

Program Transcripts

For September 2017



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY [®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

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Topics subject to change without notice

SEPTEMBER 3 – THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Just because something is free doesn't mean it's cheap. Grace is free, but the cost of discipleship is another matter. The Lord Jesus paid a dear price for our souls, and we ought to take our faith seriously.

SEPTEMBER 10 – IS GOD ACTIVE TODAY?

Some think God is absent in our world today; others say God is dead. The Bible teaches God is indeed alive and active in the world today and is working for our good. We can be thankful to have a God who cares for us.

SEPTEMBER 17 – THE CHURCH IS NECESSARY

Many people think you can be a good Christian without being a member of any church. Is church necessary? We're going to explore what God says about the church in Scripture and see how God thinks about the church.

SEPTEMBER 24 – MORAL EXCELLENCE

God has asked us to make every effort to add to our faith seven virtues. These qualities will keep us from stumbling and will richly provide us an entrance into the eternal kingdom in heaven. We need these seven virtues.

The Cost of Discipleship

Just because something is free doesn't mean it's cheap. Grace is free, but the cost of discipleship is another matter. To find the difference between authentic Christianity and some watered-down forms of Christianity, study the Bible. To know what God desires from you, study every day. God's Word provides everything that we need to have eternal life with God. We need God's Word!

Many today want a convenient Christianity that asks little of them. They go to church sometimes, read their Bible occasionally, and pray when it's convenient. They give token amounts to the Lord but never really learn to sacrifice. They want God to commit fully to them, but they don't want to make a commitment that costs very much. They want a Christianity that allows them to believe whatever they like and live however they want.

They want a Christianity that never embarrasses them in front of their non-Christian friends. They don't want a strict morality or to talk about sin. They don't want to be taught anything that's different from the popular opinions of the day. Sadly, there are plenty of preachers willing to give them a watered-down faith and a gospel that asks nothing. While salvation is a free gift, being a disciple of Christ requires the denial of self and bearing a cross.

The word disciple describes a student who strives to imitate his teacher. A disciple of Jesus wants to become just like Him in every way. The essence of discipleship isn't a self-help plan for losing weight, or getting rich, or finding happiness. Discipleship is about putting God's kingdom and His righteousness first in our lives. It's about Christ living in us through humble service and pure lives. It's about commitment to the one true way of salvation.

It was 37 years ago that Mack Lyon began this program on one station in Ada, Oklahoma. Today we go throughout the United States and in many other countries. Thanks for being loyal viewers of this program as we begin our 38th year.

Our scripture reading today comes from the Gospel According to Luke 14:25-30.

Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Have you considered how valuable your soul is? Your most valuable possession is your soul. It's the one thing that you will always have. When you die, you won't take anything into eternity with you, except your soul. You can't take your possessions, your money, your house, or your car. You can only take your soul. Because of this, we must take, all of us, time to think about our souls.

Romans 6:23 says, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Your salvation was a gift from God; it's free. God invites you to take hold of eternal life freely. The Bible says, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost" (Revelation 22:17). Just because something is free doesn't

mean it's cheap.

When Jackie and I married, the preacher, Dewayne Thomas, asked, "Who gives this woman to this man in marriage?" Her father and mother gave her to me to be my wife. She was indeed a gift of God, and the human I love the most. She's a gift, and I treasure her. But she's not cheap. The Lord gave Jackie and me our four precious daughters. Psalm 127:3 says, "children are a gift of the LORD"; but some say it will cost as much as \$300,000 to raise a child through college. Just because something is free doesn't mean it's cheap.

God had to pay a price for your soul to be saved. He sacrificed His own Son to atone for your sins. First John 4:9-10 says, "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That big word "propitiation" means that Jesus had to die on a cross as an atoning sacrifice so that you could be forgiven of your sins and reconciled to God.

I can't imagine the anguish the Father felt in sacrificing His Son Jesus to such a horrible death. As a loving parent, I cannot see my children suffer without having anguish in my own heart. I hurt when they hurt. I'm just an imperfect man, but God is perfect in love and holiness. If I suffer over my children's pain, think how much more so does our Father in heaven.

The Father sacrificed His Son, and the Son also paid the ultimate price to save your soul and mine. First Peter 2:24 says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Jesus bore our sins personally in his body. Sin against Christ is personal, and His loving sacrifice for you is personal. Sin is not merely breaking a law; it's breaking God's law and God's heart.

Jesus gave His head to a crown of thorns. He gave His back to a horrible, life-threatening scourging. They spit on Him and mocked Him. He gave His hands and His feet to nails, and they suspended His body between heaven and earth. In crucifixion, every breath the Lord Jesus took demanded great energy and was excruciatingly painful. He had to pull Himself up by the pierced hands and feet to draw a breath. He hung on the cross for six long hours until at last his heart could take no more. Jesus sacrificed himself for your soul. My friend, your soul's salvation is not cheap!

We shouldn't think that Jesus merely endured physical pain on the cross. The true punishment of the cross came in His bearing the sins of the whole world. He bore real wounds to heal us. Isaiah 53 reminds us that the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all; He received the stroke that was actually due us. When the Father saw the anguish of the Son's soul, His only Son who was a guilt offering, He was satisfied and He justified the transgressors, that's you and me. Second Corinthians 5:21 says the Father "made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." For this great gift of salvation and reconciliation, we owe everything to Him.

Peter said that you were redeemed "not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). We should never, never take our salvation for granted. We thank God every day for the Lord's sacrifice for our sins. His death not only atoned for our sins, it also gave us eternal life. It opened the door for us to live with God in glory as His children. According to Ephesians 1:3 we have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. God has given us an

indescribable gift!

Just because the gift of eternal life is free doesn't mean it's cheap for us either. God expects us to value this gift more highly than anything else. The Lord said, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13:44-46).

The kingdom of heaven is worth sacrificing everything that we are and everything that we own. We should be willing to give up anything and everything so that we might have eternal life and enter the kingdom of heaven. The Lord Jesus said, "So then, none of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33). If I follow the Lord, I can't consider my possessions as more precious than my Lord.

In fact, if a disciple must choose between loving his own life and loving the Lord, he should choose the Lord. The Lord said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). The Lord isn't teaching hate here. He's comparing the love that we must have for God and the love that we must have for our families and ourselves. To be a true disciple, God must come first.

To have eternal life and enter the kingdom of God, we must become disciples of the Lord. The Lord Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master" (Matthew 10:24-25). A disciple studies his master as well as his master's teaching. His task is to become as much like his master as possible. We should become like Jesus in our thinking, in our practices, in our attitudes, and in our efforts to please and glorify the Father.

Some aren't content to follow the Lord or do His will. In Luke 9:23-24, Jesus said to the multitude, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it." If you live on your own terms, fulfilling your own desires, you'll lose out in the end. If you deny yourself and take up your cross daily, you'll find God saving your life and your soul forever.

The cross is necessary to be a disciple. The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). Some people want the crown of life but are unwilling to carry the cross and die to themselves. If you won't bear the cross, then you can't wear the crown. Some want God's grace, but not His ways. They want redemption, but not repentance. You can't hold onto the world and to the Lord at the same time.

Jesus encountered three prospective disciples. Jesus helped each of them to consider the cost. The first is found in Luke 9:57-58: "As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, 'I will follow You wherever You go.' And Jesus said to him, 'The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'" Jesus didn't promise this man health and wealth if he came along. The Lord will meet our physical and spiritual needs, but He's not in the millionaire-making business. We must love God for Himself. We don't follow Him for what we can get out of Him. You cannot serve God and money at the same time.

Second, Luke 9:59-60 records: "And He said to another, 'Follow Me.' But he said, 'Lord,

permit me first to go and bury my father.' But He said to him, 'Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.'" Jesus wanted this man to follow Him, but he hesitated. He had a father in bad health. He wouldn't commit to serve until after his father had died and was buried. How Jesus responded may seem unfeeling at first. It probably shocked this man when He said "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God." Caring for parents in their final days is important, but answering the Lord's call is even more important!

A third man said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home.' But Jesus said to him, 'No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:61-62). Discipleship is for a lifetime. There's no salvation for the one who abandons his faith.

Why have we talked about all this? Because, while God's grace is a gift, He expects those who receive the gift to place the highest value on it. The Lord Jesus said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love" (John 15:8-10). Serving the Lord Jesus causes us to abide in His love and to glorify the Father. The phrase, "abide in My love," is intriguing. It suggests that if we fail or cease to keep the Lord's commandments, then we'll fail or cease to abide in His love.

The Father in Heaven and the Lord Jesus could live anywhere on earth that they wish to live. They enjoy Heaven and the most beautiful places on earth. But think what the Lord says in John 14:23, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." God, the Father, and Jesus, the Christ, choose to make their home with people who love them enough to keep their commandments. If someone looked at your life, would you prove to be a disciple?

The Holy Spirit said, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). To be disciples of our Lord Jesus, we must take the focus of our minds off of the world and put it on the will of God. God's will is good, because God is good. His will teaches us how to live morally, spiritually, and respectfully. God's will is acceptable; it teaches us how to please God and how to be acceptable to others. God's will is perfect or complete; it doesn't lack anything that we need to know to have eternal life.

You'll never regret choosing to be the Lord's disciple. The Lord has the words of eternal life. There's no other path. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Only Jesus has the way to heaven, the spiritual truth we need, and the life that never ends. Serving Him is worth every sacrifice and demands our complete attention. We must be good students of His will, so we please Him always.

To become a Christian, that is a disciple, you must listen to and accept the gospel; you must believe in Jesus Christ; repent of your sins; confess Jesus Christ; and be baptized in His name. Baptism into Christ is an immersion in water. When you're baptized, God washes away your sins according to Acts 22:16. He also adds you to His church (Acts 2:47); He unites you with Christ and gives you new life (Romans 6:4-5); and He makes you His child (Galatians 3:26-27). I hope and pray that you'll become a disciple of Jesus Christ today, and that you'll live faithfully to Him for the rest of your life.

Is God Active Today?

Some think God is absent in our world today; and others say that God is dead. Is God alive and active in the world today and working for our good? We want to know all we can about God, the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ; and the way to know God is through a study of His Word, the Bible. So we go again and again to the Scriptures.

How we view God matters greatly in how we view life and how we understand our purpose and role in this world. An atheist doesn't believe God exists at all. An agnostic says he doesn't know whether God exists, because he thinks God is unknowable. Some believe God got the world going and then just abandoned it. Others have the belief in God that He was relevant in ancient times, but now God is dead. They say we no longer need God.

Several years ago in graduate school, I spent a couple of semesters studying skeptics and atheists. One thing I found was that skepticism and atheism grew more out of an attitude than it did out of the evidence. Atheists and skeptics tended to focus on the disorder and the ugly in life. They seemed to ignore the intelligent order, the beauty, the grandeur, and the wisdom that's so evident in our universe. They were intelligent, but they missed the intelligent design. I'm amazed at how easily people can slip into a very narrow view of life and of God. Some folks choose to close their eyes and their minds to the beauty of God and see only the evil. God is good and actively blesses us every day. Thankfully, we can know Him and what He has done for us to bless us and to give us eternal life.

Our scripture reading today comes from the book of Proverbs 3:5-8. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones." That's a great encouragement to trust in the Lord. Let's pray together. O, Father, may we always trust in You and not lean on our own understanding. May we always acknowledge Your existence and Your presence in our lives. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul said in Ephesians 1:18-19, "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe." God wants our hearts to be open to His power. God's power towards us who believe is greater than we think!

Have you ever had an "aha!" experience—awakening to some great truth that had eluded you up until that time? That's what Paul wanted for the Ephesians. He wanted them to understand what God causes to happen—God is at work! God has great power—and His power works in the lives of His people.

You might ask how God is at work. He is working in a variety of ways. First, God works in the universe. As a prophet of God, King David said, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1). One can hardly look at the beauty, the order, and the wisdom of our universe and not see how wise and powerful God is. The God who makes the sun shine and flowers bloom, the God who regulates times and seasons has such great power and wisdom that it is truly beyond our understanding. Paul proclaimed: "And in the generations gone by He permitted all the

nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:16-17). All that we have, all of our blessings come from God!

Jesus is not only our Creator, He is also the one who keeps this world together. The Bible says, "And He (speaking about Jesus) is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15-17). God's power and wisdom cause our seasons, cause the earth to rotate every 24 hours making night and day, cause the moon to revolve around the earth every 28 days and controlling the tides of the ocean, and cause the earth to go around the sun every 365 and one fourth days determining our year and our seasons. This couldn't just happen on its own; God has been in control.

The Lord Jesus taught us to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). We're blessed to have food to eat each day, food that God provides. Have you ever thought about the power of one seed planted in the ground? One kernel of corn planted in the ground, watered, and fertilized can produce an ear of corn with sixteen rows and 800 kernels. Many cornstalks will have more than one ear! God created that kernel of corn with the information and the ability to reproduce itself in that marvelous way.

God is indeed powerful and wise! The Lord Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he doesn't know how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:27-29). God has been taking care of us in marvelous ways for a very long time.

Second, God is at work in our salvation. God sent His only Son to die on the cross; God through the Holy Spirit inspired men to write the Bible including the gospel, which has the power to save; and Christ built His church, who are the saved. From the beginning, God has been working toward our salvation. The apostle Paul by inspiration said, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:4-9).

The salvation that we enjoy through Christ was expensive. It's the gift of God, and for that we are thankful. Great gifts are never cheap, and our redemption came at a price greater than silver or gold. God sacrificed his Son Jesus, and Jesus sacrificed His body on the cross. We must not take our salvation for granted or treat it lightly as if it were trivial. People who mock the Lord, ignore the cross, and criticize the church are usually people who are unthankful for what God has done to save them. They don't realize what He sacrificed to give them eternal life. The Bible is the message of that life. Without the message of the Bible, we would all be in great peril—without hope and without God in this present world.

The Bible teaches us how to come to Christ, and how the blood of Christ cleanses us, and how we can have new life with Christ. The Bible says, "having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions" (Colossians 2:12-13). It is God who is "at work" in baptism.

In baptism, God unites us with Christ, and washes away our sins, takes away that old man of sin, buries us with Christ, and raises us up from spiritual death to life. In baptism, God adds us to the church and makes us His children. God is very busy working on us in baptism. For this reason, I cannot quite understand why anyone would say baptism is unnecessary for our salvation. Read what the scripture says. Baptism is when God works on us.

God doesn't forget us once we are saved as Christians, once we've been baptized. Every Christian still has weaknesses and still sins. Christians wish they could keep from sinning; they hate it when they sin and they want to stop it afterward. God knows that we're weak but He has provided for our weaknesses. The Bible says, "Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). That's what Jesus is doing right now for us. He is interceding with the Father on our behalf, asking the Father to forgive us and to continue blessing us, even when we have sinned. I am so thankful for the Lord who loves me enough to pray for me.

Third, God is at work answering prayer. The Bible says, "It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; and while they are still speaking, I will hear" (Isaiah 65:24). God wants to hear your prayers. He invites you to pray to Him. The Bible says, "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow" (James 1:17). God loves us enough to hear our prayers and to help us when we need Him. The apostle Paul reminds us, "Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

Fourth, God is busy shaping our lives. He works in us. The Bible says, "For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). God prepares His people to do His work, so we may live for an eternity in heaven with Him. What God is doing in us now prepares us for the life to come. The Bible says, "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" (Philippians 2:12-13). God is shaping our hearts, our attitudes, our will, and our lives to conform to His will, so that we might live with Him always.

God also saved us so that we might be His servants, doing good works and impacting the world for love and righteousness. The Bible says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). So much good is being done in the world; because of the love of God and the teaching of the Bible, Christians feed the hungry, take care of widows and orphans, help unwed mothers, provide help to the lonely and homeless, and point sinners to righteousness. Oh, yes! God is at work through the church.

I saw a book the other day written by a skeptic, called, The God Problem. His subtitle suggested that God never addresses the problem of evil in the Bible. I wondered which Bible he was reading, because it's not the Bible that I've spent my life studying. God knows about our suffering, and the cross of Christ demonstrates God's willingness to suffer for us. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God doesn't stop every event of suffering, but He uses even suffering to work for our good. We don't always understand what God is doing or why; but we know that God loves us and will use every circumstance in our lives, good or bad, pleasing or painful, to work for good in some way. We can trust God!

David, who was inspired of God, said, "Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, And forget none of His benefits; Who pardons all your iniquities; Who heals all your diseases; Who redeems your life from the pit; Who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; Who satisfies your years with good things, So that your youth is renewed like the eagle" (Psalm 103:1-5).

God has been working in our lives a very long time. He isn't hidden or dead; and the Bible reminds us of all the good that God is doing for us and in us. The apostle Paul said, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). God's Word is far from being harmful. It is the source of love and life and good and righteousness. We need the Bible every single day to help us grow spiritually and in character, and to live like God intended. Pray with me. O, Father, we're thankful that You have been so active in our lives through the world You created, through Your answer to prayer, through the things written in Your Word, and through the providence we enjoy. Father, bless us and help us to love You more each day, to be good servant, and to do Your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I join Paul in His prayer: "and I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe" (Ephesians 1:18-19). God can work in your life, IF you let Him. He won't twist your arm; He won't force you to do anything. But if you out of love and obedience, put your life into His hands, God can do amazing things. It's not the power of God that's lacking. It's not the willingness of God to work in our lives that's lacking. What is lacking is our willingness to let God into our lives and into our hearts.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." You must trust Him and let Him work in you. God desires that we believe in Jesus Christ enough to obey Him and trust His promises. Do you?

That starts by trusting Him enough to repent of your sins and confess the name of Christ before others. Christ doesn't want a secret disciple. He wants you to confess with your mouth that He is your Lord and that you believe He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. After you've repented and made that confession, God wants you to be baptized into Christ where God cleanses you with the blood of Jesus and makes you into one of His own children. Won't you do that today? Won't you obey the gospel and put the Lord Jesus Christ first? Will you let God work in your life?

The Church Is Necessary

Many people think you can be a good Christian without being a member of any church. Is church really necessary? Today, we're going to explore what God says about the church, and you can't afford to miss this study!

We know the Lord's way is the best way, the right way, and the holy way of life. The best way to know the Lord's way is to study the Scriptures. They are God's voice to us today. They were true when the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and prophets to write them, and they're true for all time.

When you mention the word "church," people respond in a multitude of ways. Some think of the church as optional. Some think of the church as an institution. Some think the church is made up of prejudiced hypocrites. Some think the church needs reinventing in a style more like the culture of our times. Everyone seems to think they know what the church should be like. Even folks who have never read the Bible or have not entered a church door in many years have an opinion about what the church should be.

You've probably noticed religion in America has changed. Many groups have become religious entertainment venues and others have become like shopping malls. Some think the primary purpose of church is to cater to my wants and desires. We've become self-centered, thinking Jesus ought to be our servant rather than thinking we ought to be His. It's no wonder some see the church as optional and others as a waste of time. Few want to know what Christ envisioned for the church that He built or what place it has in His heart. The Lord never thought of the church as an option; in His eyes, it's necessary.

Our reading today comes from the Book of Acts 20:28-32.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

The Lord Jesus considered the church as necessary. He wants everyone to be a member of His church and to attend worship regularly. The idea that you can be a good Christian and yet not be a member of the church is not from the heart of God. Anyone who takes a close look at the New Testament will see that the church is quite necessary to our relationship with the Lord. The church Jesus built does not belong to you and me. It belongs to the Lord. He built it. After Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord Jesus said, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock (that is, the confession that He was the Christ) I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus took the time to build His church, and not even His death could prevent it.

The church belongs to the Lord, because He purchased it with His own blood. The apostle Paul, by inspiration, told the elders of the church at Ephesus, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). If Jesus loved the church enough to die for it, how can we think so little of it. The church must be precious to the Lord.

The Bible reveals how closely related Christ is to the church in Ephesians 1:22-23: "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." Just as your head is inseparably connected to your body, so Christ is inseparably connected to the church. Just as your body does your will as it is conceived in the brain, so the church does the will of its head, Jesus Christ. The church is the fullness of Christ. We must never separate Christ from His church or the church from Christ.

The church is most precious to the Lord; in fact, He considers the church as His bride. The Bible says, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so 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 (that is, the church) would be holy and blameless" (Ephesians 5:25-27). Jesus has gone to great lengths to bless and to sanctify the church. He wants the church to be radiant with glory. We need to be careful how we think of the church. When people slander the church or make it trivial, they mock and really insult Jesus Christ Himself. They're saying Jesus is foolish to sanctify and glorify the church. If you wish to make a man angry, just slander his wife. Do you think the Lord Jesus will look kindly on anyone who slanders His bride?

I want to distinguish the church that the Lord Jesus calls His bride from what people today think when they hear the word "church." What I am speaking about is the Lord's church described in the New Testament. Many religious groups who call themselves "churches" are not anything like the New Testament church. They differ in name, in organization, in doctrine, in mission, and even in worship. They're often more a reflection of human culture than of what God intended for the church to be. Some groups have so little spiritual value and content it is no wonder people see them as unnecessary.

This difference confuses and causes people to stray from the will of God. More than ever, people need to know the truth revealed in God's Word about the church. They need to think clearly about what God desires rather than be pulled into a false hope by something that calls itself a church but differs greatly from the church that Jesus built as described in the New Testament. The Scriptures clearly make the church Jesus built a necessity for us to attend if we wish to please God.

Why is the church so necessary? There are several reasons. The first is this: the Lord adds the saved to His church. When the Jews at Pentecost heard Peter preach, they were pierced to the heart and they wanted to know what to do. Peter replied that they must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. Acts 2:41 says, "So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls." In verse 47 the Bible says, "And the Lord was adding to their number (that is, to the church) day by day those who were being saved." The Lord adds the saved or the baptized forgiven to His church. Baptism was the time that they were forgiven or saved and when they were added.

When a person is saved, the Lord Himself adds that person to His church. To be in the church means the Lord has saved you. The Scriptures never see a person who is saved as a person who hasn't been baptized or a person who's not in the Lord's church. The apostle Paul told the church at Colossae, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13-14). Just as the Lord grants forgiveness when one repents and is baptized, so

the Lord adds the baptized to His church. The church is the kingdom of Christ!

When John wrote to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation chapter one, he revealed what Christ had done for them. The Bible says: "John to the seven churches that are in Asia: 'Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen'" (Revelation 1:4-6).

When John wrote the seven churches of Asia, he spoke to a people who had come into a kingdom and were priests to God. John taught that "we" Christians "are of God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). There are but two kingdoms, and that's the domain of darkness and the kingdom of His beloved Son. To enter the church is to enter the kingdom of the beloved Son.

The Lord Jesus Himself spoke of the church as a kingdom. The Lord said, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19). Why would the Lord build one thing and then give Peter keys to something else? He doesn't do that. The church is the kingdom of God today.

How do I know that? Think about this. In Acts 20:28 the Lord Jesus purchased the church with His own blood. We have no record anywhere in the New Testament that the blood of Jesus ever purchased anything but the church. The twenty-four elders sang this new song to the Lord Jesus, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth" (Revelation 5:9-10). The same blood did not purchase two different things—the church is that blood-bought kingdom.

Being in the church means that you're blood-bought, but there is no promise of being blood-bought to those outside the church. The church contains the cleansed, but the others outside are not cleansed. The kingdom contains priests to God, but outside there are no priests to God. The Bible says, "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). Being in the Lord's church is vital to our eternal salvation.

Ephesians chapter two contrasts the difference between people who are in the world and outside of Christ from those who come into Christ and His church. The apostle Paul reminds those who came out of paganism at Ephesus of what they had before they became members of the church or body of Christ. He says about them, "remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:12-13).

Then in verses 19 to 22, Paul describes them after they became Christians, after they became members of the church. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household (God's family), 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.” Before, they were strangers without hope and without God. Now, they are God’s family and fellow citizens in God’s kingdom, the church.

The church is vitally necessary because being in the church means that you are a member of God’s family. Paul told Timothy, “but in case I am delayed, 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 Timothy 3:15). In this passage, Paul identified the church as God’s household or family. The children of God are in the church. If you claim to be in God’s family, but then say church membership is unnecessary, my friend, you are confused and may be deceiving yourself.

The very act that puts one into the family of God is the same act that puts one into the church. Compare these two verses. First, Galatians 3:26-27, which says, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Baptism as an act of faith is what makes us children of God. Then second, consider 1 Corinthians 12:13, which says, “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.” This verse says that we were baptized into the body. Ephesians 1:22-23 taught us that the body of Christ is the church. So, God makes one His child, a member of the church, the body of Christ; and He does that, both of those things, through baptism.

When we realize the church is God’s family, the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the saved, and bought by the blood of Jesus, when we realize all those things, we will see why the church is so, so, important in God’s eyes. Being a member of the Lord’s church is not optional. My friend, are you a member of the church that Jesus built? The one that you can read about in the New Testament. I hope you are. If not I hope you will become one.

Many people claim to be members of the church, but they aren’t active members. They’ve ceased to attend church or to support it. By their actions, they’ve actually abandoned the church and in that sense abandoned the Lord. The Bible says, “let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Lord wants us to encourage each other to love and good works, and to not forsake assembling with other Christians. You can’t encourage other Christians to stay faithful if you quit going to church altogether.

I know some of you can’t attend worship because of your health. The Lord understands your situations. But, if you can attend worship yet choose to forsake meeting with the Lord’s church, you’re forsaking the Lord, too. The Lord loves His people and knows His church. If you quit serving Him, He knows it. When you stop attending, you also open the door to temptation of every kind. To stay spiritually healthy, stay in church!

To become a member of the church and to be saved, believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; repent of your sins; confess Jesus as the Christ; and be baptized. When you’re baptized, the blood of Jesus will wash away your sins and cause you to be added to the church. You’ll become a child of God, born again into His family. If you’re a member of the church of Christ and you’ve stopped attending, why not come back to the Lord and to the church. Get right with God!

Moral Excellence

In a world growing more secular and less religious, I wonder if we've lost something precious. What is it? Virtue! Today, we're going to explore the need for virtue. God gives us precious and very great promises in His Word. We don't want to miss a single one of those promises. Considering those promises, we must study the will of God and practice it in our lives. God wants His people to live virtuous lives to demonstrate God's love and holiness to a world that needs to see godliness and love in action.

Many people are content to go along with the crowd. One man recently revealed that he was content with his salvation and didn't feel he needed to do anything more than what he had already done many years ago. God expects more than a lazy, complacent faith. He wants us to "be all the more diligent to make your callings and election sure" (2 Peter 1:10). Wouldn't it be sad to presume we are right with the living God, only to find on Judgment Day we were never right with Him or we had fallen from His favor?

Instead of listening to what people think, turn to the Bible to find a true morality that comes from God. We should ask what God requires morally, rather than falling for worldly ways that ignore God and lead to chaos and confusion. Instead of following popular opinions and conforming to this world, we should look to God's Word as our moral guide. Romans 12:2 says, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." When people follow God's will found in Scripture they demonstrate a life that is indeed good and acceptable and perfect.

Second Peter 1:3-4 provides our context; it says, "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."

God has given us everything we need for life and godliness through His Word, the Bible. God has called us by the gospel to His own glory and excellence. This gospel message has granted to us His precious and very great promises. Where else can you go to find the promise of eternal life? Where else can you go to find the forgiveness of sins? Where else can you go to learn how to live as God desires? Where else can you go to escape the corruption that is in the world?

Because this is true, God expects us to be diligent in our faith, to give it our best effort. We must make living our faith in God a priority. To do that we must add some virtues to our faith! Saying that we believe and demonstrating our faith are two different things. Sadly, many people profess faith but don't practice it. We must do better than that!

First, we must add to our faith virtue. Virtue is moral and ethical excellence. This is a comprehensive term that refers to our morals and ethics. It calls us to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong. It calls to the inner person to be everything he or she ought to be. This calls for moral thinking, moral attitudes, moral relationships, and moral behaviors. God expects excellence from his people. Peter said, "But you are a chosen race, A royal priesthood, A holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1

Peter 2:9). God is not mediocre but excellent, and He calls His people to rise above mediocrity to a moral and spiritual excellence!

Even in our everyday lives God expects us to think morally excellent thoughts rather than spend our days in worldly desires. Colossians 3:1-4 says, "Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory."

Instead of complaining, coveting, and giving in to despair, God wants Christians to focus on blessings and good things. Philippians 4:8 says, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." People admire those who have an exceptional character, virtue, uprightness, and righteousness. People appreciate purity and holiness. Employers want honest people of character. Our society, any society, needs people of integrity and character who live honest lives.

Second, we must add to our virtue knowledge. We need a true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, knowledge that comes from the Scriptures. If everyone knew and loved the Lord Jesus, we'd see a changed world. Crime, war, chaos, and dishonesty would cease. People think ignoring God makes a better world, but they are wrong. The more people get away from God, the more confused and chaotic our society becomes. The prophet Hosea realized how devastating ignorance of God truly is. Hosea 4:6 says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."

If we forget God and His laws, do you think we can count on God's continued blessing? Let's not fool ourselves. If we ignore the moral laws of God, we'll have a life filled with misery. You may say, "I don't want to live by God's morals"; but I guarantee you will want everyone else to live by them. You want other people to be honest with you, fair with you, kind to you, and patient with you. If you think it is okay to ignore God's laws, then you have no reason to complain when people treat you in an ungodly way. They are merely following your rules. Think about it. Don't you wish everyone followed the Lord's teaching?

Third, we must add to our knowledge self-control. Self-control is the opposite of self-indulgence. First Peter 1:14-16 says, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'you shall be holy, for I am holy.'" We must learn to say no and deny ourselves sinful pleasures and place our hope in the Lord Jesus. The pleasures of sin do not last; they will in time cause misery and ruin. The truth and the love of God give us courage and strength to find freedom. The Lord teaches us self-control, so that we are able to overcome temptation and break the chains of sin. Self-control leads to virtue. Self-control means I no longer allow what might hurt me to enslave me. I am no longer a child; I can and will do what is right and best.

Fourth, we must add to our self-control patience. Patience or perseverance enables us to keep on keeping on in our pursuit of a godly character, even though we may suffer for doing so. First Peter 2:21-24 says, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed."

God sent Jesus to this earth to sacrifice His body for our sins; I cannot describe how difficult and painful His trials and crucifixion must have been. I do know, through it all, Jesus did not call for twelve legions of angels or stop His suffering. He suffered many hours until He died. He never gave up on us. All the misery and insults didn't stop Him from fulfilling the Father's will. He patiently and lovingly endured the cross by entrusting himself to His Father. When we need patience, we too should entrust our souls to the Father's hands.

Fifth, we must add to our patience godliness. Godliness refers to our faith put into practice. Because we believe and take God seriously, we live godly lives. Godliness is the devotion to God we practice in our day-to-day walk. It's the attitude of reverence, which seeks to please God in all things. It desires a right relationship with both God and others. Godliness leads to a holy life and sets us apart from what is common or profane. Godly people work hard to be more and more like Christ.

The apostle Peter wrote, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14-16). Some folks think that because we're saved by grace we don't have to worry about our salvation and can live any way we want and still go to heaven. This is not God's teaching; God expects us to repent of our sins. Second Peter 3:9 speaks to Christians and says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."

Grace doesn't open the door to sin; it closes it! Titus 2:11-12 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age."

Sixth, we must add to our godliness brotherly kindness. "Brotherly kindness" is the love saints should have for one another. The Lord Jesus said, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Brotherly love arises from our common faith in Christ, our common hope in heaven, and our common love for God. Love for Christ overflows into loving our brothers and sisters fervently from our hearts. This love, based on a shared relationship with Christ, can be sensed immediately even though two saints may never have met before. Peter wrote, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22).

Seventh, we must add to our brotherly kindness love. First Corinthians 13:1-3 says, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing." God is love, and we know how to love because the Father and the Lord Jesus loved us. Without love in our hearts and lives, we can never be what God wants. Loving God and others is our highest calling.

The Lord Jesus said, "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:44-48).

God loved us, even before we thought to love Him. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). First John 4:19 simply says, "We love, because He first loved us." We love God, because Jesus loved and forgave us. We love and forgive others, because God first loved and forgave us.

How are you doing on this scale of seven virtues? Are you making your calling and election sure, or have you become blind and forgotten how God forgave you?

Peter speaks clearly about these seven virtues. Peter said in chapter 2 verses 8-11, "For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you."

I suspect you want to be useful to God and fruitful. I suspect you want an abundant entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord in heaven. I know I do! I want to make certain God's calling and choosing me. I don't want any surprises on Judgment Day. To do this we must be all the more diligent to make our calling and election sure. We don't want to forget the great price the Lord Jesus paid for our sins. We want to add to our faith the virtues that God expects from His children.

To add these things to your faith, you must first come to the faith. You must become a Christian by placing your faith and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, repenting of your sins, publicly confessing your faith, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. God washes us clean with the blood of Jesus when we're baptized. He gives us newness of life and adds us to His church. After you become a Christian, remain faithful to the Lord. Don't let anything keep you from serving the Lord all the days of your life. Make your calling and election sure!