

Program Transcripts

For February 2017



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY[®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

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Topics subject to change without notice

FEBRUARY 5 – AT YOUR WORD

Does God speak seriously? Many today have dismissed the teaching of God for what they personally think or what society feels is right. Should we follow the Lord Jesus Christ, when He speaks something that goes against human thinking?

FEBRUARY 12 – OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

What do you do when you're tempted to sin? Are we slaves to sin, or has Christ provided a way for us to overcome our sins? In this message, we will learn how we can conquer the temptations that plague us.

FEBRUARY 19 – MATURITY IN CHRIST

When we first become Christians, we are babes in Christ. The Lord Jesus, however, expects to grow spiritually to maturity. What does a mature Christian look like, and how does he differ from the immature Christian?

FEBRUARY 26 – RELIGIOUS CONFUSION

The *Encyclopedia of American Religions* lists 2,300 religions. With so many religions, people must be terribly confused these days. How can we really know what is true about God?

At Your Word

Does God speak seriously? Does He mean what He says? We're going to compare God's way with human reasoning. The Lord Jesus promised His disciples, "If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31-32). We want the truth; we don't want to be deceived by speculation or human tradition. We want the truth that makes us free, and the Lord Jesus is the trusted source. He never misleads with half-truths or false promises. He doesn't play games or change the rules. You can trust Him to speak straight and to lead you to righteousness.

The great question of life is not whether God created the world in six days, or whether Jesus really lived, or whether there is life after death. The great question of life is whether we will listen when God speaks. Will we believe Him or will we trust our own judgment? If we listen to God, He will answer the other questions for us. If we're unwilling to listen to God, we'll live in uncertainty, blindly searching for a clear conscience and eternal life and yet missing the path. Wouldn't it be sad to miss your opportunity to know the truth? Don't let that opportunity slip away. Proverbs 23:23 says, "Buy truth, and do not sell it, Get wisdom and instruction and understanding."

When it comes to eternal life, ignorance is not bliss. To ignore the way of the Lord is to lose His grace, His favor, and His blessing. To ignore the way of the Lord is to abandon hope for heaven and living with God eternally. Don't miss the blessing of God; open your heart and your ears to hear God's teaching.

Our reading today comes from the Gospel According to Luke 5:1-6. "Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around Him and listening to the word of God, He was standing by the lake of Gennesaret; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake; but the fishermen had gotten out of them and were washing their nets. And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon's, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat down and began teaching the people from the boat. When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, 'Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.' Simon answered and said, 'Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets.' When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break."

This event in the life of Jesus took place on the Lake of Gennesaret, sometimes known as the Sea of Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, or the Sea of Chinneroth. Two empty boats were standing by the shore. The owners had returned from a night of fishing; they had caught nothing and were washing their nets. Jesus entered one of the boats, and Simon pushed the boat off the land a little. Jesus sat down and began teaching, using the boat for his pulpit.

After teaching, Jesus said, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." You can imagine how they must have felt after a long night's work with nothing to show for it. Simon Peter answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." Even though they didn't feel like it, even though Jesus wasn't a professional fisherman like they were, and even though they were ready to quit, they did what Jesus said. They put out their nets and they enclosed a great number of fish, to the point that their nets were breaking and they needed help to draw in the fish. Both boats were so full of fish that they began to sink. Astonished, Peter fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (verse 8).

Peter, by trusting in his own experience and judgment, listened to Jesus with doubts and questions. He had to see for himself what God could do. When Jesus' Words proved true beyond any expectations, Simon Peter recognized his sin in failing to trust the Lord. Luke, guided by the Holy Spirit, recorded this true story for our learning and our profit. We would do well to learn from this story.

First, we need to know that God's instructions do not arise from human philosophy or reason. The time for fishing had passed. To continue casting their nets now that it was sunny was foolish to their human standpoint. I'm sure that they could have made some informed arguments against following the Lord's instructions. This is not the first time the Lord commanded something that defies human reason.

Do you recall the Lord's admonition through Moses that the children of Israel sprinkle blood on their doorposts to avoid the tenth plague? From a human viewpoint, one may ask what one has to do with the other. Do you recall Moses stretching out his rod over the waters to bring about the parting of the Red Sea? Do you recall God's command to Moses to strike the rock to bring about water? Do you recall God telling Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole, which could cure everyone who looked on it? Human philosophy would never connect the command with the promise. Do you recall Joshua and Israel marching around Jericho for seven days in order to see the walls of Jericho fall? Surely, this was not a military plan that humans would design! Do you recall Naaman, the leper, dipping himself seven times in the Jordan River to cure his leprosy? When Elisha told him to do this, Naaman got angry. He thought Elisha would call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the place, and cure the leper. Dipping in a muddy river was offensive to his human pride and his wisdom.

In the wisdom of this world, the cross is foolishness. First Corinthians 1:18-29 says, "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God."

God is the source of all spiritual truth; it is His place alone to say what His conditions are in order to receive the blessings of His promises. Human philosophy may help us understand some things, but listening to God is necessary. God didn't ask the counsel of the wisest men, but has at all times revealed His divine wisdom in dealing with men. Romans 11:33-36 says, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the LORD,

who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Second, we need to remember human experience does not measure up to Divine wisdom. Many people today reject anything and everything that doesn't correspond to their own experience. But our Lord's power and wisdom cannot be measured by human experience. We cannot reject something simply because we don't understand it. Many can't accept the virgin birth or the resurrection because they can't understand how these things could happen. They say such things are against nature. They've never seen a man raised from the dead, so they don't believe it can happen. However, the believer accepts whatever the Word of God says, even though he has never experienced such things. He realizes that truth can come from more sources than his five senses.

Some people refuse to obey the commandments of the Lord because they think these commandments are foolish or because they go against the social grain of our day. Frankly, we need the attitude that Peter showed. He said, “Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets.” (Luke 5:5). Peter sacrificed his own practical knowledge and skill as a fisherman to listen to the authoritative Word of Jesus. We too need to say, “I will do as You say....”

When we truly love the Lord and believe in Him, we want to know what His will is for our lives. So, we're happy to ask, “Lord, what will you have me to do?” We're ready and eager to do the will of the Lord, because we know that His wisdom and power work with what He teaches and instructs us to do. When the Lord teaches us His will, we don't consult with others. We listen to the One who bore the cross, the One who forgives! We don't want other voices to confuse and mislead us.

Third, we need to see the difference between listening to the Lord and refusing to listen. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed God's Word when Israel refused to hear. He said, “To whom shall I speak and give warning That they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed And they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; They have no delight in it” (Jeremiah 6:10). Their refusal to listen to God led them to follow idolatry and to be enslaved to sin.

Jeremiah wept over how far the children of Israel had fallen away. They became greedy and cheated one another; they worshiped other gods; and they scorned the Word of God. Jeremiah asked, “Were they ashamed because of the abomination that they've done? They were not even ashamed at all; They didn't even know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; And at the time that I punish them, They shall be cast down,” says the LORD” (Jeremiah 6:15).

Though the Lord wanted to give them every opportunity to repent, the people refused. Jeremiah said, “Thus says the LORD, ‘Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, Where the good way is, and walk in it; And you will find rest for your souls.’ But they said, ‘We will not walk in it’” (Jeremiah 6:16). Oh, they were stubborn and rebellious people. Jeremiah's prophecy that Babylon would come in and destroy them came to be true. The Jews suffered greatly because they would not do what the Lord says.

When the Lord teaches us what to do to be saved, how the church is to meet, how to worship, how to live pure lives, and how to serve others, are we listening? When the

Scriptures teach that we are no longer under the old covenant but are under the new covenant, are we listening? When the Lord teaches us about the sanctity of life and marriage, are we listening? When the Lord teaches us that some behavior is sinful, are we going to debate with Him? Are we going to treat the Lord as if He doesn't understand our culture, as if He were naïve and has no right to govern our lives?

When it comes to our salvation, instead of debating with the Lord who created us, shouldn't we say, "I will do as you say"? If the Lord commands us as penitent believers to be baptized in His name, immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, why should we argue with Him? When it comes to how we worship, shouldn't we take into account what pleases the Lord? You can't entertain people to the point that they will deny themselves and take up a cross. Conversion to Christ requires more than pop psychology, preaching, and an entertainment form of worship. You can't get people to repent of their sins if you never preach against sin. Sadly, some preaching has become so weak and ineffective that many don't even know their behavior is sinful. In some cases, they've never been taught the Word of God; they've been deceived with a blend of selective spirituality and cultural dogma! Teachers have led them to believe that they will face no consequences for their sins. The wisdom of men sounds reasonable, but it's not the Lord's way. It's a broad way that leads to destruction, always has been; it's a house that's built on sand.

If we intend to enjoy the promises and blessings of God, then let's listen to His instructions in the Word of God. When God makes a promise with a condition to be met, He never grants the blessing until the condition is met. The blessings of God come after obedience, not before. God cleansed Naaman after he dipped seven times; God healed the Israelites of their serpent bites after they looked upon the bronze serpent; God gave Israel water after Moses struck the rock; and God saves us after we obey His teaching. My friend, have you obeyed?

When we obey the Lord, the Lord blesses us far beyond our expectations. When Peter let down the net, "they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break." Peter never imagined that they would catch so many fish. They had to get their partners to come and help them! They filled up both boats, so that the boats were beginning to sink! Our God is "able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us" (Ephesians 3:20). When we obey the Lord in repentance and baptism, God grants us the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). But, He gives us far more than forgiveness. He causes us to be born again (John 3:5). He adds us to the number in His church (Acts 2:47). God makes us His child (Galatians 3:26-27). He saves us by the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).

Someone says "Well, I don't understand how being immersed in water saves us; I thought the blood of Christ saves us." The cleansing blood washes away our sins when we are baptized in water. God does the cleansing. Romans 6:3 says, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" Baptism unites us with Christ in His death. Baptism is the time when our souls come in contact with the death of Christ. Romans 6:6 says, "knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin." This takes place when we are baptized. We have been buried and raised with Him in baptism, and that's when we begin our walk in newness of life. My friend, the blessing follows the obedience. And so, I'm asking you, won't you be obedient to the Lord today?

Overcoming Temptation

What do you do when you're tempted to sin? Today, we're going to learn some ways to overcome temptation. Life challenges us every day, but God's Word provides answers to those challenges. Life's problems can overwhelm us, but God's Word can guide us. In a dark world filled with sin, we need the Lord's help! Psalm 119:105 says, "Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path." It leads us in the paths of righteousness and away from the dangers that can destroy us. This is why we listen and study the Word of God.

From the moment that we're old enough to understand right from wrong, truth from error, and good from evil, we face the temptation to please our selfish desires rather than to please God. Temptations come in many forms, and what affects one person may not affect another. Some are tempted to tell a lie, some to steal, some to take revenge, some to gossip. When we're afraid or hurting, we may be tempted to get angry or to strike out. When we're greedy or jealous, we may be tempted to take what is not ours or to put others down. The devil strives to make sin attractive, but sin is offensive to God.

With the Lord's help, you can overcome Satan's schemes and his tricks to lead you astray. With the Lord's help, you can find strength to overcome sin. With the Lord's help, you can control your desires and live a righteous life. Don't doubt that people can change. With the Lord's help, you can become a new person who lives in righteousness. You can't change the past, but you can change your future. With the Lord's help, you can rise above your past and be the person you always wanted to be!

Our reading today comes from the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians 10:6-13. "Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, 'THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, AND STOOD UP TO PLAY.' Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

The apostle John describes the three appeals that Satan uses to draw us toward the world and away from God. First John 2:15-17 says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever." Every temptation comes in one or more of these three forms. The devil uses our desires to lead us astray from God.

James warned, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it's full-grown, brings forth death" (James 1:13-15).

Satan appealed to the flesh, the eyes, and pride when he tempted Eve to eat of the fruit of

the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Genesis tells how Satan tried to get Eve to doubt what God said and by appealing to her desires. "Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, "You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" The serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'" (Genesis 3:1-5).

The devil first tries to get people to question God. He wants to make them think God is trying to withhold some blessing from them. Once Satan gets people to be self-centered rather than believing in God, he's able to tell them lies that contradict God. Jesus told some Jews who did not believe in Him, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me" (John 8:44-45).

The devil urges people to trust in their own judgment rather than listen to God. Of course, trusting your own judgment will lead you to give in to your desires. Satan tempted Jesus to use His powers to make food. You remember the Bible says, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. And when the tempter came to Him, he said, 'If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.' But He answered and said, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God"' (Matthew 4:1-4).

Jesus said no to the devil, because Jesus knew His relationship to God was important! God helps us overcome temptation by teaching us who we are in Christ. We don't belong to ourselves but to Him, to Christ, who purchased us with His blood. God also helps us by giving us His Word to teach us how to live and how to avoid sin. The more we rely on God's teaching, the more we're able to avoid temptation.

Solomon advised his son: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil" (Proverbs 3:5-7). The Word of God, the Bible, can give you strength and can help you through those struggles that you face with the devil and with the world. The Word protects us in times of trouble. The psalmist said, "Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Psalm 119:11).

Sometimes the devil appeals to the sinful desires that are inside of us. The Lord Jesus warned us to be careful what we look at. Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:27-29).

Society glamorizes sex. The desire for sex has led many young men and women away from God into sin. The consequences of sin are always greater than people think. Sexual immorality can lead to an unwanted pregnancy or a disease. People who get involved in

sexual activities outside of marriage often feel great guilt for what they've done and wished that they had never violated God's will.

Christians must be careful what they look at. They should turn their eyes away from the things that tempt them sexually, so that they may remain pure in their thoughts. Young men who love the Lord learn to control their eyes and avoid temptation. Young women need to consider how they dress, so that they might not tempt young men or send the wrong message. We all must be careful not to tempt others to sin. A young woman who dresses in a sexually provocative way shouldn't be shocked that boys will see her as willing to be sexy. Young women who profess godliness should dress modestly (1 Timothy 2:9-10). When people, and that's either male or female, dress modestly, they can avoid many embarrassing situations and temptations. The devil loves to appeal to the eye; and that's why every Christian should pay attention to how he or she appears to others. Our clothing and appearance reveal much about our character.

The apostle Paul lived in Corinth in the first century, and it was a place where people practiced a lot of sexual immorality. So, he advised them, "Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; and therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20). When temptation confronts you and you're inclined to yield because no one else seems to be around, remember that God is always watching. Proverbs 15:3 says, "The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good."

Learning to flee in times of temptation is a great strategy for avoiding sin. Those who linger around sin usually get caught up in it. Paul later warned the Corinthians, "Do not be deceived: Evil company corrupts good habits" (1 Corinthians 15:33). So stay away from the things that will harm you spiritually. Paul told Timothy, "Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2:22).

Whether the devil appeals to the eye, to the flesh, or to pride, he is actually appealing to our selfishness. Our selfish desires can lead us away from God. Luke tells how the devil tempted Jesus: "Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, 'All this authority I will give to You, and their glory; for this has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.' And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve"' (Luke 4:5-8).

Jesus knew whom He should worship and serve, and it wasn't the devil! In spite of all the treasures and power that He might have received in ruling the world, Jesus knew that He would be a slave to Satan if he had given in to the temptation. Jesus knew that there was only One person to worship and serve, and that's the Father in heaven.

Sin has a high price! Jesus knew that when the pleasure of sin wore off, they had to deal with the consequences of sin. Romans 6:23 says, "the wages of sin is death." Ananias and Sapphira decided that they wanted to keep back part of what they had promised God; so they lied to God in order to possess some money. They never expected that their decision would cost them their lives (Acts 5:1-10 tells the story).

Judas betrayed Christ for thirty pieces of silver, but it filled him with guilt and regret. He went away and hanged himself according to Matthew 27:3-5. We must never assume that sin is trivial. Sin was so serious that Jesus bore the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:19-21).

My friend, take heart! If the temptation is too strong for us, God will make us the way of escape. 1 Corinthians 10:13 says, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." When you feel the temptation is too strong for you, start looking for the way of escape. As a loving Father, the God of heaven wants to spare us from getting into situations that we can't handle.

The apostle Paul recalled the time that he appeared before Caesar and did not know whether he would live or die: he said, "At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen" (2 Timothy 4:16-18)! We need confidence that the Lord will also deliver us from every evil circumstance beyond our control. He will indeed strengthen us or give us the way of escape so that we may remain close to Him as His children.

You don't have to face temptation alone. You have the help of God through His Word and through prayer. The Bible stands as God's written Word! Ask, and it shall be given you. You have the support of fellow Christians who want to live godly lives, too. You have the hope and promise of heaven. With the Lord's help, you can overcome! Sometimes God allows us to go through trials to test and strengthen us. He's not being mean to us but is helping us to mature and to be able to stand on our feet as Christians. First Peter 5:8-10 says: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

God always helps His children through their difficulties. When the trial is over, the God of all grace perfects, establishes, strengthens, and settles us. Wherever you are in life, whatever you're going through, and whatever struggle you face, remember that nothing will ever be bigger than what God and you can handle.

With God's instructions, you can change! Romans 6:17-18 says, "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became the slaves of righteousness." You don't have to stay a slave of sin! Obey the Lord, and He will set you free.

Put your faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. With love in your heart, turn from sin in repentance. Confess the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and be baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. When you're baptized, the blood of Christ will wash away your sins, cause you to be born again with newness of life, and make you a child of God! Oh, do it today!

Maturity in Christ

When we first become Christians, we have a lot of spiritual growing to do. What does a spiritually mature Christian look like? We want to please God in every respect, and the Word of God teaches us how! The Word tells us how to develop ourselves spiritually and how to treat other people. It sheds light on the truth, so human traditions and sin won't blind us. Because of the Scriptures, we can avoid the pitfalls and survive the storms. It challenges us to make us brighter and stronger. It gives goals to stretch our minds and our behaviors. We're blessed beyond measure to possess a copy of God's Holy Word!

All four of our children are now grown. Jackie and I watched them mature into responsible and loving people, and we're proud of them. We raised them to be adults and to pursue lives of their own. We didn't want them to be childish. We wanted our daughters to be like Jesus, who matured as God desired. Luke 2:52 says, "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." He grew mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially. Loving and godly parents want that for their children. We did our best to meet their needs to help them mature properly. We also felt the need to train them spiritually.

Likewise, Paul urgently wanted to help young Christians grow to spiritual maturity in Christ. He said, "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). We must do more than just become Christians; we must become complete in Christ, fully functioning as servants of the Lord.

Our reading today comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews 5:11-14. "Concerning him (that is, Melchizedek) we have much to say, and it's hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." A worthy exhortation. No one knows for sure who wrote the inspired book of Hebrews, but the book calls itself a "word of exhortation"; it's written to spiritually weak Christians. The author describes those to whom he's writing as people drifting from the faith, neglectful, dull of hearing, immature, and sluggish. Some had begun forsaking the assembling of the church; others were in danger of unbelief. Some who should have become teachers needed training in elementary principles. Like little children, they could only digest the most basic teaching and couldn't handle a more advanced understanding of the truth.

He worried that the deceitfulness of sin had hardened their hearts and caused them to cast away their confidence in Christ. He realized that false teaching had led many astray. For these reasons, he worried that they might grow bitter and come short of the grace of God. The writer warns that they might miss the eternal rest in heaven. Sadly, they could not renew some to repentance.

The book of Hebrews could easily describe many today. People own Bibles but they don't read them carefully. They've become sluggish and dull of hearing. Interestingly, they think they know God's will but they're easily led astray by pop psychology, human traditions, false prophets, and their own feelings. They're vulnerable to error, because they are spiritually

immature and not grounded in the truth. Millions have stopped attending church, and some have ceased to believe in Jesus Christ. Because much of Christianity is so weak, people have lost sight of what is the true faith in Christ, and what it looks like.

I want to describe the mature Christian. First, mature Christians know God and they take Him seriously. Proverbs 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." Fearing the Lord means that one has a profound respect for God, knowing that we will one day face the judgment seat of Christ. Since our eternity is at stake, we take the Lord seriously. We take His commandments seriously and His promises. We respect His warnings and believe what He says is true. We know He is both compassionate to those who love and serve Him and just in condemning those who reject Him.

John 1:18 says that Jesus explains God the Father to us. We know what God is like because we can see God the Father in the character and the behavior of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it's something that He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (John 5:19). We know God is holy, loving, and compassionate by looking at Jesus. We know the Father is firm and just by looking at Jesus. We know God wants us to be saved because of Jesus on the cross; and we know God's power through Jesus being resurrected. We know God keeps His promises because Jesus kept His. Yes, Jesus explains the Father to us.

Second, mature Christians are not naïve. Many people want to paint Christianity as naïve and gullible, but mature Christians by practice have their "senses trained to discern good and evil." Mature Christians know right from wrong, good from evil, and truth from error. They've seen the destructive nature of evil and immorality; they know God's Word proves true. Some naïve Christians really don't believe what God says. Proverbs 14:15 says, "The naïve believes everything, But the sensible man considers his steps." The naïve are presumptuous and willing to act foolishly, but mature Christians are cautious. Proverbs 22:3 says, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, But the naïve go on, and are punished for it." Mature Christians have taken time to think through the moral and spiritual challenges. They see reasons to say no to temptation and sin, while others walk right into trouble. Proverbs 14:18 says, "The naïve inherit foolishness, But the sensible are crowned with knowledge." The difference between being naïve and prudent matter.

Galatians 6:7-8 warns, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Don't deceive yourself into thinking that sin will not harm you. It always does. The naïve or simple-minded person thinks he can sin and get away with it.

Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs to his son to help him grow wise and avoid the traps of life. In the first chapter, Solomon has wisdom crying out in the street! Proverbs 1:22-33 says: "How long, O naïve ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing, And fools hate knowledge? Turn to my reproof, Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make my words known to you. Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention; And you neglected all my counsel, And did not want my reproof; I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes, When your dread comes like a storm, And your calamity comes like a whirlwind,

When distress and anguish come upon you. Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me diligently but they will not find me, Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the Lord. They would not accept my counsel, They spurned all my reproof. So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, And shall be satiated with their own devices. For the waywardness of the naive will kill them, And the complacency of fools will destroy them. But he who listens to me shall live securely, And will be at ease from the dread of evil.”

How much better it would be for us to open our hearts and follow God’s teaching rather than thinking that we can do as we please! Sin has consequences; and that’s why God teaches us to refuse to sin. God is a loving Father who wants to protect us from evil.

Third, mature Christians fix their eyes on Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12:1-3 says, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” They know the source of their blessings and hope; they realize that the way is often difficult and can be hostile. In spite of all, they serve with joy looking to the future. Just as Jesus died for sinners, so the Lord expects us to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute us. Mature Christians follow Christ.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus means standing firm in His teaching, His commands, and His promises. It means taking Him and His Word seriously. Colossians 2:6-7 says, “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.”

Fourth, mature Christians show patience when they face difficult days. Christians show their maturity by how they react to troubles and heartaches. Immature people get angry and rant about their problems. Immature people despise correction. Immature people blame others for their faults and fail to learn from their mistakes. They don’t realize that the struggles of life may be the path to their growth and blessing.

The apostle Paul opened his life to us, and he helped us to understand a valuable lesson. Paul said, “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). God’s grace is sufficient for us, even when we suffer and struggle. It’s a great moment in life when we realize how dependent we are on God! It’s a great moment in life when we see how His grace sustains us through our weaknesses.

Mature Christians keep a check on their attitudes. They find the silver lining in the storms. They see beyond the present! James 1:2-4 says, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you

encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” God allows us to be tested to help us grow and develop spiritually. The test of our faith produces the ability to endure, and endurance helps us to become complete. Without the testing, we wouldn’t grow strong in faith.

Fifth, mature Christians obey the Lord. They obey out of love and respect for God. First John 2:3-6 says, “And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but doesn’t keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. And by this we know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” Many people talk about loving God, but those who genuinely love God keep his Word! They live up to their claims. Love is perfected, matured, by obeying the will of God.

I’ve known folks who will boast of their faith and love but live like the world. You cannot find them when you need them. James said, “But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God” (James 2:20-23). Abraham didn’t have a dead faith. Faith that will not obey is worthless. Faith is perfected and matured by obeying the will of God.

Why does this matter? It matters because God expects His people to mature and to grow to be like Jesus. The Lord Jesus commands us to live holy lives, to hold fast to the truth, and to love others the way that He has loved us. How would you describe yourself? Are you a mature Christian who loves and serves the Lord with all your heart and soul? We are all a work in progress! Hopefully, we’re growing stronger in faith and love each day. Philippians 2:12-13 reminds us, “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” God will help us mature; and He’s at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure. The apostle Paul wanted to be right with God and to attain the resurrection; that is, to go to heaven and live with God eternally.

And so he said, “Not that I have already obtained it (that is the resurrection) or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect (that is mature), have this attitude” (Philippians 3:11-15). My friend, are you pressing on to that high calling?

You can become a Christian by placing your trust in the Lord Jesus, repenting of your sins, confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and by being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. God expects more than merely becoming a Christian! He expects you to serve Him lovingly and faithfully for the rest of your life. He wants you to love Him with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. That’s the ultimate goal of every Christian!

Religious Confusion

The *Encyclopedia of American Religions* lists 2,300 religions. Religion in America is terribly confused and diverse these days. So how can you know what's really true about God? The Bible provides the way out of confusion and into religious truth. This Word has stood the test of time; and the more you know about the Bible, the more you'll treasure what it has to say.

We live in the most religiously diverse culture of all time. You might wonder why you should choose Christianity. There are so many different kinds of Christianity, you might wonder why you should choose one church over another. Religious division creates doubt, cynicism, arguments, broken families, and broken friendships. So, we ask, "How can we find our way out of all the confusion?"

Our nation is like the ancient city of Athens. In the first century, Athens was full of temples devoted to pagan deities. The Greek writer Pausanius said that the Athenians worshiped the gods more than any others and had more religion than any other city. But we too are a religiously diverse culture. There are 635 major denominations of Christianity and countless independent groups. This division is confusing; and it's no wonder the fastest growing religious group in America is the one that replies, "no religion." The number of people who don't go to church has grown from 39 million in 1991 to 75 million people today. This diversity has brought nothing but division and confusion. We believe there is something better and something real from God. And, it's right where it's always been.

Our reading today comes from Paul's Second Letter to Timothy 3:1-7. "But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these. For among them are those who enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." That's a great warning for us today as well as for those in the time of Timothy.

In Acts 17:16, the Bible says, "Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols." It should provoke the heart of any faithful Christian today to see so much religious confusion. There are so many voices saying so many different things, and that must leave us trying to figure out what is the truth. What Paul did in a religiously divided world was simply to preach the gospel of Christ.

Acts 17:17-18 says, "So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. Some said, 'What does this babbling wish to say?' Others said, 'He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities'—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection."

Epicurus, who lived 300 years before Christ, held that pleasure was the chief goal of life, and wanted a life free from pain, passions, superstitions, fears, and anxiety about death. He believed in the gods but thought they didn't really care, so he pursued pleasure. A contemporary, Zeno, founded the Stoics and emphasized man's reason and self-sufficiency. For him, God was everywhere; it was the "World-soul." Neither the Stoics nor the Epicureans ever understood the love of God!

Some of them disputed with Paul and called him a "babbling." Babblers to them were a

ne'er do well and they put forth other people's ideas as their own and didn't understand what they were talking about. Paul was not a babblor; the babblers were the Athenians who spent all their time talking and listening, hoping to hear something new.

So, they invited Paul to speak at Mars Hill. Acts 17:22-25 says: "So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.'"

Many today think they know God. But, the God they think they know and the true God of the Bible are often quite different. People confuse themselves when they believe their perceptions of God rather than what the Bible actually reveals about God. Their perceived God is quite different from the God who created them. Many want a God of their own liking who always agrees with them rather than the God of Scripture. Popular religion would have you believe that God so loves everyone and is so full of grace that He accepts us just as we are, even if we never repent of our sins. But the God of the Bible expects people to repent.

Some say that "sin" is an outdated word that no longer people should use. They imagine using the words "sin" or "sinner" is offensive and keeps people from coming to Jesus. The Bible, however, says that Jesus "came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15), and he "died for our sins, according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Sin is not merely breaking a law; it is breaking God's law! Sin breaks God's law and God's heart. The gospel says Jesus bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Peter 2:24). With God, the idea of sin is very personal. God hates sin and He wants to transform our lives. Paul, at Athens, said, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). God demands repentance and will judge people in righteousness at the end. You can be sure of it, because God raised Jesus from the dead! Any preacher who doesn't ask you to repent is not a gospel preacher.

In the paganism of old, everyone had their own god. They chose the god that they liked. The idols of Greece couldn't talk; they didn't have a Bible, and asked nothing of their followers. Idolatry was often associated with sexual immorality, and paganism allowed people to live in sin. That's very convenient to serve a god that expects nothing out of you. As long as you didn't mess with their god, they didn't mess with yours. Everyone could believe as he liked and would leave each other alone. That's very similar to our culture of "live and let live."

But, this is why Paul was called a trouble-maker by the Athenians; and frankly, Biblical Christianity is thought to be troublemakers today. It doesn't live and let live. Jesus asks for people to believe that He is the Messiah, the only way to heaven. Jesus demands that people repent and live righteous lives according to His teaching. Jesus asks each of us to take up our cross and follow Him. Some will mock this, just as they did when Paul preached. They would rather have a Christianity that costs nothing and asks nothing. That's why much of popular Christianity is in such a mess!

When Paul spoke of the resurrection, some mocked him but others said, “we’re going to hear you again about this” (Acts 17:32). Some of those men joined Paul and believed on the Lord. Much of the differences in people come from attitude. Some people are willing to listen, while others mock and make fun of Christianity. Some think they know more than God knows and they sit in judgment of the Bible itself. They don’t realize that one day the Word of Christ will judge them and decide their eternal destiny (John 12:48). Will you tell God, or will God tell you what is right and wrong?

People say, “Put twelve people in a room and read to them a passage of Scripture and you’ll have twelve interpretations of that passage.” I’ve heard that a lot, but is it really true? Does the Bible itself cause the confusion, or is it that we tend to place our own thinking above the Bible? The Bible was written to be understood as we’ve talked about before, but God also wants us to understand it alike. Like a textbook in school, the Bible was written for groups of people to learn and use. Why would God give us a Bible that we could not understand and then tell us that He will judge on the basis of that book? God is in the business of saving not confusing.

Paul said to the Ephesians, “When you read this (speaking about what he had written), you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:4-6). In the New Testament, a mystery was not an unsolvable riddle but something hidden from one generation but revealed to another. Jesus made some promises to us that can help us through this confusion.

The Lord Jesus said, “If you abide in my word, you are truly disciples of mine, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). The way to know the truth is to study the Bible, to stay in the Word, and not abandon it for human opinions or human traditions. Only the Word of God can set us free from sin, free from darkness, and free from the confusion of our day. The Bible will bring light to a confused and decaying society. We need the Bible now more than ever! We ought to be grateful that the Lord loves us enough to tell us the truth!

Jesus also promised the apostles, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13). We not only can know the truth, we can know the whole truth that leads to life and godliness in the revealed Word of God. We’re not lacking anything that God intended for us. The Bible is all-sufficient and can equip us for every good work. Second Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Don’t settle for opinions or assumptions. Don’t settle for human traditions that stand outside the Bible. Go to the Bible. If you can’t find it taught in Scripture, don’t believe it or practice it.

Why is there so much religious confusion? People stopped listening to God and His revealed Word and started trusting their own thinking. When you get away from the Bible, you can count on confusion. When you have confusion, people end up doing what they please. They live without God’s teaching, and they ignore the morality taught in the Word of God. When people are morally and doctrinally confused, they lose sight of what matters and they make up their own rules. Pagan Athens was like that, and I fear much of our world today is

going in the same direction. More than ever we need to return to the Bible!

The Bible contains a message ensured by God that will never change. You can count on its promises and its warnings. You can believe every word of it as a sure foundation of truth. First Peter 1:23-25 says, “for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ And this is the word which was preached to you.” The everlasting gospel message is your true hope, your sure anchor, and your only opportunity for eternal life.

Paul said, “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33). God never intended to throw this world into chaos by having hundreds of religions and hundreds of ways to live. God wants everybody to unite under His teaching. On the other hand, the devil is always at work, telling lies, making spiritual counterfeits, and encouraging new religions. The devil will do anything to lead people away from the Truth. He makes every effort to discredit God, to discredit the Lord Jesus, to discredit the Bible, to deny miracles, and to suggest that man evolved rather than was created. He wants men to have their own gods rather than to submit to the one true and living God.

The Bible says, “but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence” (1 Peter 3:15). Jesus is the one and only Lord, but have you made Him Lord in your heart? The way to overcome confusion is to recognize the uniqueness of Jesus—unique in His birth, unique in prophecy, unique in His miracles, and unique in being raised from the dead. Only His blood can cleanse your sins. Oh, let's follow the Lord Jesus!

Many in this land once found their moral and theological values in the teaching of Jesus Christ found in the New Testament. The farther we drift from those values, the more confusion and chaos we'll see. We need a great revival of Bible study and prayer. We'll never overcome our moral and spiritual decay until we restore our love and respect for God and His Word. We need the Lord today more than ever. We need to study God's Word so that we won't be fooled by counterfeit religions and false doctrines. Let's turn to the one source that we can always trust! We must go back to the Bible as our constant companion to help us know the truth and to live righteously.

Following the Bible only makes Christians. We intend to follow the teaching of Jesus Christ in Scripture, and nothing else. If you add other doctrines from other sources, you'll be spiritually confused and will corrupt your faith. You can become just a Christian today.

You do this by faith in Jesus Christ. Without faith, you can't please God (Hebrews 11:6). You must repent of your sins. You can't live on in sin and still please God. You must also be baptized into Christ by an immersion in water for the forgiveness of your sins. When you're baptized into the death of Christ, the blood of Jesus will wash away your sins (Romans 6:3).

Perhaps you're a member of the church of Christ who has strayed from God, turned to sin, and quit the church. My friend, will you return to God? If you fall away from God, you'll find only confusion and chaos. You can't thumb your nose at God without consequences. Repent of your sins and ask God's forgiveness. Today is the best day to follow the Lord and to worship with the church of Christ. We're here to help you know God and to love Him.