tenderness. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, therefore he had the same authority as Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Paul was not to be trifled with. He could have commanded the Thessalonians to obey, but he didn't. He wasn't hungry for prestige. He wasn't seeking honor and glory. He did not make demands on people, throwing his weight around and wield-

ing power.

Instead, using a feminine metaphor, Paul says he acted like a mother tenderly caring for her nursing infant: “we proved to be gentle among you.” This word is used but twice in the NT—the only other place is in 2 Tim. 2:24: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be *kind* to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24-26, NIV).

This is exactly the exhortation Paul gives to fathers in Ephesians 6:4. But there he uses the antonym, saying, “Don’t be harsh with your children.” Don’t use a cross tone of voice. Think of a mother tenderly nursing her child. That is how we are to act with each other. We may have to say some hard words at times—we may need to be tough—but we are always gentle. We can misuse our authority by insisting on irritating or unreasonable demands, making no allowance for our children’s inexperience or immaturity. We can humiliate them by using sarcasm and ridicule, seeking to control them for our own selfish motives. But all this accomplishes is to provoke them to resentment and anger.

I am not saying there is never an occasion for demanding obedience of a child. It is critical, with young children especially, to grab the reins early. And certainly there is a place for discipline. But discipline must never be arbitrary or unkind. I find it all too easy, especially when I am opposed, to assert my authority. I can be heavy-handed and autocratic. But that is not how we should act with our children. We must not be harsh with them.

There is much confusion in the evangelical world over the issue of male headship, leading to a misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual authority. Most people define authority as, “the right to require obedience.” That may be a valid secular definition, but it is inadequate for our purposes. Spiritual authority is not about control and power. It isn’t about demanding your children be perfect. It isn’t about performance at all.

Spiritual authority seeks to encourage a willing response. Leadership in our homes is not so much about learning to make right decisions as it is about learning how to serve, how to initiate without being controlling, how to speak truth gently, how to give others freedom to fail and room to grow, respecting their individuality. That is what the father of the prodigal did. Jesus redefined authority when he told his disciples: “You know that...the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10:42-43, NASB).

Practically speaking, what does this mean? Some children share their honest answers. Listen to how two of them completed the sentence, “If I could change my Dad...”:

- an 11-year-old girl: “I would make him less strict, make him listen to what I have to say before he answers, make it so he doesn’t assume the worst all the time.”

- a 15-year-old girl: “I would like to be able to talk to my Dad freely without being yelled at or being preached to.”

For me, this involves less barking out of commands and a greater willingness to help others in the tasks they struggle with.

Here is my second observation:

A father’s heart has an affection that communicates unconditional love.

Look at verse 8:

Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us (2:8, NASB).

The apostle was not only gentle, he was affectionate, too. What a beautiful metaphor! This masculine individual was not ashamed to use a feminine metaphor. He could have used a number of words that were familiar to his readers to convey what he wanted to say, but he chose this word, which is not used anywhere else in the NT. One scholar defines this term translated affection, “to feel oneself drawn to something.” There is strong intensification of the feeling. It is a warm, inward attachment. Another scholar says it is a term of endearment borrowed from the language of the nursery. Fathers, do you remember how you felt when you held your first child in your arms? The tender affection that flooded your very being? That’s what Paul is referring to.

Unfortunately, that tender affection can fade if it is not cultivated. Prior to my current ministry with adults, I worked with adolescents for eleven years; consequently, I spent a lot of time listening to teens talking about their parents. I have observed that most parents love their children. It is rare to find one who doesn’t love his or her child. Having said that, though, I would also say that many children don’t *feel* loved, especially by their fathers. Something is breaking down between the affection we feel in our hearts and the love we communicate.

Parents need to learn to communicate love to their children. How can we do that? First of all, *we need to use our mouths*. Words have tremendous power. Proverbs 28:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” The saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” How foolish! Words are very powerful. If you don’t agree, think back to how you felt when the teacher announced in school, “Class, take out a clean sheet of paper.” I still shudder when I remember those words.

Here is what Paul says about words, in Ephesians 4:29:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.

One man paraphrased it this way for parents of adolescents:

Do not let any response motivated by personal need come out of your mouth, but only such a response that is directed at the strengthening of your adolescent according to his need at the moment, that it may be ben-

eficial for his relationship with Christ.

Secondly, *use your eyes*. Children can tell a lot just by looking at your eyes, Ross Campbell, in his excellent book, *How to Really Love Your Child*, writes this:

Eye contact is crucial not only in making good communicational contact with a child, but in filling his emotional needs. Without realizing it, we use eye contact as a primary means of conveying love, especially to children. The child uses eye contact with his parents (and others) to feed emotionally. The more parents make eye contact with their child as a means of expressing their love, the more a child is nourished with love and the fuller his emotional tank.

My eyes are the first thing my children notice when I come home in the evening. One glance at my eyes tells them what kind of night it's going to be.

Third, *use your ears*. Learn to listen actively to your children for the purpose of understanding. When my son Stephen was younger, he would take hold of my head to get me to look at him while he was speaking. Nothing lets a child know we value them more than active listening and remembering what they said.

What a tremendous blessing to give your child—knowing that his words are worth remembering! One reason why parents don't listen well, especially to their adolescent children, is that they confuse understanding with acceptance. They feel that if they show any degree of understanding in conversation with their children, the kids will think they are agreeing with them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your children know you like a book: what you believe in, your likes and dislikes. What parents must do is listen in order to understand, and then communicate that sense of understanding.

Lastly, *use your hands*. Meaningful touching is an important means of communicating and a significant part of one's emotional health. Unfortunately, because of abuses in this area, people are loath to touch children today—and that caution is certainly valid. But children need to be touched in meaningful ways, particularly by their fathers. In his ministry to children, Jesus almost always held them and touched them. This was not only a means of illustrating his teaching to his disciples; our Lord knew a child's inherent needs. Meaningful touching can be done casually. Snuggle up to your children while you are watching television. Put your hands on their shoulders while waiting in line. Use your hands to demonstrate that you love them. A number of studies have been done on the relationship between sexual dysfunction and the lack of meaningful touching by fathers.

A couple of years ago, there was a story in *Sports Illustrated* about Greg Norman, the professional golfer who intimidates most other professional golfers with his ice-cold stoicism. The article said he had learned his hard-nosed tactics from his father. "I used to see my father, getting off a plane or something, and I'd want to hug him," he recalled once. "But he'd only shake my hand." In talking about his aloofness on the Professional Golfers Association tour, Norman responded, "Nobody really knows me out here." After leading golf's most prestigious event, the 1996 Masters, from the start, Norman blew a six-shot lead in the last round, losing to rival Nick Faldo. Rick Reilly, the *Sports Illustrated* columnist, wrote, "Now, as Faldo made

one last thrust into Norman's heart with a 15-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole, the two of them came toward each other, Norman trying to smile, looking for a handshake and finding himself in the warmest embrace instead. As they held that hug, held it even as both of them cried, Norman changed just a little. 'I wasn't crying because I'd lost,' Norman said the next day. 'I've lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I'll lose a lot more. I cried because I'd never felt that from another man before. I've never had a hug like that in my life.'"

Fathers, I pray that will never be said of any one of us. Our children need our love. The gift of unconditional love, demonstrated in all these ways, will give your children a sense of love, belonging and competence.

This brings me to my third observation:

A father's heart has a transparency that models and communicates an authentic spiritual life.

Here are Paul's words, from verses 9-12:

For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are our witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (2:9-12).

Ministry is simple, really. It's making friends and imparting truth. Being a father involves the same elements: it's loving our children and teaching them. Paul thought of his message in terms of two elements: He both *embodied* the truth and *imparted* it. That is where our authority and credibility come from. Paul says he behaved devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly. His life was consistent with what he knew to be true. And he was blameless. Not sinless, mind you. He is not talking about perfection here, but of the attitude that we should have toward holiness, our desire for it, the hunger we have for righteousness and progress. That's what gives us authority. Paul knew that the most powerful form of teaching the Scriptures was modeling the truth in his own life. You can't give away something you don't have. It is our lives that give credibility to our words.

And not only should we embody the truth, we should impart it. We ought to teach people the word of God, which implies that we are spending time in the Scriptures and gaining knowledge, growing in our apprehension of Biblical truth and using it to encourage and exhort others.

The home is the primary place where the flag of truth is passed on—and the primary responsibility for this rests with fathers. Truth is to be passed on from generation to generation in a perpetual relay. This takes time, thought and effort. It does not happen by osmosis. There is no easy, push-button method for teaching your children about God, nor is there any undisturbed section of time in which to do it. What God put in Deuteronomy 6 cannot be improved upon as to when we should do this. It is to be accomplished during the normal activities of our day—at mealtimes, bedtimes, etc. This means we must spend time together. The greatest problems in this relay of truth, as is

true in any relay race, are slow starts and sloppy passes. This is where we must begin.

And the purpose of it all must be kept in mind. Paul says in verse 12, "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Why should we minister to our spouses and children? So that they will make more money or have an easier life? No. God's purpose must override every other purpose in life. We need to help people grow in their likeness to Christ, to become more and more a visible representation of the invisible Christ. What do we want for our children? To do all the things we couldn't do, athletically and academically? Do we try to relive our lives through them, or do we want them to grow in their likeness to Jesus Christ? Oftentimes that is where we get lost. We forget that the purpose for which every other purpose exists is to create living reminders of Jesus Christ. And that is what we need to ask ourselves when we sit down to talk to our mates and our children. Whatever situation we find ourselves in we desire to be successful so that when we leave, people are more and more like Jesus Christ.

But we must remember one other thing: there are no guarantees. This is where grace comes in. We can do all the right things and still our children might drop the baton. Some of you have faithfully run with the baton and done your best to love and teach your children, only to see them reject the truth. If that is what has happened with your child, be encouraged by these comments by Paul Tournier in one of his books on grace:

Many parents are extremely authoritarian and many parents are extremely permissive. Most parents are in between those extremes. But whether parents are extremely authoritarian or extremely permissive or somewhat in between, if their children turn out all right, it's by the grace of God.

I believe that with all my heart. It's all by the grace of God. Even in our failures, God in his grace can teach us great things. And he can "restore the years that the locusts have eaten." As we attempt to train and discipline our children we will fail at times, yet God in his grace will use our mistakes for his good purposes.

Let me say also that no father has the natural resources to lead in this way: to serve humbly, to love unconditionally, to model a genuine Christian life. It takes God to do all of those things. And that is exactly what God wants to do

as he lives his life through us. Our part is to allow him the freedom to work inside us. That is where it all starts, with a heart that asks God to change us and make us into the men he desires us to be.

I spoke to my oldest son on the telephone last week. He is away at college, and he shared with me that he doesn't know what he wants to do in life. He is scared, because he thinks everyone else has a career path all mapped out. After I assured him that I had no fears about this, that he was going to be fine, I told him that what I wanted for him more than anything else was that he fall in love with Jesus. If he has that relationship, then everything else will fall into place. Nothing else matters.

As we close, I want to leave you with a powerful image of a father's love for his son.

In the Summer Olympics of 1992, Derek Redmond was the favorite in the 400 meters. He had trained all his life for this race. He had the world record time in the event, and he had won all his earlier heats, but he had never won the gold medal. In the final, he shot out of the starting blocks in an unbelievable start, and was on a world record time as he rounded the last turn. But suddenly, he went down in a heap on the track. He had torn his Achilles tendon. The crowd gasped, stunned by what had happened. Slowly, Derek rose to his feet and began to hop agonizingly on one leg to the finish line. The entire stadium was perplexed. No one knew what to do. Suddenly, an older man made his way out of the stands. He pushed past the security guards who tried to stop him, and ran to Derek's side. It was his father. He put his arm around his son and said, "You don't have to do this." But Derek said, "Yes, I have to." "Then we'll finish together," said his father. In an unforgettable scene, these two men, father and son, walked to the finish line together. Derek Redmond never did get that gold medal, but he has the memory of his father who shared his pain and finished the race with him.

If you did not have a father like that, know that you have a heavenly Father who loves you. Perhaps life has been hard for you. You feel there is no way back, that you can't recover. Well, know that your Father in heaven loves you. Despite all that has happened in the past he wants to accompany you on the rest of the race. He died for you to save you, and rose from the dead to empower you to live now for him, to give you the heart of a father. May God in his grace do that for every father here this morning.

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SUFFERING HONESTLY, SUFFERING HOPEFULLY

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Judy Squier
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SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

I am almost down to earth after a taste of heaven at the Bill Gaither Praise Gathering in Indianapolis last weekend. It's been called the World Series for Christians. This year we heard over twenty nationally renowned speakers and more than fifty Christian artists/musicians. Three days. A total of thirty hours of concerts, workshops and praise.

Flying home, I realized the speaker/artist who stole eleven thousand hearts was Sheila Walsh. Sheila had flung open the door of her life for all to see her brokenness. It was in 1992. Sheila says, "My life hit the wall at 200 m.p.h. After five years of co-hosting the 700 Club, I locked my office door for the last time, having been told: 'Sheila, don't do this. If you admit yourself to the psychiatric hospital, you're finished.'"

These are some things she learned about God: "It's just like God to take you to prison to set you free"; "I never knew you lived so close to the floor"; "Some of God's most precious gifts come in boxes that make your hands bleed when you open them."

It was around midnight on the second night of the Praise Gathering. As we returned to our hotel room, exhausted but exhilarated, my thoughts turned to my upcoming talk on suffering. I asked my niece Christie, who is blind, and my daughter Emily if they'd listen and give me their feedback. Interestingly, their response was unanimous: "It's a great talk, but you don't show your pain."

Two nights later, just before flying back home to California, I asked my friend, Rev. Reynen, a man with twenty-five years of counseling under his belt, to read it. His feedback was, "You begin with the facts and end with the victory, but what happened in the middle? Where was the dark night of your soul?"

I usually say I was born without legs. More accurately, my legs never developed. I had no thighs or knees, and I had deformed feet, with two toes on the left and three on the right. Also, I had a webbed left hand. The doctor who delivered me was in shock as he stepped outside the delivery room to give my dad the bad news: "Your daughter is going to live, I am sorry to say."

My dad, who loved challenges, rose to the occasion. He adapted my toys, taught me to climb trees, ice skate, ride a horse and drive a car. He trained me to articulate my words so I could become a public speaker. Mom carried the brunt of the pain. She still does, at age 87. A mother's pain runs deep. We discovered how deep when David and I decided to interview our parents for

a keepsake tape for their grandchildren:

"Mom," I unsuspectingly asked, "What was the hardest day of your life?" As if waiting her whole life to be asked, out popped the dark truth, "The hardest day of my life was the day Judyann was born, and it still is." My sister Tina was three years older. She had long legs. I watched her polish ten toe nails, jump rope, jitterbug, be chased by boys, and be nominated to the homecoming queen's court in college. I watched her growing up years in envy.

My childhood landmarks were surgeries at the Shriner's Hospital in Chicago. The big one was at age ten when they amputated my deformed feet and I exchanged my metal stilts for artificial limbs.

My teen and college years began on a low but ended on a mighty high when in June 1968, I received two degrees, my M.A. in Speech Pathology and my M.R.S. Degree, Mrs. David Squier! Ten years into our marriage we began our family. That's where we're at today, with three girls and three boys—Emily, Betsy, and Naphtalie, our teenage daughters, and Joshua, Chester, and Buck, their dogs.

Where did God fit in? Everywhere! He was there while I was being formed in utter seclusion and saw me before I was born. He had his foot in the door for praise when mom named me Judy, which means praise. He wept when my parents were too numb to weep, and felt the slap in the face when someone in dad's congregation said, "You know, Rev. Rieder, your daughter's condition is because of your sin."

It was God, not Cupid, who stirred the love between a boy named David and a girl named Judy and between the two of them and himself. And Elohim, the Creator God, filled every spellbound atom in the delivery room at the birth of each of our daughters as they and their fully developed legs slipped through the birth canal.

And somewhere in the incredible journey, at different places for each of us, the hundreds of family and friends touched by my disability exchanged the no longer needed hankies for helium balloons. Unbeknownst to us, God had made my life a celebration. Together we had learned that suffering is a potential delivery room for the extraordinary, the unprecedented, the inconceivable.

It was near midnight as Rev. Reynen repeated the question, "Judy, where was the dark night of your soul? How did you feel when your mom said the hardest day of her life was the day you were born?" "You're asking

me how it felt?" I thought. "It's not unchristian to feel? You care?"

Three vivid memories popped into my mind. Three times when it wasn't OK to feel. Three times when someone didn't care:

Being wheeled into the operating room at age ten for the amputation of my feet. The cold, sterile green room. "I'm afraid," I told the anesthesiologist. "Shut up, Judy. You talk too much," she said.

My father, my cheerleader through hoops and milestones. "Dad, I'm going under." "Judy, I'm so disappointed. You've lost your song."

A Christian woman after church in Palo Alto. "I'm not doing well." "Judy, motherhood is difficult for everyone. You're no special case!"

"Judy, how did it feel?" Rev. Reynen didn't give up. Suddenly, I heard myself say, "The dark night of my soul was my childhood. The dark night of my soul was my teenage years! My marriage was not the dark night of my soul, because David is a saint! My first job at Stanford Hospital was a dark night of my soul! Motherhood, with three kids five and under, was a dark night of my soul! And mothering three teenager daughters is a dark night of my soul!"

Fifty years of silence was broken. That was less than a week ago. Lord, what comes next? I don't know, but I do know that God does not require us to be strong. He invites us to bury our face in the mane of the Lion of Judah!

Gordon MacDonald tells a story of his daughter's struggle choosing a college. She got the choice down to two, and assured her parents she didn't need their help. After weeks of watching her agony, they couldn't take it anymore. Gordon moved alongside her as she stared out her bedroom window. "Honey, see that strong oak tree? Sometimes we can manage life alone. Other times we're more like the tulip over there, which could easily be run over or trampled. Which one are you?" "I'm the tulip, daddy." "Then your mother and I will build a fence around you."

Do you ever feel that the distance between the truth that you know and the faith you don't have is as far as the East is from the West? Have you ever had trouble thanking God? Our God takes full responsibility for bridging the great divide. This could be his greatest work. But instead of running to him and hiding our faces in the mane of the Lion of Judah, we go down in the basement and get beaten up by guilt or disappointment in ourselves.

There was something my dad would never allow me to say. It made him furious if I said, "God allowed my handicap." "God had nothing to do with you having no legs, Judy." But one day, maybe I was twenty, my dad and God went down in the basement. Dad came back up with my orthopedic shoe. He had spray-painted it gold!

I could talk for a week of Sundays about the truths I

have learned thanks to this orthopedic shoe. But the *Rhema*, God's words to my soul, tucked inside on a wrinkled gold paper, says it best: "The affliction you gave me, Lord, is the best thing that could have happened to me, for it taught me to pay attention to your statutes. They are more valuable than silver or gold."

Nothing is as sweet as when God's Word hits the bull's eye of our pain.

Some days, the words, "Thank you, Lord," pop right out of our mouths; other days, they're nowhere to be found. It was on one of those latter days that God was gracious to send a reminder. Almost a year ago, I was preparing a talk for Young Life's Capernaum Project. Nick Palermo had invited me to be the inspirational speaker for the Winter Bash. I'd visited the year before, so I knew to gear my talk to teenagers. "What should I be sure and include?" I asked one of my daughters. "Mom, be sure and tell them you're thankful for your disability." "I don't know if I'm thankful," I confessed. "Mom, you wouldn't be the woman you are today without it."

Suffering is a surgical knife applied to our souls. It hurts. Every time we submit to the knife, we become a little more like Jesus.

But honestly, I still hate suffering. I'm a tulip, not an oak tree. I'm even afraid to pray for patience. You'll never ask me back again, but let me tell you something. Why is this so hard for me to say? I'll tell you why. I told a Christian friend I was preparing a talk on suffering. Looking down at me in my wheelchair, she said: "Judy, Christians don't talk about suffering. They talk about the joy of suffering."

To me, suffering is a vice. It makes me feel like I'm in a vice. And yet, my spirit knows: Suffering is a redeemed vice. Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb! Jesus plucks it out of the liability column. He accomplished history's great reversal with his finished work on the cross. Suffering becomes an asset.

The 90's began with a big bang at the Squiers. Autumn 1990 was definitely a dark night of my soul. You ask, "What hurt?" Actually, David was the one who was hurting. Diving off a ladder onto the blacktop, he shattered his ankle in seventy pieces as he dodged a falling Monterey pine branch and his chain saw. Arriving at the Stanford Hospital emergency room, his message to the nurses (they thought he was delirious) was, "You have to restore my leg. My wife has none." God did just that and in the process made me a woman of prayer. David's accident threw me totally off balance. His legs were my legs. How helpless I was without them! "God," I told him, "You're going to have to take care of me now."

Enter Kay Arthur's book, *Lord, I Want to Know You!* I met El Shaddai eyeball to eyeball and he proved his all sufficiency, so much so that the lintel over our front door has a plaque that says, *El Shaddai*, instead of The Squiers. My soul connected deeply with Elohim, the Creator God, the God of a thousand ideas when we

can't think of one. And Jehovah Raah, Raah, Raah, our Cheerleader Shepherd. "What is that, a joyous choir I hear? No, it is the Lord Himself exalting over you in happy song." And Jehovah Rapha, the Wounded Healer, whose style is to inhabit our suffering, our brokenness.

Have you ever been surprised by the Truth you didn't know you knew? Something swimming around in your soul may jump out and you say, "Who said that? That was good." I was at the swim club a month ago, and as I wheeled out of the women's dressing room I overheard a conversation between a mom and a custodian. She was nursing her aching back in the spa, and I winced as I heard the custodian say the unspeakable, "You know, when I hurt my back, I prayed, and God healed it instantly." Sitting legless in my wheelchair, ready to jump into the pool, I jumped into the conversation. Flinging my arms heavenward, I looked the uninformed, I mean uniformed, man in the eye and said, "When God doesn't heal us, he inhabits us!"

Speaking of inhabit, the name Joni Eareckson Tada is pretty much a household name in the Christian community. I can almost tell you the color of Jesus' eyes as I see his habitation in Joni. Her God is so big. Why? Because she and God grew real tight in the cesspool of suffering. I am convinced that her Rock of Gibraltar strength took a hold when a high school friend, Steve Estes, visited her week after week at the rehabilitation center. He opened God's Word and disciplined her. Though paralyzed, she grabbed hold of truth and it grabbed hold of her. And God built this woman into this generation's icon of God's power made perfect in weakness.

About forty of us had the privilege of sitting at Joni's feet last Thursday night, listening as she shared a story about her recent trip to the Holy Land. She told how she and her wheelchair sat beside the Pool of Bethesda: "I flashed back thirty years, to a body newly paralyzed. How I wished Jesus, the all powerful Healer, would touch me. But this day, with thirty years of quadriplegia and thirty years of God's faithfulness under my belt, with tears streaming down my cheeks, I thanked God that he hadn't!"

I watched her shriveled, lifeless hands wave back and forth mid air as she spoke, hands that could no longer brush her teeth, scratch an itch or apply lipstick, and I realized the secret of Joni's joy: her limp hands had no will of their own. "*Just to be clay in the potter's hands, willing to do what his will commands.*" Hands open to God. It doesn't matter if they're limp. It doesn't matter if they have only three fingers. Bring them. But what if my hands are gripped tight in fear or my fists clenched in anger? Bring them. Jesus said, "Come." No need to gussy up. Come just as you are.

Ever since John Hanneman invited me to give this talk I've been wheeling around, saying, "Lord, how do

we comfort those who are suffering? What is the right thing to say?" Job's friends taught us the wrong thing to say. About that time, I was watching a high school soccer game with two long-time friends, Bill and Marilee Clauson. "You two are doctors," I said. "What do you think Job's friends should have said to him?" Bill, with his usual Swedish twinkle in his eyes, met the question head on: "They should have said nothing and just hugged him." Driving home after the game, I realized Marilee hadn't said a word. Then I realized she didn't need to.

From the first day we had met at a prayer workshop, twenty years ago, she had hugged me, so to speak. She was finishing her residency in anesthesiology at Stanford Hospital, working ninety to one hundred-hour weeks. She dropped everything and rode into San Francisco with me for a one o'clock appointment at the Legman's.

It was Marilee who cheer-led me into motherhood. "I could never be a mom," I would say. She would reply, "Judy, you'd be a great mom." She never gave up. She was there for me during my three pregnancies. She figured out my gallbladder pain when the doctors couldn't. She has never required I be cheerful. She's always accepted me as I am and walked alongside me.

This may surprise you, but for years I thought physical disability was the only kind of suffering there was. I thought all able-bodied people were pain-free. But now, fifty years wiser, I see we all have handicaps. And you know what, I think mine is one of the easiest. It's visible, out front. It's predictable, and it doesn't get worse. I can go to the Legman's and get it fixed!

But loneliness and loss are not easy to fix. Neither are barrenness, baldness, shyness, being single and wishing you were married or being married and wishing you were single. Maybe you've lost your job or you have a job you hate. Maybe you've struggled a long time with depression. Perhaps you're disappointed with God. My heart weeps with you. I know I cannot fix your pain as you cannot fix mine, but we can walk along together, arm in arm. I'll hold your hankie if you hold mine.

"And then after we have suffered a little while, our God, who is full of kindness through Christ, will give us His eternal Glory. He personally will come and pick us up and set us firmly in place" (1 Peter 5:10). The apostle Peter said it. He knew, didn't he?

I'd like to close with an ever so simple word picture of "Suffering Honestly, Suffering Hopefully." Mary Verschuyl, the pastor over the Care Ministry at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, shared her comfort as she remembers her mother's response in crisis. Her mom would sit down in her rocking chair, open her Bible, and rock and cry and pray. She knew the simple truth: Life is difficult, God is faithful.

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WORK: A QUESTION OF IDENTITY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1185

Genesis 2:15

Fourteenth Message

Wm. D. Hyatt

November 22nd, 1998

1. Introduction

The theme of this series of messages is finding what we have termed the Spiritual Dimension of various aspects of life. We have already looked at such topics as singleness, suffering, sexuality, etc. The subject today is work. Is there a Spiritual Dimension to what we do in our daily occupations? While I will focus my comments on the kind of things we normally associate with having a job, these concepts will also apply to many other occupations of life. Your work is whatever occupies your time each day, whether you are paid for what you do or not. Whether you are a homemaker, a student, an artist or a young mother at home with little children, even if you are self-employed or retired, this will have an application in your life.

It might be a new notion to you that the typical job has any Spiritual Dimension. But where else other than the workplace do you hear the name of God mentioned so often, or see most of the Ten Commandments violated regularly?

There is much that could be said about work, especially from a Christian point of view. But, in the brief time that we have today, I will point out only a few of the many foundational spiritual issues that are related to work.

When I agreed to give this talk, I was not exactly pleased with my work situation (and I was the President!). My first thought each morning on getting to the office was, "How soon can I leave?" I remember seeing the book, *Your Work Matters to God*, in a Christian bookstore and thinking, "That's great. But why doesn't it matter to me?" God was gracious enough to "arrange" this opportunity to speak to help give me the answers I needed. I eventually made a job change just last month, so the issues I will be discussing here today are relevant and timely.

American society, and this is especially true for the Bay Area, places a high degree of importance on work. Recently, a man from the Czech Republic said to me, "In Europe, people have a life outside of their work, but here, 'who you are is what you do.'" Our business cards define us. Between jobs, I have carried a business card with just my name and address on it. I was always a little uncomfortable handing those out. Even I wasn't sure of who I was without a job title.

So our job title largely defines us in our culture. The question that arises then is, how successful are you in your career? Are you getting ahead? A young man who worked for me told me he was unhappy because he wasn't "getting ahead." When I asked him what that meant to him, he said he would let me know later. He would have to ask his wife. She had been telling him that he wasn't "getting ahead"!

The push to "get ahead" leads to a stressful work and home life in Silicon Valley. Pamela Pettler tries to help us see this in ourselves in her book, *The Joy of Stress*. With tongue in cheek, she writes about the supposed "benefits" of stress, and suggests how we can increase stress in our lives:

A True Story

One day in late 1969, in the research library of the University of California at Berkeley, a young man went berserk. He ran through the library, shouting hysterically at his astonished fellow students, "Stop! Stop! You're getting ahead of me!"

He was arrested. But what was his crime, really? *Being in the wrong decade*. As we all know, the sixties era, and its childish preoccupation with peace, good sex and battered VW buses, was little more than a black mark, a shameful demerit in the History of Stress.

Now, of course, in the stress-filled eighties, this concept of "getting ahead of me" has regained its rightful place of importance. In fact, it is one of the basic precepts of stress.

Simply stated, *people are getting ahead of you*. All the time.

While you're at your desk, people working out in the gym are getting ahead of you.

While you're at the gym, your coworkers are getting ahead of you.

If a friend gets a promotion at work, she has gotten ahead of you.

If a colleague reads a book you haven't read, he has gotten ahead of you.

The entire U.S. swim team has gotten ahead of you.

While you're reading this book, *everyone* is getting ahead of you.

The beauty of this concept is that it can be applied across the board, anywhere, anytime.

On the road? Drivers of more expensive cars have gotten ahead of you.

Watching TV? All the writers, actors, and technical crews have gotten ahead of you.

At Marine World? *The dolphins* have gotten ahead of you.

Always judge yourself, and your intrinsic moral worth, in terms of specific achievements as compared to others.

Always judge any situation in relation to how much the people involved have gotten ahead of you, and in what ways.

That helps us see the danger of estimating our intrinsic worth by comparing achievements in the work world. But, as Robert Bellah in *Habits of The Heart*, says, "However we define work, it is very close to our sense of self. What we 'do' often translates to what we 'are.'" This is the same conclusion voiced by my Czech friend. If work controls your identity, it will probably control everything else in your life.

So, our occupations do occupy us! And yet, the writer of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes concludes that work is futile:

**My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun (Eccles. 2:10b-11, NIV).**

So my heart began to despair over all my toilsome labor under the sun. For a man may do his work with wisdom, knowledge and skill, and then he must leave all he owns to someone who has not worked for it. This too is meaningless and a great misfortune. What does a man get for all the toil

and anxious striving with which he labors under the sun? All his days his work is pain and grief; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is meaningless (Eccles. 2:20-23).

“Meaninglessness. Nothing gained. A chasing after wind.” Certainly, from what this writer observed, that seems to be the case as far as work is concerned. I have found that to be true in my conversations with others. I have had many breakfast and lunch meetings in which the primary topic was job dissatisfaction, a sense of futility, of a desire for something better, whatever that means.

Even at its best, work can be as absurd as a Dilbert cartoon. At its worst, it can grind you down and make you miserable both while you are at your job and when you are away from it.

Why does work often seem so futile, frustrating and unsatisfying? We need to go back to the beginning to see what went wrong.

2. “In The Beginning...”

If I were to ask you where we should turn to find the “beginning” of work in the Bible, you might suggest Genesis 3, as a consequence of the entrance of sin into the world. While that did affect the meaning of work as we now know it, we have to go further back, to Gen. 2:15, to find the introduction of work. Take note, men! Adam had to work even before Eve’s entrance into his life!

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Gen. 2:15, NIV).

Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it (Gen. 2:15, NASB).

This is Adam’s job description. It is a picture of what God originally intended work to be.

Adam is to “cultivate” and “keep” the garden. The first term, translated “cultivate,” is a common word. It is most often translated “serve,” although at times it is rendered “work” or even “worship.” “Serve” is the characteristic I want to focus on here. The second term, “keep,” means “to keep” or “watch” or “preserve.” In the NASB, the word is most often translated “keep,” and at times “careful.” It has the biblical sense of “stewardship.” As the NIV says, Adam was to “take care of” the garden which was not his.

I hesitate to introduce the word “steward” here, because we may have lost that concept in our culture. We tend to think of a steward as a sort of glorified butler. But until recent times, a steward was a responsible individual who was fully empowered to act on behalf of his employer. It may be hard to imagine today, but back then people did not have wire transfer of money, fax machines, or even e-mail! To be able to do business or manage your affairs from a distance you needed someone who could act on your behalf. Maybe our closest equivalents are the agents that represent American companies in other countries, or perhaps the idea of a power of attorney.

The role of a steward was common in biblical society. In Luke 16, Jesus told the parable of the steward who changed the amounts owed to his employer. Much to our surprise, the employer did not punish the steward, or even have him make restitution. He commended him! This is hard for us to understand, but it shows the power and autonomy of the steward and his position of trust. He was no glorified butler!

So at its best, we see that work, in its God-given original form, involved these two aspects of serving and stewardship. We are to be “servants” (responsible to...) and “stewards” (responsible for...). Adam was to be a steward of God’s earthly riches, responsible to serve in the garden. (Later we will see how these roles reappear in the New Testament.)

But after sin arrived, the whole structure of the external world

changed—and work changed as well. Here is God’s pronouncement:

3. “What went wrong?” (First Spiritual Dimension)

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’

“Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food

until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken;

for dust you are

and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:17-19, NIV).

Here we find the judgment that resulted from the sinful choice of men and women. Henceforth, work would be accompanied by “painful toil.” Notice that God does not curse work, but, rather, it is the ground that is cursed. And now what would have been a “joy” will require sweat and frustration, pain and sorrow to be productive. Does this sound like your job?

This word translated “toil” is used only three times in the Bible. Two of those usages are here in Genesis 3. This is a powerful word that means more than physical pain (although it includes that); it also has the idea of emotional pain, grief, and sorrow. It is the same word used in Gen. 3:16, where the woman is told that childbirth will be accompanied by “pain.” Painful toil accompanies work. Mothers can understand this painful toil, this double pain, both physical and emotional, that accompanies childbearing (and child raising). The only other occasion this word is used is in Gen. 5:29, where Lamech says of his new son Noah, “He will comfort us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the Lord has cursed.”

The ancients had a better idea of what was going on around them than we do. They knew the world had changed. Our culture has lost that knowledge. Francis Schaeffer makes the point well: “...there is not a total unbroken continuity back to the way the world originally was...this is very important to the explanation of evil in the world. But it is not only that. It is one way to understand the distinction between the naturalistic, non-Christian answers and the Christian answer. The distinction is that as I look about me I know I live in an abnormal world.”

We must recognize that, from the biblical point of view, everything has changed. Not only our work, but our relationships with each other have been affected, and our relationship with God as well. This is not the way it could have been or will be. God had something much better available to us. But he also gave us free choice, and we took Plan B.

While the reference to “thorns and thistles” may be metaphorical to you, unless you are a gardener or farmer, this image means a lot to me. I grew up in a little town in rural Wisconsin. In the summer time, before I was old enough to get a real job, I could always make a little money by going down to the center of town early in the morning. A truck would come by there at 6 o’clock and pick up teenagers who wanted to work for the day. The job was to weed an immense field of mint plants by hand. I was put at the end of a row about a half mile long, and I had to get on my knees and go down that row pulling weeds. The only way to tell a mint plant from a weed was that mint had a square stem. The plants are quite fragile, so this work could not be done mechanically. Gloves were useless. Every so often I would grab a nettle plant. Talk about “thorns and thistles”! I was paid 40 cents an hour for this work. I know what you are thinking, “That must have been worth a lot more way back then.” But even “back then,” 40 cents an hour was not very much.

The point of all this is that now we can see that work is inherently frustrating and unsatisfying; and that it will be accompanied by “toil,” this special kind of grief and sorrow. With that in mind we need to ask if there can be any Spiritual Dimension to work. Does God have a purpose for allowing us to be in this situation? He does. As we have seen in the past weeks, as in many other areas of life, God’s purpose here is redemptive. We may seek to find our ultimate fulfillment in work (or in other activities), but if we cannot, we may eventually be driven to seek the Creator and Redeemer of Life—God himself. Work, your job, no matter how great it is now, will not, indeed cannot, provide you with ultimate satisfaction and fulfillment. Only a relationship with God can do that.

You might think, “If only I were the boss it would be better.” I have been the President or CEO of four companies in the past 15 years, and I can speak from experience that being “in charge” can greatly increase the frustration and futility of work. Yes, if you were the boss things would be different, but these basic issues would be unchanged.

This is the first Spiritual Dimension of work. Remember this tomorrow as the frustration builds, as you experience “painful toil” on the job. God has something better in store for you. He is willing to allow the futility of your work today to cause you to seek him.

4. Practical Value of Work/Blessing of a Job

At this point you may be thinking, “OK, so work is ultimately futile. But I have the distinct feeling that it would be better for me to show up on the job on Monday morning than not to!” On a practical level, having a job is better than not having one. Work has some value. It can even be a blessing. A paycheck with your name on it is a pleasant thing to receive.

The writer of Ecclesiastes agrees that even in the face of the ultimate futility of work we should not conclude that it is better to be lazy. “The fool folds his hands and ruins himself” (Eccles. 4:5). And as Paul says, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thess. 3:10). Also, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim. 5:8, NASB).

There is much practical value to work, including:

- Work allows us to “eat” (i.e. to live and to provide for our family).
- Work allows us to help others.
- Work allows us to be creative.
- Work puts us into situations that develop our character.

Our pastor, John Hanneman, spends much of his time with the “TwentySomethings” who are just entering the work world. His advice to them about difficult job situations is: “It isn’t wrong to leave a job, but if you are leaving because you just can’t stand it, because you can’t get along with the people, it may well indicate that you need to stay. It is when you get to the place that you don’t need to leave that you are free. Maybe God is doing something in your life as a result of this particular job. If you leave with the lessons not completed, you will just face the same thing somewhere else.”

For these and other reasons we can see that work can actually be a gift from God.

5. A Biblical Perspective of Work (Second Spiritual Dimension)

What should be our attitude with regard to work? Paul describes the biblical perspective that points to another Spiritual Dimension of work.

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey

them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him (Eph. 6:5-9).

The point of all this is that you are not working for the approval of others but for the Lord himself. Notice Paul’s emphasis, “as you would obey Christ,” “like servants of Christ,” “as if you were serving the Lord.” Think about what this means. When you work just for the approval of others it *does* matter who is watching, it *does* matter who gets the credit. We *do* get caught up in comparisons and people pleasing for selfish reasons.

The question for us is: In what do we place our identity? A title? A salary? A stock option? If our identity is based on our relationship with God, we will have a very different attitude about our work. As Paul says, we will work with “fear and trembling” (NASB), and with sincerity of heart. Our work will be characterized by humility and integrity. We will “fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen” (2 Cor. 4:18).

We will work:

- As servants of Jesus, doing the will of God from the heart, not with manipulative people-pleasing or in fear of the boss.
- Rendering service with good will.
- Knowing it is the Lord who will reward us (with the only reward that will matter).

If this sounds strange it is because it is so *rare* in the work place. Some years ago when I worked in a large company, I remember a young woman who was serious about her relationship with the Lord. Humbly and with great integrity she served those around her. Her godly spirit was a fragrance in that place. She was not concerned with position or power so she was free to “render service as to the Lord.” As for me, I was too preoccupied with my job title and the value of my stock options to serve anyone but myself. I learned from that woman that if your identity is based on a relationship with Jesus, you will have “freedom” at work. You will be free to serve in difficult, unrewarding or unnoticed situations, to ask those important but often unasked questions like, “Is this true? Is this right? Is this really what we promised the customer?” I once sat through a long business meeting during which the focus was on increasing the value of our shares on the stock market. After a few hours I mentioned the dreaded “C” word, “Customer.” I asked, “Why not see if we can be successful by considering the needs of our customers? What do they want? What have we promised?”

The right perspective will result in our having great freedom on the job. As a matter of fact, I was “given” my freedom from that job shortly after asking those questions!

Some people feel that the purpose for a job is having a platform for evangelism. But, as we saw earlier, work is far more than just a platform. And evangelism is far more than just words. Francis of Assisi said, “Preach the gospel constantly and, if necessary, use words.” Your values make a statement at work whether you intend that or not. You are already “preaching” some kind of message at work. Is it consistent with your desire to follow Jesus and to find your identity in your relationship with God? If not, your co-workers will see right past the most carefully crafted evangelistic formulations.

As we noted, before the Fall, Adam’s work was to be a steward of God’s earthly riches and to serve God by serving the garden. Today, on this side of the cross, after Jesus has paid the price to redeem us, we learn that from God’s point of view we continue to be “*steward servants*.” We are to be stewards of God’s spiri-

tual riches, and to serve God by serving one another. This is what Paul says in 1 Cor. 4:1 (NASB): “Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”

The apostle also says, in Galatians 5:13, “do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”

And 1 Peter 4:10 (NASB): “As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

Having a biblical attitude about work and a clear understanding that by working “as if you were serving the Lord” (by being a steward of your spiritual gifts and by serving others), means that you will be willing to take on assignments that no one else will consider. The reality is that much work, whether at home or on the job, is drudgery, to be avoided as much possible. I am quick to say, “Someone has to do it,” then I try to make sure that it is not me.

Here is where we need to be reminded of whom we are serving. If it is another person, we may find excuses to be unavailable, but we are called to serve the Lord wholeheartedly. This has been termed “The Splendor of the Ordinary.” Hudson Taylor, the missionary to China in the 1800’s, said, “A little thing is a little thing, but faithfulness in a little thing is a big thing.” The best example of this in our time, Mother Teresa, said, “I don’t do big things. I do small things with big love.” Mother Teresa and Hudson Taylor could live with an attitude like that because they got their identity from their relationship with God, not from any accomplishment or title that the world values.

Paul summarizes this second Spiritual Dimension of work with these words:

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving (Col. 3:23-24).

That is the attitude that we are called to have at work.

6. “Dark Night of the Soul”

While listening to Judy Squier last week, I began to think about my own work-related “Dark Night of the Soul.” I know exactly when and where that took place. It was in mid-1995, on an airplane ride from Chicago to San Jose. I had been CEO of a company in the early 90’s which had been sold and so I “retired” at the end of 1994. I spent a few delightful months relaxing, enjoying time with my youngest son and taking some long bicycle rides. When I decided to go back to work, I quickly found a position that I thought would be just right for me, with a small local company that had a larger parent company in Chicago. I met with the recruiter and a manager here. Everything went well and soon I was on my way to Chicago to meet with the senior managers of the parent company. I expected to get a job offer.

I had been given an agenda with an impressive list of managers to meet. The first person on the list came into the small interview room, and within minutes I knew that something was

wrong. He barely looked at my resume, seemed disinterested, and excused himself in less than 15 minutes. I sat alone for awhile. Finally, another man, not on the interview list, entered the room. He asked a few more questions, but after ten minutes he said that my interview session was over. All the others on the list were unexpectedly occupied, and I was free to leave. They called the airline and got me on an earlier flight, and shortly I was standing in the lobby waiting for a taxi. I had expected to have a job offer when I left that day; now all I had was a voucher for a taxi ride! I had a four-hour plane trip to take this up with the Lord.

Here was something completely beyond my control. When difficult situations had arisen in the past, things like no orders, no money for payroll, key people quitting, etc., I always felt there was something that I could do to solve the problem. That is why this experience was so painful. There was nothing that I could do except take it to the Lord.

By the time that I got off the plane, God had graciously reminded me that nothing important had changed. Jesus had died for me, and I had trusted in that fact. God was still real, and still able, and this setback had not put me beyond his reach to care for me.

Does that mean I was immediately at peace about this situation, and now I am “happy, happy, happy all the day”? No. Even though it is three years later it still hurts to remember that day, although now I can more readily put God’s perspective alongside that pain.

7. Summary/Conclusion

We have discussed two Spiritual Dimensions of work. The first is that work is inherently unsatisfying, but God can use work to cause us to seek something better—a relationship with him. Even if we have a great job, God does not want us to get stuck there. He does not want us to be like a child on Christmas morning who plays with the wrapping and never gets around to opening the gift. He has something better for us.

The second Spiritual Dimension is that followers of Jesus can have a different attitude about work. We can work as servants of the Lord and as stewards of what he has provided. On Thursday we will celebrate Thanksgiving. This is a good opportunity to remind ourselves of the things God has provided and for which we are stewards. This attitude about work is actually a question of identity. It requires us to place our identity in our relationship with God, and to trust in his power and leading on a day by day, moment by moment basis.

The world around us asks, “What do you do?” and “How successful are you?” Henri Nouwen has well said, “The question is not:...How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus?...In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal.”

My prayer for each of us is that we will be that kind of person: in love with Jesus and listening to the heart of God, at work and in every situation.

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FEASTING WITH GOD

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

Catalog No. 1186

Exodus 24:1-11

Fifteenth Message

Bernard Bell

November 29th, 1998

Ten days ago, I was reminiscing with one of my sisters about our first Thanksgiving dinner. I was nine years old at the time, and we were at a mission boarding school high in the mountains of central Malaysia. Somehow the school obtained a real live turkey. For two months, this turkey was kept in the middle of the playground, in a pen constructed of wood and chicken wire. It became something of a school pet. But there came the day when it was gone, only to reappear on our dinner plates. I remember my mixed emotions: there was the novelty of eating turkey for the first time, but also the realization of where it had come from. For sixteen years, that remained my only experience of Thanksgiving.

But I did not grow up deprived of feasts. I grew up as a missionary kid in Thailand, where feasting is an important part of life, as it is in most so-called traditional societies. We were surrounded by wedding feasts, funeral feasts, feasts marking the entrance of a son into the Buddhist monastery, feasts for earning merit in the Buddhist system, and so on. The major feast that we participated in was held each Christmas, when the staff of the mission hospital in the small town would arrange a huge feast for all the hospital staff and their families. I still have far better memories of that Thai food than of any turkey I've ever eaten.

Though feasting no longer plays the important role in the West that it does in more "primitive" societies, the tradition of the feast survives at Thanksgiving. Hours are spent in the kitchen preparing the meal. The table is set in festive array. Families gather and we all sit down to a long, leisurely meal.

This message is the last in our series examining the spirituality of daily life. John Hanneman began the series for us with three messages on the parable of the prodigal son, a parable which concludes with a feast. Indeed John entitled the second of his messages "Joining the Party," and invited us to take communion as a sign of doing just that. To draw this series to a close and to mark Thanksgiving, I thought it appropriate to speak on the topic of feasting, and to once again invite you to feast at the communion table.

I take my initial text from a section of Scripture that I feel is too little known. We are familiar with the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20, but most people don't know the context in which those commandments are set. I will be looking at the first eleven verses of chapter 24, but before we start on that chapter it is important that we note the setting.

The book of Exodus opens with the Israelites in slavery in Egypt. God instructed Moses to confront Pharaoh with the demand, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me." Six times Moses challenged Pharaoh with those words (7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Though God was moved to compassion by the suffering of his people, it was not primarily to make them happy that God delivered them. God saves us not to give us health, wealth and prosperity, but to make us his worshipers. This is the same thing that Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well: "a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father

seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24).

Having delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, the Lord brought them on a three-month journey through the wilderness, to Mount Sinai. Exodus 19:1 records their arrival at Sinai. There they camped in front of the mountain, and prepared to meet their God. Then occurred one of the most awesome scenes in the whole of Scripture, as described in Exod 19:16-19,

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. (Exod 19:16-19, NIV)

Astounding though the physical events were, it was the theological event that was the most astonishing. God had come down to earth to meet with an entire nation. Prior to this, God had occasionally revealed himself to individuals, but this revelation to an entire people was a major new development in the progress of redemption. Fellowship had been re-established between God and humanity. It is against this backdrop of restored fellowship that God then gives the Ten Commandments, in 20:1-17, followed by the case laws of chapters 21-23.

Though the Lord had brought his people to worship him, he could only be worshipped from afar. Though God had come down to earth, he was not fully accessible to the people. Indeed the people were so terrified that they wanted to maintain their distance. Atop the mountain was a holy God. At the base of the mountain was an unholy people. The two could not meet face-to-face, so Moses engaged in an ancient form of shuttle diplomacy, moving back and forth between the two parties. In chapter 19, he made three round trips up and down the mountain. After the Ten Commandments were given, Moses approached the thick darkness where God was (20:21), while the people remained at a distance. From within this cloud God addressed Moses, giving him the laws recorded in chapters 21-23.

Now we are ready to read chapter 24.

Then he said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him." (Exod 24:1-2)

After the Lord has finished giving the laws, he summons Moses to come up the mountain and to bring with him some of the Israelite leaders. He is to bring his brother Aaron, and Aaron's two eldest sons, Nadab and Abihu. He is also to

bring seventy of the elders, the number seventy indicating that they are representative of the whole. This party is to come part-way up the mountain, and there, at a distance, worship the Lord, while Moses alone approaches the Lord.

But before Moses can come up the mountain he must go back to the people to fetch the leaders. Verse 3,

When Moses went and told the people all the LORD's words and laws, they responded with one voice, "Everything the LORD has said we will do." Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey."

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." (24:3-8)

Moses returns to the people and recites for them what the Lord has told him from out of the thick darkness. He writes these words down in a scroll, described in verse seven as the Book of the Covenant. This scroll later becomes Exodus 20:22-23:33. The people are confident that they can do everything which God commands them. But the best intentions of the people are not sufficient to seal the covenant between God and mankind. For the covenant to be ratified it is necessary that blood be shed.

Accordingly, Moses rises early and builds an altar, surrounded by twelve stone pillars, representing the tribes of Israel. Since the priesthood has not yet been established, he summons young men to make sacrificial offerings to the Lord. Moses collects the blood from all these animals, gathers it in bowls, and then sprinkles it upon both the altar and the people, proclaiming, "This is the blood of the covenant." This act of sprinkling the sacrificial blood seals the covenant, which is really a peace treaty between God and his people. Note that it is the blood, not the people's pledge of obedience, that makes the treaty.

Now that the covenant between God and his people has been solemnized, the leaders are able to venture up the mountain. Verse 9,

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (24:9-11)

These are extraordinary verses, among the most extraordinary verses in the entire Old Testament. The first extraordinary thing is that these seventy-four people saw God. You might ask how this is possible, since just a few chapters later the Lord tells Moses, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod 33:20). On that occasion, Moses was privileged with seeing the back of God (33:23). Here in 24:10, presumably the leaders did not see the face of God. Indeed it seems they saw only his feet.

How do you describe the indescribable? These leaders

were confronted with that problem. The nearest they could come to describing God is describing the pavement under his feet. It looked something like sapphire, blue as the sky on the clearest blue day. When Ezekiel had a vision of God, he described "what looked like an expanse, sparkling like ice and awesome" (Ezek 1:22), and above this expanse was "what looked like a throne of sapphire" (1:26). When John, the author of Revelation, had a vision into heaven, he saw before the throne "what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal" (Rev 4:6). Such are the attempts of men to describe the overwhelming radiance of God's presence.

We would expect that when the Israelite leaders are confronted with this radiance, they would be overwhelmed and fall down in worship. This was the response of Moses (Exod 34:8), of Isaiah (Isa 6:5), of Ezekiel (Ezek 1:28), of the creatures whom John saw around the throne (Rev 4:10; 5:8, 14). But here in Exodus 24:11, the leaders do not do that. Instead of falling down to worship, they sit down to a meal. This is even more extraordinary than them seeing God. The meal that they enjoyed was a fellowship meal in God's presence, a meal which sealed the covenant in an even more profound way than did the blood thrown upon the altar and upon the people.

Let's pause awhile and consider the act of eating. We live in an age that strives for ever greater efficiency and productivity. Yet eating is inefficient. The food we eat has to be raised and then processed. Once inside us it has to be broken down in our alimentary canal until it's in a form that the body can ingest. How much more efficient it would be if the scientists would develop a set of pills that gave us everything we would need. Think of all the land that would become available if none were needed for the growing of crops or the raising of livestock. Think of all the illnesses and diseases that would be prevented. But the great majority of us rebel against this vision of life. Astronauts eat in a highly efficient manner, taking their food from tubes, but for all the sophistication of NASA's food scientists, what every astronaut craves is "real food" such as pizza.

There is something more to eating than just providing our bodies with the nourishment they need to keep functioning. Eating a meal is a metaphor for something more profound. To cite an example familiar here in Silicon Valley, at a "power lunch," the actual consumption of food is of minimal significance.

The metaphor of eating begins in Eden. When God created Adam, he placed him in the garden and told him he could freely eat of the great variety of trees. Only one tree was forbidden. With the bounty of the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had all the food they needed. Furthermore, since this was God's garden in which he walked in the cool of the day, they ate in the presence of the Lord. But once they ate of the one forbidden fruit they were expelled from this feast and subjected to eating their food in sorrow. Because they transgressed in the realm of eating, God afflicted them in the realm of eating:

"Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,' Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return." (Gen 3:17-19)

Though this curse is punishment, it also establishes a long-

ing for the day when we will once again sit down to a banquet that is not provided through our painful toil but through the beneficence of God, a banquet which is eaten in the presence of the Lord.

This is the banquet to which these seventy-four leaders sit down part-way up Mount Sinai. God solemnizes his reconciliation to humanity by having these leaders eat a meal in his presence. Now at this point the rest of the people are at the foot of the mountain, eating their manna, which in itself is not the fruit of their own toil, but bread from heaven. But God will presently extend to the whole nation this invitation to eat in his presence.

In Deuteronomy, the Lord through Moses gives the Israelites extensive instructions on the subject of feasting. In chapter 16, he instructs the Israelites on how to celebrate the three major festivals in the Israelite calendar, the festivals of Passover, Weeks (later called Pentecost), and Tabernacles. For each of these three festivals the Israelites were to come to the place the Lord would choose as a dwelling for his name, later identified as Jerusalem. There they were to offer their sacrifices, and then eat and rejoice in the presence of the Lord. The Lord is emphatic that eating and rejoicing in his presence is the climactic element of these festivals.

In chapters 12 and 14, the Lord gives instructions on what the Israelites are to do with their tithes and free will offerings. Reading for example from chapter 14,

Be sure to set aside a tenth of all that your fields produce each year. Eat the tithe of your grain, new wine and oil, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose as a dwelling for his Name, so that you may learn to revere the LORD your God always. But if that place is too distant and you have been blessed by the LORD your God and cannot carry your tithe (because the place where the LORD will choose to put his Name is so far away), then exchange your tithe for silver, and take the silver with you and go to the place the LORD your God will choose. Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God and rejoice. And do not neglect the Levites living in your towns, for they have no allotment or inheritance of their own. (Deut 14:22-27)

Does that alter your understanding of life for the Israelites in the Old Testament? God redeemed the Israelites from slavery so that they might worship him and have major parties in his presence. From any utilitarian or pragmatic point of view, the use of the tithe for feasting was a complete waste. The money could have built such majestic buildings and run such impressive programs. But, no, every year the Israelites were to blow the whole lot on a party. And they were to ensure that the Levites, who had no income of their own, could join the party.

Here at PBC Cupertino, we operate in what most churches would consider an inadequate facility. Our auditorium is so small that we now have to have three services. We have an inadequate parking lot. We rent an office suite a mile away because we don't have any office space here. There would be certain advantages to having a larger, more modern facility. But the elders consider it far more important that your tithes be spent on people than on buildings. This commitment, plus the fact that we don't carry any debt on this facility, allows us to employ more pastors—those modern-day Levites with no income of their own—than would be normal for a church this size. It allows us to operate a need fund so that we can re-

spond to the needs of the family and ensure that we all participate in the party.

It is against this backdrop of eating and rejoicing in the presence of God that we should read the stories of Jesus' table fellowship. A large percentage of the stories about Jesus and of the stories that he told concern food and eating. Jesus scandalized the religious leaders of the day by his choice of dinner companions. Indeed, one commentator on Luke has remarked that Jesus was killed because of the way he ate.¹

Earlier in the service, we read the account of the dinner party that Levi, also called Matthew, threw for Jesus (Mark 2:13-22). As a tax collector, Matthew would have been hated by most Jews as a collaborator with the Romans and as a man who profited from the misfortune of others. Yet Jesus accepted Matthew's invitation to a dinner party in his house. Furthermore, he had the disciples come as well. Most of these disciples were fishermen and they would have known Matthew as that despicable fellow sitting at the tax booth between Bethsaida and Capernaum, extorting money from his fellow countrymen. Imagine how these disciples felt when Jesus told them that they were all going to dinner at Matthew's house.

By having table fellowship with Matthew and his tax collector buddies, Jesus was making some strong statements. He was telling these sinners that they were welcome to eat and rejoice in the presence of God. He was telling his disciples to welcome Matthew as an equal. And he was telling the religious leaders that even tax collectors and sinners, nay, especially tax collectors and sinners, were welcome at the Messianic banquet foretold by Isaiah, who wrote,

**On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—
the best of meats and the finest of wines. (Isa 25:6)**

Meanwhile, these religious leaders stood outside watching and working themselves into a frenzy over the complete lack of decorum. But that is just the point. The Christian life is not a life of decorum. It is not about having your act together, about washing your hands the right way, eating the right food, and having the right dinner guests. At the heart of the gospel lies the scandalous invitation extended to sinners to come and dine at God's table.

When missionaries first went into central Thailand in 1952, there were no Christians in the whole region. My parents arrived there soon afterwards: my mother in 1954, my father in 1955. For several years, my mother helped run leprosy clinics. The missionaries would go to a village, set up under a tree, and invite lepers to come and have their wounds treated. In those days, leprosy was a dreaded disease, and lepers were cast out of their villages. As the missionaries touched these lepers whom no one else would touch, they told them the gospel stories, the stories of Jesus touching lepers, and dining with outcasts. In central Thailand, two churches came into being: a so-called "leprosy" church, and a "well" church.

For many years when I was a child, my father taught a residential Bible school for these "leprosy" Christians. Numerically, the "leprosy" church was stronger than the "well" church, and spiritually, it was much stronger. Physically, the "leprosy" Christians were not well, but they had much greater spiritual vitality than the "well" Christians, so much so that for many years the "leprosy" church resisted encouragement to unite with the "well" church for fear that their spiritual vitality would be diluted. What led the two churches to finally unite, in the early 1980s, was the realization that the children of the "leprosy" Christians were "well" children. Even today,

the leader of the Central Thailand Association of Churches is one of those “leprosy” Christians who responded to the news that lepers are welcome at God’s banquet table.

Spread before us here we have a banquet table. Every year at Passover, the Israelites feasted and rejoiced in the presence of God. Jesus ate the Passover meal with his disciples, but he transformed it by giving it new significance. When God delivered his people from bondage in Egypt, he brought them to a mountain where he made a covenant with them and invited the leaders to sit down to a meal in his presence. God has delivered us from bondage, and has brought us to a mountain, as described in Hebrews 12,

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.”

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:18-24)

We have been sprinkled with the blood of the covenant and are invited to sit down to a fellowship meal in God’s presence. The food we eat has been provided by God himself: it is nothing less than the body and blood of his dear Son.

It is not a cocktail party that God invites you to. At a cocktail party, people mill around, eating finger food and engaging in small talk. If you’re an introvert like me, it’s easy to feel left out. Cocktail parties are not kind to the little people. We watch as others gather around the exciting people, the extroverts who are “the life and soul of the party.” If we manage to strike up a conversation with someone, we catch them glancing over our shoulder to see if there’s someone more interesting to talk with. Maybe you approach the Christian life like a cocktail party: it’s all right until something more exciting comes along. If this is your attitude, then you will never appreciate the Lord’s table for the extraordinary thing that it is.

It is to a dinner party that God invites you. A host invites you to a dinner party because he wants you. In his marvelous book, *The Supper of the Lamb*, Robert Farrar Capon writes of the dinner party,

it is an honest attempt to create a company, not a crowd. Persons matter at the table. We sit in real and estimable places marked with the most precious and intimate device we have: our names. Harry sits next to Martha not because he wandered to her side out of whim or loneliness but because, in his host’s loving regard, he is Harry and she is Martha, and that is where they belong ... assignment to place by name is the host’s announcement that he cares... To ask a man to break bread with you is to extend friendship, to proclaim in love that you want not his, but him.²

In February, I threw a surprise fortieth birthday party for a friend. His wife suggested that we go to a restaurant, but I

wanted to throw a dinner party at home so that we could enjoy table fellowship in an unhurried manner, free from the many distractions of a restaurant. Eddie came in the mid-afternoon, ostensibly so I could help him with his laptop computer. As we worked away in my study, the dinner guests quietly arrived in the living room. When we emerged from the study, the surprise was complete. Nine of us sat down to dinner, and spent three hours around the table. We feasted on food and on stories, but, above all, we celebrated Eddie’s very being. By inviting you to his table, God celebrates your being.

But there is still more to this feast. The Lord’s Supper is but a picture of the real feast that will take place in the future. Here’s Capon again,

For all its greatness...the created order cries out for further greatness still. The most splendid dinner, the most exquisite food, the most gratifying company, arouse more appetites than they satisfy. They do not slake man’s thirst for being; they whet it beyond all bounds... This is the inconsolable heartburn, the lifelong disquietude of having been made in the image of God.³

God invites you to feast at this table until he brings you to feast at the table spread for celebrating your marriage to his dear Son. We were made for more than this earth. Thanksgiving dinner and each other dinner feast to which we sit down is a declaration of the extravagance of being, of the fact that eating is about much more than just nutrition. It is about celebration and welcome, of being accepted for who one is. This meal to which we are about to sit down may not seem like much. Symbols are like that if you can’t see the reality to which they point. Take the symbols, eat and drink, and see this as the extravagant act it is: a feast at God’s banquet table.

**O God, you are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you,
in a dry and weary land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because your love is better than life,
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.**
(Psalm 63:1-5)

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1. R. J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist, 1985) 70; quoted in Jerome H. Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. J. H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 361.

2. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb* (New York: Smithmark, 1996 [1967]), 170, 172.

3. Capon, *Supper*, 188-190.