

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 6, Number 9

September 1997



Society's Increasing
FAITHLESSNESS

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About Our Cover:

The root cause of the high divorce rate in this nation is faithlessness: not remaining loyal to those who deserve it. It has produced many evils, such as sexually transmitted diseases, latch-key kids, single parents and increasing crime. It is also the source of spiritual adultery—idolatry—not being faithful to God. Such is the spirit of the seventh commandment. (CGG photo library)

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THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

Anyone who drives on this nation's freeways knows how everyone "gawks" at an accident or what appears to be an accident. A motorist could be doing nothing more exciting than standing beside his automobile, but it creates a bottleneck, sometimes of great length. People just cannot seem to drive by without slowing down to look at what might be the aftermath of a gory accident.


In bookstores we can tell what the top social issues are by observing where people congregate to peruse the latest solutions to certain problems. Magazines have articles every month by a different Dr. So-and-So who gives his keys to resolving the latest "hot" problem.

For the past forty years, marriage, sex, dieting, exercise, the environment, substance abuse, money and politics have topped the list of issues. Though their popularity varies from time to time, the clear leader over the long haul has been marriage. Year after year, Americans publicly discuss marriage with undiminished confusion, pessimism and passion. Calamity always attracts attention, and in the U.S., marriage is in a state of calamity, even though the venerable institution has lately shown some signs of increasing stability.

Even as recently as the late 1960s, our divorce rate was under 40%, but by 1975 the divorce rate had jumped to almost 50% and by 1978 it reached 51%. However, since 1988 it has remained at a shade under 50%. As alarming as those statistics are when considering the stability of the nation, California's San Mateo County recorded a 70% divorce rate! The state of Nevada, home of Las Vegas, normally has nearly three times as many divorces per capita than the national average!

The average divorcing couple used to remain married for seven years before splitting. However, it is now down to between four and five years. What has caused the divorce rate to increase and marriage length to decline?

Israel's Responsibility

 The media bombard us with information claiming that sexual compatibility is the all-important factor in marriage. Yet, as knowledge of sex has increased and spread, as has the opportunity to be promiscuous and experiment with many partners before marriage, so has the curse of broken homes, disease and an unstable, cynical and violent society.

Sexual incompatibility is not *the* cause of these curses. It

does cause divorce, but it is merely one facet of a far deeper NATIONAL sin. God speaks of this sin frequently regarding Israel's relationship with Him under the Old Covenant.

Amos makes an interesting comparison of the sins of the Gentiles and Israel. God promises to punish the Gentiles for these reasons:

Because they have threshed Gilead with implements of iron . . . Because they took captive the whole captivity to deliver them up to Edom . . . Because they delivered up the whole captivity to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of brotherhood . . . Because he pursued his brother with the sword, and cast off all pity; his anger tore perpetually, and he kept his wrath forever . . . Because they ripped open the women with child in Gilead, that they might enlarge their territory . . . Because he burned the bones of the king of Edom to lime. (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1)

But His reasons for punishing Israel are very different:

Because they have despised the law of the LORD, and have not kept His commandments . . . Because they sell the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of sandals. They pant after the dust of the earth which is on the head of the poor, and pervert the way of the humble. A man and his father go in to the same girl to defile My holy name. They lie down by every altar on clothes taken in pledge, and drink the wine of the condemned in the house of their god. (Amos 2:4, 6-8)

God judges the other nations guilty of gross and vicious cruelties in warfare. Israel's sins, though, largely involve national and personal deceit, disobedience to God's commandments, and creating social injustice by being faithless toward fellow man to get for the self.

It is not that other nations do not have these characteristics, but Israel has less excuse to be this way because God gave the Israelites His Word. They should know better! Amos 3:2 drives this home: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." God has given no other people the privilege of being faithfully responsible to Him to keep His commands.

The psalmist of Psalm 111:10 writes: "The fear of the

LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments. His praise endures for ever.” Since doing His commandments produces understanding, it follows that if one breaks them, loss of understanding results. This is what has happened in Israel, and we see it in how the sin of faithlessness has undermined the quality of life on many fronts simultaneously.

Hosea’s dominant theme is Israel’s faithlessness in contrast to God’s patience, mercy and faithfulness. The prophet is especially creative in metaphorically describing Israel’s spiritual condition and relationship with God. He introduces two dominant ones in the book’s second verse: “When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: ‘Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD.’”

The primary metaphor is Israel as a faithless wife, and the second is Israel as a child of adultery or faithlessness. A child is the fruit or product of a relationship. Hosea implies that Israel, as a child of an adulterous relationship, manifests its characteristics because the next generation tends to continue the traits of the former and perhaps even increase their effects. A primary characteristic of adultery is faithlessness.

In the first metaphor, God is a faithful husband, and in the second, a loving and long-suffering parent. Israel is faithless in carrying out her responsibilities in both cases. God bluntly calls her actions adultery, harlotry or whoredom because she did not fulfill the duties she had promised in a contract, a covenant. In more intimate terms, this contract is a marriage.

Sowing and Reaping



Hosea 2 continues this theme:

Bring charges against your mother, bring charges; for she is not My wife, nor am I her

Husband! Let her put away her harlotries from her sight, and her adulteries from between her breasts. . . . For their mother has played the harlot; she who conceived them has done shamefully. For she said, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.” . . . She will chase her lovers, but not overtake them; yes, she will seek them, but not find them. Then she will say, “I will go and return to my first husband, for then it was better for me than now.” (verses 2, 5, 7)

Israel is so faithless to her duties, she openly invites adulteries and aggressively chases after her lovers. Her aggressiveness does not merely perpetuate a condition but creates a climate that increases its effects. Paul reveals this principle in Galatians 6:7: “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” It is a law of nature that unless something intervenes to interrupt the growing cycle, more is reaped than is sowed.

The Bible uses a saying to describe this latter prin-

ciple, “Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind” (see Hosea 8:7). It is like saying, “Fan a breeze and produce a hurricane!” Sowing faithlessness is no different: Unless real repentance interrupts it, it will produce more faithlessness until the spirit of harlotry, an attitude that causes many serious ramifications, permeates the entire nation.

Proverbs 22:8 (RSV) adds another factor to how sin builds in intensity: “He who sows injustice [*iniquity*, KJV] will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.” The first phrase repeats the principle of sin producing fruit and spreading its pain. The second phrase depicts the “law of retribution”: The iniquity will rebound, bringing calamity to and perhaps destroying the perpetrator!

Hosea 4:1-2 reveals some of the ramifications of faithlessness:

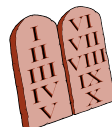
Hear the word of the LORD, you children of Israel, for the LORD brings a charge against the inhabitants of the land: “There is no truth or mercy or knowledge of God in the land. By swearing and lying, killing and stealing and committing adultery, they break all restraint, with bloodshed after bloodshed.”

Faithlessness, when it has infected every area of a culture, blurs the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, morality and immorality. Without truth, there is no reliable ethical basis for government, commerce or social relationships. There are no solid standards. Without virtues upon which a majority agree, one can never be quite sure how another will conduct himself, and so everyone becomes untrustworthy.

In this context, mercy connotes steadfast love rather than a singular act of kindness toward somebody in need. It means, then, that people waver in their loyalties. They pursue whatever fad comes along. We might say today that they “blow hot and cold.” When they are “hot” they are “hot,” but they can never seem to sustain it because, when their eyes are lured by some new, exciting interest, they are off in that direction until yet something else catches their imagination.

The “knowledge of God” includes two elements: First is the knowledge *about* God, of His existence, Word and way. The second is *acknowledging* Him. This denotes commitment, a steady loyalty to Him personally and to His way of life as a pattern of living. The context demands the second element since God would have no reason to accuse people who were not aware of Him and His way of life. Because He is addressing those who have that basic knowledge, His complaints are directed at faithless, uncommitted people. In America it is becoming almost impossible to find responsible and trustworthy people.

Sin’s Addictive Quality



Hosea 4:11-13 adds more to the list of faithlessness’ effects:

Harlotry, wine, and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols, and their staff informs them. For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have

played the harlot against their God. They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops, and burn incense on the hills, under oaks, poplars, and terebinths, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters commit harlotry, and your brides commit adultery.

Everyone understands the addictive and destructive power of alcohol in wine and new wine. It can affect a person's mind (heart) insofar as he will lose the right perspective of situations he encounters and, with it, his discretion. Alcohol has the power to enslave the heart. It also has a subtle quality to draw a person into dependence on it while promoting the destruction of his will.

Amazingly, God lists harlotry (faithlessness) alongside wine and new wine, teaching us that it can affect us the same way! This fact is not nearly so well known. Faithlessness is every bit as enslaving and destructive as drug addiction, and it has ensnared far more people in its entangling web than have ever been addicted to a drug.

Hosea 7:1-4 introduces a revolting depiction of the extent of Israel's faithlessness:

When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was uncovered, and the wickedness of Samaria. For they have committed fraud; the thief comes in; a band of robbers takes spoil outside. They do not consider in their hearts that I remember all their wickedness; now their own deeds have surrounded them; they are before My face. They make a king glad with their wickedness, and princes with their lies. They are all adulterers. Like an oven heated by a baker—He ceases stirring the fire after kneading the dough, until it is leavened.

We cannot fail to see the same conditions prevailing in our nation. For God to bring about repentance and healing, He must first restore a knowledge of His standards. But when He does, the faithlessness becomes very apparent. It sounds much like Paul saying, "When the commandment came, sin revived and I died" (Romans 7:9).

Unfortunately, when God exposed the Israelites' sins, they did not repent as Paul did. Genuine repentance is impossible without a consciousness of sin. Hosea's indictment is that Israel was not conscious of their faithlessness to God: "They [did] not consider in their hearts." This shows how "far gone" they were under sin's addiction. They had become almost completely numb to their spiritual state. Spiritually speaking, they were sleepwalking through life, unaware of the social disaster they had created and in which they were wallowing. Faithlessness was the "norm" and generally accepted.

Faithlessness—A National Trait



When this faithlessness combines with marriage and promiscuous sex, very few people will change, despite all the evidence of how destructive this sin is! Syphilis, gonorrhea, herpes, chlamydia, AIDS, broken homes, increased illegitimacy, rebellious children, teens bearing children, and latch-key kids—who see their parents only at bed-

time because both parents work to provide them "with the better things in life"—are just some of the effects.

Faithlessness is tearing the country apart! Hosea 7:5-7 shows that the nation's leaders are glad these things are occurring because it gives them an excuse for their actions! Besides, they are prospering as a result! Politicians, doctors, lawyers, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, pornographers, booksellers, movie makers and others are prospering from this faithless, adulterous society.

Jeremiah weighs in with a devastating picture of Judah just before it fell to the Babylonians:

How shall I pardon you for this? Your children have forsaken Me and sworn by those that are not gods. When I had fed them to the full, then they committed adultery and assembled themselves by troops in the harlots' houses. They were like well-fed lusty stallions; every one neighed after his neighbor's wife. (Jeremiah 5:7-8)

Prophet after prophet makes similar statements. Israel has trouble being faithful to anything: God, mate, country, employer and contracts! Our national mind runs like quicksilver from here to there—always running to get the best for the self, willing to bend in any direction to gain advantage and have our pleasure. We work very hard at this. At times, it almost seems to be in our genes!

Nationally syndicated columnists Sydney J. Harris writes on the subject of reliability:

Most virtues exist on a sliding scale, all the way from excellence to ineptitude, and most of us are tolerably somewhere in the middle, without too much damage to ourselves or others. But there is one virtue that is all or nothing: and that is reliability. You are either reliable or you are not; and, if not, it doesn't much matter how nearly or how often you are reliable.

If I were an employer of any sort, I would be willing to put up with many kinds of personal or professional deficiencies, but never with this. A person who is not dependable is bound to fail you (and himself as well) at precisely the wrong time.

It reminds me of the debonair Viennese gentlemen who, when asked, "Have you been faithful to your wife?" replied, "Frequently." It is plain that a man who is frequently faithful is not faithful at all; he might as well never be.

Reliability is one of the hardest character traits to identify by testing or "screening" or anything except personal acquaintance.

Some people are "rocks" by nature or training, while others are *papier-mâché* painted to resemble rocks, who crumble when sudden pressure is applied by circumstances.

If you are married to someone who cannot be depended upon to pull his or her own weight, it hardly matters what other admirable traits your mate may possess, because you can never know

when or where you will be let down.

It is the same as being married to an alcoholic, who is only “there” part of the time—and usually not when most needed.

Consistency is what is required in the people we associate with: the confident knowledge of what we can rightfully expect of them, barring sudden illness or catastrophe beyond anyone’s control. Otherwise there is no real relationship, but only a shifting accommodation to the winds of caprice and self-indulgence.

It is easy to feel affection for another; what is harder is to translate this feeling into acts, daily acts, that demonstrate steadfastness of purpose in a domestic routine that may not be as dramatic as some heroic rescue, but that keeps the craft afloat no matter which way the wind happens to blow.

The deepest and most important virtues are often the dullest ones; they win no medals, and get no glory; but they are the glue that binds society together and makes it work, now and always.

Faithlessness and Sex



Men seem to be particularly irresponsible and ambivalent about sex. A July 28, 1978, *Woman’s Day* article reports that somewhere between 50% and 70% of American husbands committed adultery at least once! *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 30, 1981, sets the figure at 54%, and the *Hite Report* claims it is 66%.

Whatever the exact figure, it is extremely high, especially since another survey reveals that 67% of all husbands say adultery is *always* wrong. What a double standard! Though they feel it is wrong, a large percentage of men are willing to commit it if the opportunity presents itself. This illustrates what God means about our faithlessness.

We are a self-seeking, opportunistic people who are willing to “bend” on principle, standard, tradition or belief if it means advantage for ourselves. Even if we can see the “advantage” is at best short-term—and may even be very risky—we usually seem to rise to the “bait.” An August 1981 *McCall’s* article, “What Men Want From Women,” states:

They say they value the same things women do: loyalty, commitment, caring. At the same time, many insist they “need” the novelty and excitement of pursuing other women. Is there any way to make sense of these mixed messages and find new understanding between the sexes?

Yes, it is called sin. The seventh commandment is “You shall not commit adultery,” and the tenth includes “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife.”

Such drives are a part of our humanity that we must deal with and overcome. If we do not, they will lead us into many woes. Notice how the story of Amnon, a young man who could not control himself to remain faithful, illustrates the cause and effects of this sin:

Absalom the son of David had a lovely sister, whose name was Tamar; and Amnon the son of David loved her. Amnon was so distressed over his sister Tamar that he became sick; for she was a virgin. And it was improper for Amnon to do anything to her. . . . [Tamar protested his advances.] However, he would not heed her voice; and being stronger than she, he forced her and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her exceedingly, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her. And Amnon said to her, “Arise, be gone!” (II Samuel 13:1-2, 14-15)

Anytime a thing, like sex, becomes an end in itself, it ceases to give the satisfying pleasure God intends when used within the context of love. Instead, because of sin’s addictive traits, a person futilely searches for the satisfying fulfillment of his expectations. With it he reaps the guilt associated with a knowledge of sin.

Solomon shows in Ecclesiastes 1:8 that human nature cannot be satisfied. This is not the way God made us but how we have become through sin. “The carnal mind is enmity against God” (Romans 8:7). We have become perverted in our desires, and our desires must be converted to enjoy the benefits God intends.

The above *Woman’s Day* article lists reasons men give for remaining faithful, from most to least frequently mentioned:

1. *The fear of being caught.* Men avoid adultery, not because it is sin, but to avoid the pain of possibly losing everything, socially and/or financially. People fear scandal more than sin because they want others to think well of them.

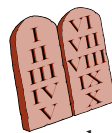
2. *The inability to deal with guilt and deception.* The burden is not the adultery and the evil it produces, but having to bear something personally that they can no longer hide.

3. *The lack of opportunity.* Men are open to adultery, but the occasion never arises because their wives are always looming in the background.

4. *The belief that husbands should be faithful.* This is more conformity to social pressure rather than belief in God.

5. *The personal desire to be faithful.* Not one of the five mentions God. This may be because it is not fashionable to talk of God, yet it could also be that God is not in their thoughts and they never consider what He thinks.

David’s Adultery and Its Effects



King David’s excursion into adultery reveals that, regardless of one’s state in life, one cannot commit it without damaging relationships any more than murder. II Samuel 12:9-14 describes the cause-and-effect process:

“Why have you despised the commandment of the LORD, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the people of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall

never depart from your house because you have despised Me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.” Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will raise up adversity against you from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun.” Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die.”

Sin produces two overall effects: First, because of the breach of trust, it creates division between us and God (Isaiah 59:1-2). Second, it produces evil results in the world. Upon true repentance, God’s merciful forgiveness cancels out the first. However, the second remains, and the sinner must bear it and—tragically—so must those caught within its web. As a result of David’s sin, five people, including four of David’s sons, died directly or indirectly: Uriah, the illegitimate baby, Absalom, Amnon, and Adonijah!

But the punishment did not end there. II Samuel 16:20-22 relates another step in the unfolding of this sin’s effect:

Then Absalom said to Ahithophel, “Give counsel as to what we should do.” And Ahithophel said to Absalom, “Go in to your father’s concubines, whom he has left to keep the house; and all Israel will hear that you are abhorred by your father. Then the hands of all who are with you will be strong.” So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the top of the house, and Absalom went in to his father’s concubines in the sight of all Israel.

II Samuel 20:3 adds a final note on this event:

Now David came to his house at Jerusalem. And the king took the ten women, his concubines whom he had left to keep the house, and put them in seclusion and supported them, but did not go in to them. So they were shut up to the day of their death, living in widowhood.

God prophesied it, and Absalom and Ahithophel used it politically to discredit David and elevate Absalom. It illustrates Absalom’s disrespect for his father, which was at least partly rooted in his father’s notorious sex life. Did the adultery make the concubine’s lives better? “Can a man take fire to his bosom and . . . not be burned?” (Proverbs 6:27). No, he cannot. Not only is he burned, but those close to him also suffer because this sin’s penalty reaches out to destroy what should be very dear and cherished relationships.

Fornication



I Corinthians 6:19-20 and 7:4 reveal that all unchaste conduct before marriage (“fornication”) is also infidelity and is doubly so if one is a Christian.

Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit which is in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s. . . . The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

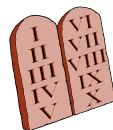
Upon acceptance of the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin, we become His since He bought and paid for us by His death. As His possession or servant (literally “slave”), He expressly forbids us to engage in any such activity. In addition, the spirit of God’s law helps us to understand fornication as unfaithfulness against one’s future mate. Virginity should be held in reserve for the one we eventually marry, so he or she will not receive a mate defiled by intimacy with somebody else.

And, just as with adultery, though God forgives a fornicator of his sin, the effects of fornication will take their toll. God’s law produces a penalty automatically. Sometimes it manifests itself in disease. Other times may see a child born out of wedlock or a “shotgun” marriage of two incompatible people. A few minutes of forbidden pleasure is not worth the price!

Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles, who do not know God; that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. (I Thessalonians 4:3-7)

On the Verge of Destruction



What we have sown—and are even now beginning to reap—with our faithlessness is illustrated in Hosea 10:12-15:

Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the LORD, till He comes and rains righteousness on you. You have plowed wickedness; you have reaped iniquity. You have eaten the fruit of lies, because you trusted in your own way, in the multitude of your mighty men. Therefore tumult shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be plundered as Shalman plundered Beth Arbel in the day of battle—a mother dashed in pieces upon her children. Thus it shall be done to you, O Bethel, because of your great wickedness. In a morning the king of Israel shall be cut off utterly.

By listening to the sensually appealing but iniquitous

Please see page 19

THE WEIGHTIER MATTERS: FAITH & FIDELITY

Our Savior Jesus Christ shows in Matthew 23 that the scribes and Pharisees had perverted judgment and were terribly unmerciful to anyone “beneath them,” as viewed from their own exalted position. This self-exaltation reached the point where they placed themselves above God. Matthew 23:18-19 explains that they honored their gift on the altar as more important than the altar itself. God’s altar sanctifies or sets apart other things as holy. A person’s “goodness” placed on the altar for all to admire is worth nothing!

This form of idolatry destroys faith in God. The Pharisees reckoned their salvation automatic because they paid such attention to minute details of the law—even adding more restrictive rules to it. Their over-carefulness bred an attitude of *deserving* salvation. They saw no need for a savior, for was not their obedience a guarantee? Surely God could not deny salvation to any so righteous as they!

Contrast the publican who “would not so much as raise his eyes” to God (Luke 18:9-14). He *knew* he was a sinner and needed help. Though he was not clothed in righteousness and thus not an immediate candidate for salvation, Christ could see in him a recognition of sin. His shame and humility would make it far easier for him to learn and repent than the pompous, self-satisfied scribes and Pharisees.

Christ instructs us to pray in private and do our good deeds quietly (Matthew 6:1-8). We should not even let one hand know what the other is doing. This does not mean we blindly

walk in circles, unaware of what we are doing. It cautions us not to pat ourselves on the back in admiration of our righteousness.

The Pharisees also felt that their position as Israelites under the covenant would influence God. Likewise, some will approach Christ, saying, “Why reject me? I’ve been good! I’ve been in the church for decades!” Luke 13:24-28 shows that being where Christ was, eating and drinking in His presence, was not enough for salvation. He calls such people “workers of iniquity”! Being “in the church” is not enough.

Fidelity

The Greek word for “faith” can also be translated “fidelity,” as it is in Titus 2:10. To understand what the scribes and



Pharisees lacked, we need to examine fidelity along with the traditional definition of faith.

Fidelity, as defined by Webster, is “the quality of being faithful, accuracy in details, exactness.” The dic-

tionary adds an interesting modern analogy to explain fidelity: “the degree to which an electronic device (as a record player, radio or television) accurately reproduces its effect (as sound or picture).”

We know we are to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (II Corinthians 10:5) and to “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). John tells us “to walk just as He walked” (I John 2:6). Peter advises, “Christ . . . [left] us an example, that you should follow His steps” (I Peter 2:21).

Spiritually, fidelity is to reproduce faithfully and exactly the thoughts, attitudes, steps and paths of Jesus Christ. The “sounds” our lives make on earth reach heaven either as the scratchy, tinny, garbled clanging of carnality, or as harmonic, melodious, pleasant reproductions of Christ in us, the hope of glory.

This is where the Pharisees missed the whole point of the law. They were not like God at all! They were so busy with their little “additions to make it better,” they forgot how to treat each other. This is a great danger facing the church today.

We can focus so intently on a specific point of doctrine—the calendar, divorce and remarriage or church government—that we forget that God bases our judgment on how we treat others (Matthew 25:34-46). Christ went about doing good (Acts 10:38). He showed compassion, healed, helped and set a righteous example in all His activities. He NEVER ONCE gossiped, slandered or verbally abused

anyone. While correct teaching is of extreme importance (II John 10), *living it* is of even greater importance because doers will be justified, not hearers only (Romans 2:13; James 1:22-25).

The “sounds” the scribes and Pharisees produced were low fidelity, unrecognizable to God in the intent of His law. When God hears our voices, does it sound to Him just like Christ did? Because we are still alive, we are better off than the Pharisees. We still have opportunity to learn to think and act like Christ, to work on reacting to wrongs and persecution—deserved or undeserved—just as He would. We have time to grow in saying just the right thing at the right time to help, encourage, inspire or guide others.

James 3:9 says we bless God and curse men made in His likeness; we respect God but not His creation. James shows this is a contradiction and wrong. Disrespecting God’s creation is disrespecting Him. He expects high fidelity from us in what we say—“pure, . . . peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy” (verse 17). He will not listen to what is “earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there” (verses 15-16).

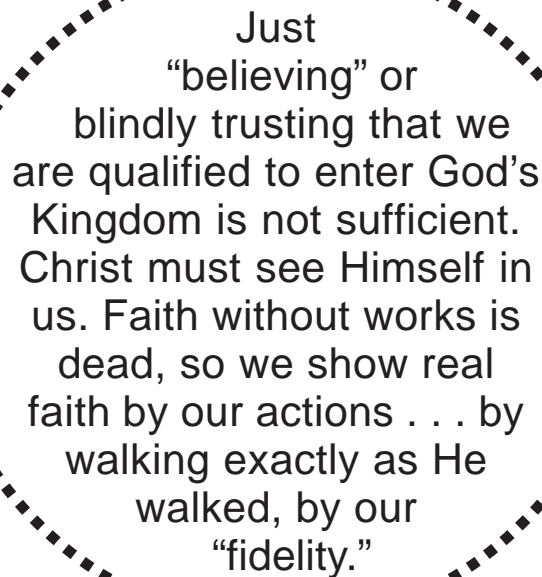
Upon hearing the dissonance, the discord, the accusations, the gossip, the fault-finding in the church today, is it any wonder God covered His ears and blew us apart (Lamentations 2:1-8)? We *can* “get comfortable” again in our chosen “daughter” of our mother, criticizing others who might think differently. Or, we can really go to work on ourselves, realizing that we are not yet Christlike, and improve our fidelity. God’s ears would appreciate it. When we completely control our tongues, we will have perfect fidelity (James 3:2).

Fidelity, then, is the kind of faith mentioned in James 2:14-26. Just “believing” or blindly trusting that we are qualified to enter God’s Kingdom is not sufficient. Christ must see Himself in us. Faith without works is

dead, so we show real faith by our actions (verses 17-18). Even the demons “believe” God exists—and they tremble in fear (verse 19), but they are unwilling to think like Him, talk like Him, live like Him. Theirs is a dead faith. We are to show our faith by our works, by walking exactly as He walked, by our “fidelity.”

Faith

This understanding does not exclude the more traditional definition of faith as Paul explains in Hebrews 11:1: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Christ “calls those things which do not exist as though



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they did” (Romans 4:17)!

Often, once we see the standard of righteousness and holiness that God requires of us, we become discouraged, recognizing our sins and weaknesses. We feel so unworthy, so sinful, that we feel unable to leave the past behind and make the effort required to grow in holy character.

Faith—belief in what we cannot yet see but act upon it, knowing it will truly happen—becomes a very weighty matter! In Hebrews 10:35-36, Paul encourages us to have confidence, believing that if we do God’s will, He will reward us. Verse 38 instructs us to live by faith, not drawing back, for if we doubt or disbe-

lieve, God will not be pleased with us. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul gives example after example of faithful people like Abraham, who boldly stepped forward to seek a place, “not knowing where he was going” (verse 8). Some had to leave father and mother, were fed to lions, tortured, not accepting deliverance. Some wandered in sheep and goatskins, destitute. He recites story after story of such people. These, who believed enough to serve God regardless of cost, will be in the Kingdom of God, and if we show like faith, God will include us with them (verse 40).

After rehearsing historical accounts of people who, just like us, really believed and trusted God, Paul gives a “stir to action” speech. He implores us to obey regardless of any shame that some might heap on us, and he chides us for not resisting enough against sin (Hebrews 12:1-4). When God chastens us for failing to reach the mark—and God punishes all whom He loves, just as He is punishing the church today—we should not sink into despair and self-pity. Instead, Paul urges, “Make straight paths for your feet. . . . Pursue peace with all men, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (verses 13-14).

Can we really turn loose of our fears and trust God with our lives? Do we really believe He has our best interests in mind, or do we panic when it *appears* something bad will happen? Do our actions say, “We’ll trust and worship you, God, as long as the cost is not too great”? We counted the cost when we were baptized. We put our hand to the plow and cannot turn back. As bond slaves of Christ, we surrendered everything in our lives—including our lives—to Him. We are not our own (I Corinthians 6:19). If we seek to save our lives now, we will lose them forever (Matthew 16:25; John 12:25).

Often our pride arises, and we “won’t take it” from man. Sometimes we “won’t take it” from God. Our faith can seem strong as long as things are going well, but if God has some-

thing different in mind that appears negative to us, our faith, our trust, our fidelity, suddenly evaporates. We tend to try to solve such problems our own way, then assume God's hand was in the solution. We do not want to sever our relationship with Him—just make sure we get our way. After all, we rationalize, who knows what we need more than us? Can God not see that we were going to lose our wealth, our health, our life? Our belief, our faith, must be stronger than our fear.

We cannot please God without faith. Today, this generation is spoiled. We want to live our way—any way we choose—and still be blessed and accepted by God and man. This generation expects something for nothing. Our “welfare mentality” is not limited to expecting the government to send us a check simply because we exist. We expect “our rights”—the right to say or do anything, to have no responsibility for our actions and yet to indulge in the good things of life. This is not a trust or faith based on valid expectancy. God will shortly take away these “rights” in great tribulation and require fidelity before giving blessings.

Our confidence in spiritual salvation is also compromised when we come to expect salvation without high fidelity standards—sounding and acting like Christ. Through sin, our confidence and trust in God are eroded. We doubt. We waver. Such a man is “unstable in all his ways,” says James. “Let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6-7).

Increasing Faith

Faith is increased by hearing the Word of God, for we gain confidence by hearing of the faithfulness of God:

- ◆ God is *faithful*, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (I Corinthians 1:9)
- ◆ He who calls you is *faithful*, who also will do it. (I Thessalonians 5:24)
- ◆ Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren,

that He might be a merciful and *faithful* High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Hebrews 2:17)

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

◆ Indeed the devil is about to throw some of you in prison. . . . Be *faithful* until death, and I will give you the crown of life. (Revelation 2:10)

We should feel better already!

Now we need to believe this unwaveringly, boldly, completely. It did not come easily for the scribes and Pharisees, nor did they even really consider it. Is it any easier at the end of the age?

Then He spoke a parable to them, that *men always ought to pray and not lose heart*, saying: “There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a

widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, ‘Avenge me of my adversary.’ And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, ‘Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.’” Then the Lord said, “Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. **Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?**” (Luke 18:1-8)

The real problem with the scribes and Pharisees is that they were totally selfish. They weighted their judgment toward themselves, and so they had no room for mercy for others. Nothing about them resembled Christ—no fidelity. They did not see a need for faith in the forgiveness in Christ, for they felt they needed none.

Christ gave them the answer to their problem. If they would render proper judgment, without partiality, emphasis on self would diminish. Their mercy would allow people to make mistakes and have space to repent rather than fear being destroyed financially or otherwise. Finally, with true fidelity, they would treat everyone as Christ did. Their faith would increase, as would the faith of those under their influence.

Had they properly applied these three qualities—judgment, mercy and faith—their attitudes would have turned from selfish carnal goals to outgoing concern for others. They would have begun displaying the real love of God. If we apply them, we will have the confidence and boldness of which Paul spoke—the kind of faith required for salvation. The scribes and Pharisees lacked it. Being alive, we still have the chance to obtain it.

When the Son of Man comes will He really find faith on the earth?

—Darryl Henson



The “sounds” the scribes and Pharisees produced were low fidelity, unrecognizable to God in the intent of His law. What do we “sound” like to God?

SEX, SIN AND MARRIAGE

Adultery, fornication and other forms of sexual immorality have been in the news a lot lately. The military in particular is undergoing a top-to-bottom review of its sexual policies because of various misdeeds of its officers and troops. From the lowest to the highest offices in the land, marital infidelity and sexual improprieties are the buzzwords.

Tabloids scream the latest “love triangle” discovered. Magazines contest each other to picture the cover girl with the least covering. Headlines tease readers with articles about sex. Within their pages sex sins of every stripe come out of the closet.

Whether its movies, the Internet, bars, parties, homosexual activities, parades or whatever, sex is the vehicle that attracts interest. It has even encroached into children’s cartoons, books, magazines and videos!

“Living in sin” is now par for the course. People refer, not to husbands or wives, but to “significant others.” They speak of “satellite relationships” rather than affairs. Perversions have been downgraded to “personal sexual expressions.” What was once shameful is now acceptable.

Why is sex promoted so extensively? Because sin is pleasurable, and sex sins are particularly so. Moses chose to forego the “passing pleasures of sin” (Hebrews 11:25) for a greater ultimate reward and pleasure. Unaware of their glorious potential, the people of this world are busy “serving various lusts and pleasures” (Titus 3:3).

Though we may not engage in sex sins, this barrage of innuendo and flagrant sensuality can leave us very jaded. Such an assault can deaden our resistance. We can find ourselves losing sight of God’s purpose for the seventh commandment and marriage. If we fail to resist, we will begin to overlook how despicable *all* sex sins

**Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites . . . will inherit the kingdom of God .
(I Corinthians 6:9-10)**

are to God and allow this precious gift—sex—to be cheapened.

The Seventh Commandment’s Scope

“You shall not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) is not limited to sex outside of marriage. God commands us to abstain from all sexual immorality, including premarital sex (fornication), homosexuality, incest, voyeurism, bestiality, public nudity and much more (see Leviticus 18 and 20). In the New Testament, Paul adds licentiousness, uncleanness and lewdness (Ephesians 4:19), which largely deal with liberal attitudes towards sexual matters.

Men seem to “get away” with adul-

tery while unfaithful women are considered tramps. This double standard is ancient. In John 8:3-11, a crowd was ready to stone a woman caught “in the very act,” but where was the adulterous man? God’s Word, however, deals with both sexes equally.

It does not take sexual sin lightly either. Leviticus 20:10 commands death for both participants for adultery, as well as for sodomy and homosexuality (verse 13). Paul reminds us that God killed twenty-three thousand Israelites in one day for sex sins (I Corinthians 10:8). In Abraham’s day God destroyed five entire cities by fire for their aberrant sex practices. God sent the Israelites and Jews into captivity for immorality, among other reasons.

Jesus struck the heart of the matter in His Sermon on the Mount. Christians must not even lust after another—fantasizing or committing sex with them mentally (Matthew 5:27-28). Nowadays, many psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors actually advise people to fantasize, or perhaps even have a “little fling.” Advertisements and fashions all play to the lust of the flesh, making it increasingly more difficult to obey Jesus’ command. Teens sometimes scorn their peers if they are still virgins by fourteen. This topsy-turvy world has completely lost its understanding of this commandment.

Much like our big cities today, ancient Corinth was filled with sexual temptations. Paul advised the brethren there to “*flee* sexual immorality”

A Ready Answer

“Be Ready Always To Give An Answer” – I Peter 3:15 (KJV)

(I Corinthians 6:18). Too often we flee, yet leave a forwarding address! It is unwise to hang around people, places or situations that tempt us into sex sins (Proverbs 5:3-14; Genesis 39:7-12). When we flirt with temptation, we can end up as an ox going to slaughter (Proverbs 7:6-27).

Why should we flee temptations? Revelation 21:8 states that God will sentence the sexually immoral to the Lake of Fire, right along with murderers, idolaters, liars and other unrepentant sinners. Paul adds, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites . . . will inherit the kingdom of God" (I Corinthians 6:9-10).

Holy Purpose of Marriage

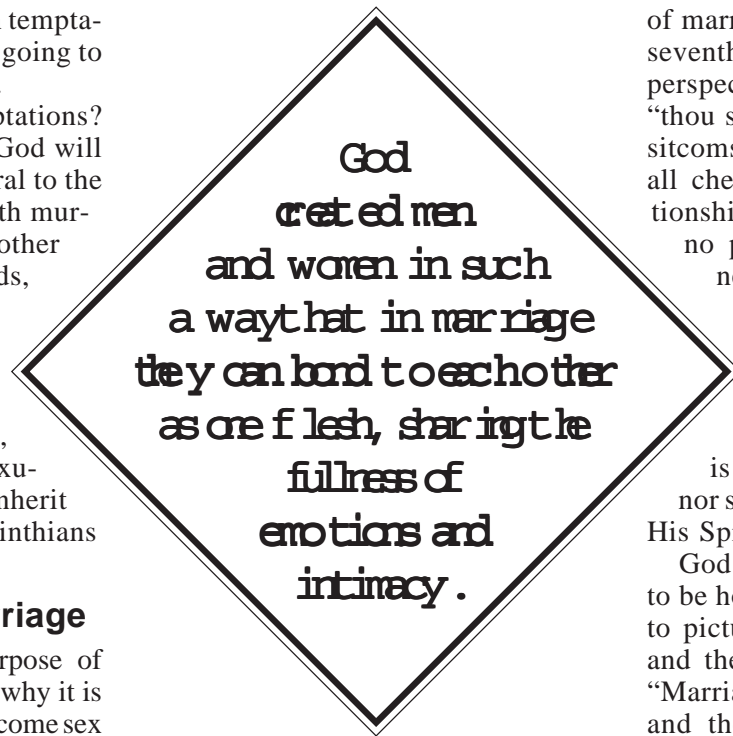
If we recall the holy purpose of marriage, we can understand why it is so important to resist and overcome sex sins. We need to look at the seventh commandment from the viewpoint of God's holiness and the holy relationship that He intends a marriage to be. Beyond that, we need to see this in light of the Kingdom of God and the church's marriage to Christ.

When God created the world and all in it, He fashioned Adam and Eve in His image and after His likeness (Genesis 1:26). "Image," some commentators say, may refer more to character than to appearance. Thus, creating people after His likeness by divine fiat could be done instantly (Genesis 5:1; James 3:9), but creating them in His image takes time.

Jesus Christ was the perfect image of His Father (Hebrews 1:1-3). He had the Father's character and holiness. He knew His Father's purpose intimately and followed His will perfectly. When asked to show the Father to the disciples, Jesus replied, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

It should be our goal to be able to reveal the Father by how we live our lives. Born again by His incorruptible seed (I Peter 1:23), we are to grow into full maturity by conforming to Christ's image day by day (Romans

8:29; II Corinthians 3:18). When we are resurrected or changed, we will be just like God Himself (I John 3:2). Jesus must marry a wife from the



same kind as Himself. His wife must therefore be composed of people who "grow in the grace and knowledge" of Christ and are changed to immortality and incorruption at His return.

Everything about a godly husband-wife marriage should "speak concerning Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:32). *We should be picturing in our marriages the holy union between God's Son and His bride made perfect!* Men should love their wives "as Christ loved the church," giving themselves for them and presenting them to themselves (verses 25-27). Then husbands should nourish and cherish their wives, "as the Lord [does] the church" (verse 29). Adultery, fornication, pornography, sodomy and other perversions prevent these things from happening—at least until repentance occurs! Similarly, a wife who drags her marriage through the same mire is not submitting exclusively to her husband, and certainly not "as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22).

These principles apply as much to women as to men. If a wife truly viewed her husband as if he were Jesus Himself, how would she act? How faithful and responsive would she be? If a hus-

band truly regarded His wife as Jesus does the church, how patient, faithful, loving, exclusive, nourishing and giving would he be?

If we can truly grasp the *meaning* of marriage, we will view it and the seventh commandment from a holy perspective and not just as another "thou shalt not." Movies, television sitcoms, jokes and modern lifestyles all cheapen this most special relationship. God's saints should derive no pleasure from watching sinners sin. If His Spirit is strong in us, we should find no joy in entertainment that depicts sexual infidelity or perversion. Though much of it is depicted as comedic, it is no laughing matter to God, nor should it be to those filled with His Spirit.

God is holy, and He has called us to be holy. He desires our marriages to picture the relationship of Jesus and the church. Thus, Paul writes, "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled" (Hebrews 13:4). He uses the word *koite* for "bed," referring to intercourse within marriage and meaning that we need to keep it unpoluted, free from stain, sacred and pure.

When that happens, the fruit of that union—children—are also holy (I Corinthians 7:14). God seeks godly offspring (Malachi 2:15), so He warns us not to deal treacherously in our marriages. A chief cause of marital problems and divorce is infidelity or the results of it, whether actual or fantasized.

We should view our spouse as set apart, not *just as* a sex toy. I Thessalonians 4:4-5 advises each of us to learn "how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God." This does not remove the tremendous pleasure, fun, joy, and satisfaction from marriage! God created men and women in such a way that in marriage they can bond to each other as one flesh, sharing the fullness of emotions and intimacy.

Presenting Our Mates To Ourselves

God first created Adam from the
Forerunner ♦ September 1997

dust of the ground, and he came to life when God personally breathed life into him (Genesis 2:7), something He did not do to the animals. Most likely, He created Adam outside the Garden of Eden and put him there later (verse 8) to be its caretaker, making sure the man had a job before he married. Later that day, God took one of Adam's ribs and from it *built* a woman, "and He brought [or presented] her to [Adam] the man" (verses 21-22). In the same way, Christ *presents* His holy bride, the church, to Himself (Ephesians 5:27).

Just as we are part of Christ's body, Eve was literally part of Adam's body. Adam *gave of himself* to have a wife, just as Christ "loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). In the marriage ceremony that immediately followed, Adam acknowledged her as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:23). One reason for this was to depict that man and wife are to become one flesh (verse 24), bonded by love.

All of this happened in a gorgeous garden which name means "delight." God meant married life to be delightful. They were both naked with no reason to be ashamed (verse 25). After the wedding, on the eve of the Sabbath, God instructed them to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). This shows sex in marriage is honorable, beautiful, delightful and holy. God judged "everything He had made, and indeed it was very good" (verse 31).

Notice, however, that God did not create Eve, Mary, Jane and Susan for Adam. God presented just Eve to Adam, and only to her could he give his affections. The ideal is one husband loving one wife. We, too, must present our mates *exclusively* to ourselves. Sex sins violate this principle.

Science has found that the human mind cannot distinguish between an actual experience and a carefully detailed imaginary one. World-class athletes use this knowledge to train themselves to win in their particular sport. This is why Jesus says it is adulterous even to lust after another. When one imagines sexual activities with another in detail, the mind records that fantasy as a real event! Fantasizing (lust) is sin because the mind registers it as actual adultery!

It becomes easier to repeat an act if one has already done it once. Evil in the heart eventually comes out as sin. When adultery occurs, a person presents someone else other than his spouse to himself. He has **RIPPED APART** his one-body/one-flesh marriage and joined himself to another. Lust is **not** a victimless crime! The husband, the wife and the marriage are the victims!

Paul writes, "He who is joined to a harlot [or anyone other than his spouse] is *one body* with her" (I Corinthians 6:16). Adultery creates a second one-body/one-flesh bond in opposition to the marriage. This will inflict severe damage upon the marriage relationship. The apostle says such sexual sins hurt so much because they are "sins against [our] own body" (verse 18).

Paul comes to his primary point in verses 19-20: *We are not our own!* God bought us at an incredibly high cost, the blood of our Master, and thus He commands us to "glorify God in your body and in your spirit," both of which are His! God owns us completely!

The import of this is staggering! When we commit sex sins—even in our minds—we have first become unfaithful to God! When we break the seventh commandment, *we show infidelity to God!* Yes, it shows infidelity to the wronged spouse, but it all begins with unfaithfulness to God.

The road to adultery starts when we become willing to break the vows we made to God at our baptism. We promised then that we would honor and obey Him exclusively and faithfully, accepting Him as our Savior, Master and soon-coming King and Husband. When we are willing to walk away from the commands He gives us about sex and marriage, we begin to walk into the arms of adultery. **PHYSICAL ADULTERY STARTS WITH SPIRITUAL ADULTERY!**

If an adulterer desires to repent, he must first acknowledge that he has sinned against God. King David, in his moving prayer of repentance after the murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba, cries out, "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4). Did he not also sin against Uriah, Bathsheba, the nation, his wives and his children? Of course! But ulti-

mately, his sin was against God! *When we are faithful to God and our covenant with Him, we will not commit sex sins.*

Overcoming Sex Sin

Sexual immorality is certainly damaging to our lives and to our marriages. It stabs a knife into the heart of the innocent victims—the mate and the children. It totally shatters marital trust, and it takes a very forgiving person even to try to rebuild it. Many find it next to impossible to forgive this sin, as it undermines the very foundations of a marriage.

Is all lost after sex sins?

Paul warns the Corinthians that the sexually immoral would not inherit God's Kingdom. He knew many of them had participated in the immorality that characterized Corinth. Were they doomed? Notice his hopeful next words: "And such WERE some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (I Corinthians 6:11). If anyone has committed sex sins, he can seek and receive forgiveness!

Overcoming any sin starts with recognizing we are sinners and need forgiveness. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn it or its sinners, "but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). If we repentantly acknowledge our sins and weaknesses, God will hear, forgive and accept us. Jesus came to heal and to call sinners—all of us—to repentance.

In this is the next step: Sexually immoral people can—and must—change. We must certainly stop feeding the sin. What goes into the mind comes out in actions; garbage in, garbage out or holiness in, holiness out. Each of us has this choice. If we avoid the temptations, we have a good chance of kicking sinful habits.

Christ's Example

How did our Savior deal with repentant sex sinners? Many expect Him to be harsh and judgmental, but that is just the opposite of His recorded encounters with them. Jesus does not whitewash sex sinners even from His own genealogy! Because of their repentance, He was not ashamed to have them listed.



The Samaritan woman at the well was living in sin, after having had five husbands (John 4:17-18), yet Jesus chose to reveal Himself as the Messiah to her first out of all the people of her city!

His genealogy includes several men and women guilty of sex sins, a few of them quite awful sins. Judah “begot Perez and Zerah by Tamar” who posed as a prostitute (Matthew 1:3; Genesis 38). Rahab (Matthew 1:5) was a harlot, but Hebrews 11 also lists her as a heroine of faith. David appears along with Bathsheba, “who had been the wife of Uriah” (Matthew 1:6; II Samuel 11). Solomon (Matthew 1:7), certainly not known for his restraint, and several of his heirs were no angels. In fact, one could say that most of those listed in the lineage broke the seventh commandment in one form or another!

The Samaritan woman at the well was living in sin, after having had five husbands (John 4:17-18), yet Jesus chose to reveal Himself as the Messiah to her first out of all the people of her city! He certainly did not shun such people as below Him. Christ even used her to spread the word about Himself to many others (verses 39-42).

Luke 7:36-50 tells the story a woman of ill repute who came to her Savior weeping and repentant. She humbly knelt and washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. Then she kissed His feet and anointed them with fragrant oil. In contrast to Christ’s gentle attitude, the host of the occasion was appalled that He would even allow her to touch Him. The story shows how God views us if we show repentance after a sex sin. Jesus simply says to her, “Your sins are forgiven. . . . Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (verses 48, 50).

We can learn from the way Jesus behaved when the scribes and Pharisees brought before him a woman caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-8). To the crowd He said, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first” (verse 7). The only one without sin there was the only One without a stone in His hand. He gently told her that *He*

did not condemn her, but firmly urged her to “go and sin no more” (verse 11). Undoubtedly, she had consequences to deal with resulting from her adultery, but sin’s spiritual penalty had been forgiven.

We must all learn to forgive those who have committed sex sins and let them start a new life. If we are Christ’s, we are a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17), and we must not judge each other based on what we were. Past is past, dead and buried. God says he removes our sins from us “as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12); His children should do no less for each other.

Some have repented of a sex sin and then done it again. Is that not true of many of our sins? Overcoming sin is a lifelong process. He who taught to forgive “seventy times seven” (Matthew 18:21-22) will forgive us when we come repentantly before His throne of grace. Though we stumble again over the same sin, we must return to our merciful God and again sally into the fight against it.

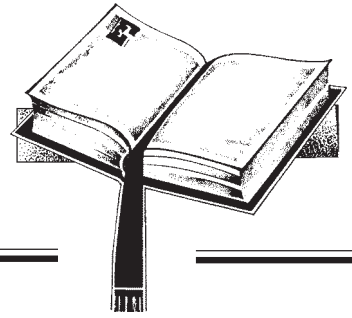
Paul recognizes that “nothing good dwells” in the flesh (Romans 7:18). He writes that there were times he found himself doing the very things he hated (verse 19). He cries out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (verse 24). He answers this question in the next verse: “I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Jude commends us “to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

Though we are imperfect and sinful, if we abide in Christ, we will overcome, even surrounded as we are by temptations and sensuality. Regardless of our past, God has called us to become the pure, spotless bride of His Son (Ephesians 5:27). We will be without blemish, for Christ is cleansing and purifying us (verse 26). He will present us to Himself as a chaste virgin (Revelation 14:4; 19:8)!

Let us so conduct our marriages, keeping them holy and clean. By doing so, we will glorify God and produce righteous fruit toward His Kingdom!

—Staff

PROPHECY WATCH



SCRATCHING OUR ITCHES

The church of God does not exist in a vacuum. Events, trends, moods and ideas that grow popular in the world—whether good or bad—soon find their way into the church. This incursion of worldliness is a “natural” process that Christians must constantly guard against.

For instance, if tetherball suddenly surged in popularity, someone among us would take up the game and try to spread it among other members. Tetherball is fairly innocuous, though an errant ball occasionally whacks an unwary player. The skin may sting for a while, but the players soon resume the game. Perhaps, at the worst, if the competition became so fierce that unchristian attitudes began to surface, certain steps would need to be taken.

Yet, generally, such a situation is benign. But what if it is not tetherball but government in the church that is being batted about? Or a particular prophecy? Or the race issue? Or the nature of God? Worldly ideas on these topics generally muddy the waters “For all that is in the world . . . is not of the Father but is of the world” (I John 2:16). John later writes, “The whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (I John 5:19).

The Process

In earlier times, the process of worldly things flowing into the church was less insistent and pervasive. In the first century, for example, philosophies and beliefs foreign to God’s way had their influence but less directly and constantly. Church members may have been exposed to unchristian concepts in the local mar-

ketplace, workplace or forum, but they probably learned to avoid such discussions after a few bad experiences. On the other hand, they faced having pagan beliefs forced on them by Imperial Rome. At least they could flee to the frontiers to escape it.

Notwithstanding, today it is far worse. The ideas of Satan and his world are virtually unavoidable. Radio, television, direct mail, billboards, the Internet and other means throw a chaotic melange of unbiblical ideas at us from the time we wake up to the time we go to bed. Retreating behind the four walls of our houses does little good in keeping the world at bay.

We try to shield our children from the world’s influences, but they spend several hours each day absorbing worldly attitudes in the classroom and on the playground. Children’s movies, television shows, books and magazines deliver constant references to demonic, sexual or rebellious activities. Try finding truly wholesome adolescent entertainment—it is nearly impossible!

Where can we go where little of this world’s influence can reach us? Many have tried to “go forth from Babylon” (Isaiah 48:20; see Zechariah 2:6-7; Revelation 18:4) only to find that Babylon follows them into the most remote wilderness. And here lies the rub: We can never really leave the world’s influences behind because they are **IN** us! We not only have to shield ourselves from Babylon, this world and all its ways, but we must also purge them from our hearts and minds.

It begins at birth. For many years, Satan exposes us to his way of life, and consciously or not, we accept

much, if not all, of it. Second-generation Christians, too, are not spared this indoctrination. Paul calls the Devil “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2), which Herbert Armstrong explained by using the analogy of radio broadcasting. Satan’s spirit permeates this world, and all humanity by nature is “tuned in” to his frequency (verse 3). That influence drives mankind to oppose God at every turn (Romans 8:7).

But at some point, God mercifully calls us to throw off that enmity and turn to Him. Suddenly, the two opposite systems clash—warfare breaks out in our minds, and sometimes in our lives! Satan does not want to lose any of his foot soldiers, so he fights to retain them. God has commissioned us to fight back:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:11-12)

Peter advises, “Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world” (I Peter 5:9). Not only do we fight Satan and his influence individually, we fight the same battle back-to-back with all our church brethren. Yet sometimes we let the enemy sneak in behind our lines, and what havoc he wreaks!

How well is our war against this



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world progressing? Who holds the high ground? Would the Commander-in-Chief regard our station as solid and invincible to enemy forces? Can He count on us to hold our ground?

Special Interest Groups

What are some of society's current ideas? Have they caused changes in the way society operates? Have they found their way into the thinking of church members? Have they caused damage in the church?

One of the prevalent movements over the past forty years is special interest groups. Because of selfish human nature, everyone wants his group to be recognized and given certain advantages. Minorities want Affirmative Action to "grease the rails" for them so they can grab their "piece of the pie." The Americans with Disabilities Act regulates the rest of us in how we treat the blind, deaf, deformed and otherwise disabled. Gays want the same rights and privileges as heterosexuals. Even animals and trees have advocates fighting for their rights!

Special interest groups have only succeeded in fracturing the nation. We are no longer just Americans in this country, but white-Americans,

Native Americans, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Jewish Americans, rich Americans, poor Americans, middle-class Americans, liberal Americans, conservative Americans, religious Americans, secular Americans, etc., etc., etc.! What ever happened to "one nation under God"?

Has "the one true church" caught the special-interests bug? How many splinter churches are there these days? The number must be well in excess of a hundred! What special interest separates one from another?

Some churches formed around a particular doctrine like the new moons, postponements or Passover observance. Others gathered around a personality. A few organized for geographical reasons. A handful separated over racial problems, abusive ministers or petty disagreements such as whose house should host Sabbath services. Far too many people have ceased attending any church at all because none meet their criteria.

The apostle Paul encountered this in his day in Corinth:

For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household,

that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? (I Corinthians 1:11-13)

In chapter 12, he concludes his thought:

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. . . . [T]here should be no schism in the body. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (verses 12-13, 25, 27)

There is one church, a spiritual organism, presently scattered about in various organizations, but "The Lord knows those who are His" (II Timothy 2:19). True members of the body will be doing God's will and following His doctrine. As Paul goes on to say in the same verse, "Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

Those of the true church are united by the Holy Spirit common to them (Romans 8:14-17). They are one because God is in them all (John 17:20-23), and with this common mind (I Corinthians 2:16; Philippians 2:5), they will—in time with God's help—unite in one organization. This may not take place until the Tribulation begins, but God promises to gather His people "to her place" (Revelation 12:14). Maybe only then will real and lasting unity occur.

Playing the Victim

Another pervasive idea in vogue is victimization. Everyone is a victim of someone or something, and as a result, people demand recompense for their sufferings. No one is responsible anymore for his actions; a person is "forced" by circumstances in his life to act a certain way. It has become so ridiculous that recently a jury acquitted a woman of murder because she had had a "bad hair day"! Her own unruly hair had victimized her!

It seems that many routinely cop insanity pleas in murder trials. But do they have no responsibility in the matter *even if they are insane*? They still took a human life! How many criminals blame their parents or lack thereof for their “life of crime”? Did they not choose that lifestyle or did their parents put a gun to their heads and make them lie, cheat, steal, rape and murder?

Have the cries of victimization resounded through God’s church? Indeed, it is a major complaint throughout every organization! “I suffered terrible abuse from my last pastor!” “I served and served and never got even a ‘thank you!’” “I never got to tell my side of the story!” Sound familiar? Are these complaints truly valid, or are they another example of the trend of victimization?

Some of these cries are certainly true, but they are no excuse for any lack that may be in us. A minister, abusive or not, cannot be blamed for spiritual immaturity, rotten marriages, rebellious children or poor finances. Some people also play the victim to cover the need to overcome personally.

Besides this, God points out that every issue has two sides (Proverbs 18:13; 17), and it is very rare that one side in a matter holds total responsibility (see Ezekiel 34:1-10, 17-22). It is proper to sympathize with those who have been abused, but abuse, a very strong term, should be proved rather than assumed. What parent would tolerate a charge of child abuse against himself without proof? Thus a charge of abuse of any kind should be backed by solid proof.

Abuse, where it has been proved to exist, is heinous, deplorable and punishable. However, accusations without proof or biblically justified ministerial actions (rebuke, correction, even disfellowshipping) do not necessarily constitute abuse. Christians should learn discernment and “judge with righteous judgment” (John 7:24).

Reducing Government

Realizing the tremendous growth in the federal government from 1930-1980, Americans in the nineties have taken “Reduce the size of government!” as a battle cry. Grassroots movements have sprung up everywhere to lobby for handing control of the country back

to the people. The national government is the “bad guy” who has over the years taken more than its constituted powers allow, and the people have organized to wrest it back.

Such a scenario was the backdrop for the 1994 “Republican Revolution,” where voters booted scores of career politicians from their congressional seats, and replaced them with conservative republicans who campaigned on a platform of reducing government. Because the polls showed this to be the country’s mood, President Clinton embraced the idea, appointing Vice President Al Gore to head a commission to streamline Washington’s bureaucracy. In its ever-so-slow manner, Congress has begun to return some power to state and local governments. Calling “town meetings,” a form of “pure democracy,” is a favorite ploy among politicians to seem to be acceding to the people’s demands.

Is it any surprise that government and turning control over the church to the laymembership are also primary concerns of many brethren? They have been immersed in this worldly mood for a few decades! No wonder they think government of any kind is the enemy of the people; power should be spread among many to limit the control of any person or group over the church; and all the members of the church are holy, so all should have a say in all its functions.

Some have become so dead-set against government in the church that any attempt to show government from the Bible is harshly rejected as twisting Scripture. No amount of proof will satisfy them! They deny verses from the Old Testament because they are “Old Covenant.” They turn plain, literal meanings of New Testament scriptures on their heads to say the opposite. Arguing with such people, as Paul says, just “increase[s] to more ungodliness . . . [and] generate[s] strife” (II Timothy 2:16, 23).

Does God support democracy any more than totalitarianism? What does the Bible say? Basically, it says that God has set up His government like a family, with a father in authority. All His governmental systems contain one person in authority, constrained by His law and motivated by His

Spirit. If the members, also likewise constrained and motivated, work in harmony with the person in charge, they produce great fruit.

However, any government—even those using God’s form—will make mistakes because fallible human beings run it. Rejecting government in the church because of past mistakes is “throwing the baby out with the bath water.” The government is not the problem—sinful men are! The Bible provides instructions and remedies for situations where men in authority abuse their power.

Beyond that, God knows and avenges those who fall victim to such abuses. He will correct His servants in His own time and His own way. In a similar situation, concerning the rich oppressing the poor, James advises: [To the oppressor:]

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for *your miseries that ARE COMING upon you!* . . . Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and *the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth* [hosts]. You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you. (James 5:1, 4-6)

[To the oppressed:]

Therefore *be patient*, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. *Establish your hearts*, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. *Do not grumble against one another*, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! (verses 7-9)

James instructs us to leave these matters in God’s hands, clean up our own lives and continue our walk toward His Kingdom. We can use these

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Teen Thrills



A deadly game called "Catching a Breeze" is the latest death-defying teen thrill. Teenagers find parallel railroad tracks and stand between two passing trains. The thrill comes not only from the danger of being immediately hit, but also from the force of the wind as the trains rush by, which can pull a person under the wheels. Two Wisconsin boys were killed in two weeks, and other fatalities are being reported across the country.

V O L C A N O S

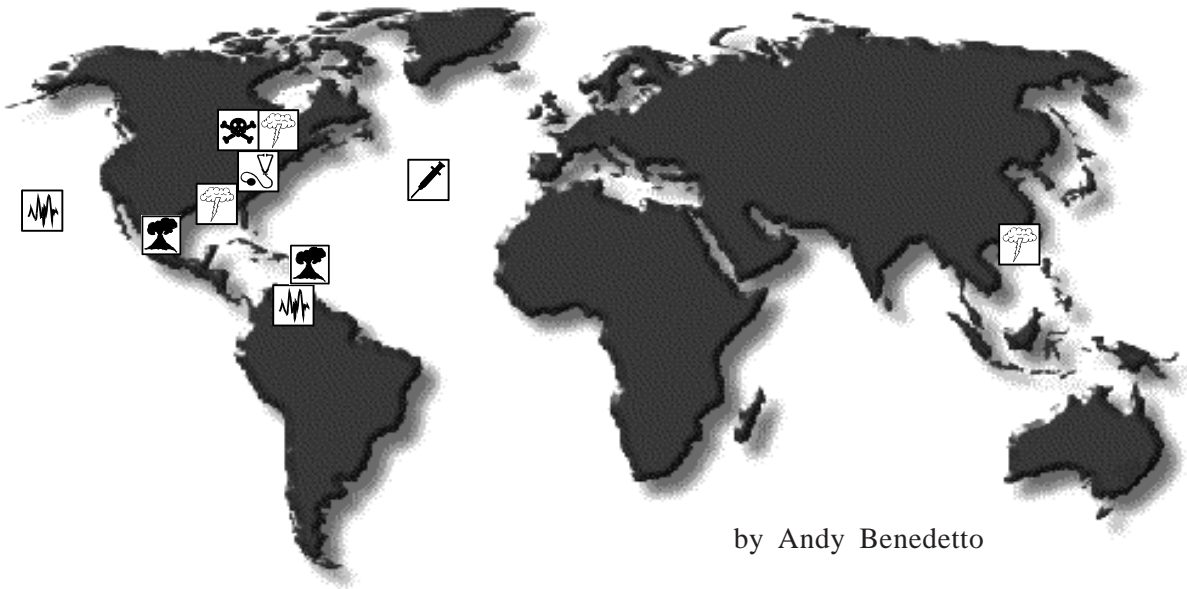


- ◆ Mexico's Popocateptl volcano erupted in late June, spewing ash 5 miles into the air and forcing thousands of residents to evacuate. This eruption, the worst since 1925, dropped ash, soot and sand on Mexico City 33 miles away.
- ◆ Montserrat's Soufriere Hills volcano erupted twice, once on June 28 and again on July 4, the most volatile it has been since 1995. Four people died and 20 are missing.

The Internet is the latest "crack house." Anyone with a computer can find out how to get high on LSD, check the going price of marijuana or get a copy of the formula of methamphetamine. Online testimonials make recreational drugs sound like fun. One teen says, "I can place a call and within an hour get [cocaine] delivered."



DRUGS



by Andy Benedetto

E A R T H Q U A K E S



On July 9, a powerful 6.9 quake hit Venezuela, killing 70 people and injuring at least 469. It was that country's most devastating earthquake in three decades. A 5.6 temblor struck near Hilo, Hawaii, causing \$1 million in damage.

W E A T H E R



- ◆ Floods and landslides from 16 inches of rain forced Hong Kong schools, government offices and businesses to close after the worst rainstorms in 50 years. Flooding and heavy rains, some of the worst in centuries, also hit the British Isles and Central Europe.
- ◆ Slow-moving hurricane Danny dumped more than 30 inches of rain on Alabama's resort coast on July 20. Along the Fish River only the tops of some roofs were visible. As far away as Charlotte, NC, about nine inches of rain fell on July 23, causing local flooding and three deaths.
- ◆ Winds of more than 90 mph and heavy rain strafed Michigan, Indiana and Ohio on July 3. More than 400 homes were destroyed and 10 people were killed.



Staphylococcus aureus is the number one cause of hospital infections like blood poisoning and pneumonia, but early reports from the University of Chicago indicate it has become resistant to medicine's best antibiotic, vancomycin. Almost half of all staph strains have become resistant to all antibiotics except vancomycin, and now it is under attack, causing a worldwide health alert. Hospital-acquired infections affect more than 2 million Americans each year.

D I S E A S E

THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT

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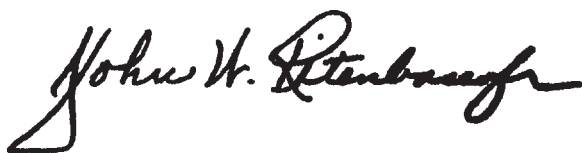
advice of “authoritative” individuals, our people have fallen prey to the lustful desires of human nature. Humanistic psychologists and psychiatrists urge people in the measured tones of academia that sin is passé and that we should not concern ourselves with remaining faithful or virgin. Ministers back away from the Bible’s authority by seeming to respect it no more than a mere writing of men. Sex gurus such as Alex Comfort, author of *The Joy of Sex*, once said of sex, “There is nothing to be afraid of and never was.” For decades Hugh Hefner has propounded his insidious “Playboy Philosophy” in his magazine, setting the tone for contemporary moral standards. We cannot forget the political figures whose sexual escapades, once only whispered about, are now openly discussed. Yet many are re-elected, indicating the public’s approval or unconcern.

People are persuaded, even though the statistics indicate an ever-increasing rise in sexually transmitted diseases and a steady divorce rate. Because God’s law may not exact an immediate penalty (Ecclesiastes 8:11), the hucksters of hedonism cry, “There is no penalty!” But because God is faithful, the penalty always falls. The penalties are mounting, bringing great sorrow and becoming visible for all who care to see. How much easier it is to learn wisdom through obeying God rather than through the harsh experiences of human nature!

Leviticus 20:22 concludes a section devoted to a variety of sexual sins and states a major result or penalty of breaking the seventh commandment: “You shall therefore keep all My statutes and all My judgments, and perform them, that the land where I am bringing you to dwell may not vomit you out.” This is the Bible’s way of saying that when a society unrestrainedly breaks God’s laws, nature will rise up as an enemy and make it impossible to live in the land. The inhabitants will be uprooted and thrust out—but not before many die in famine, war and natural disasters. The natural process of sin will bring that nation to its knees and humble it before the world.

Israel’s problems with faithlessness, of which sexual faithlessness is a major form, is on the verge of destroying us. Take heed, brethren! A major social calamity is under way and building to a crescendo. If we become caught up in it, it will lead us right into the Tribulation. This should truly motivate us to keep the seventh commandment.

In Christian love,



SCRATCHING OUR ITCHES

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trials to make us stronger, more patient and more godly. Paul counsels similarly:

Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you. (Philippians 3:13-15)

“Itching Ears”

Just before his martyrdom, Paul warned Timothy that such a situation as ours would arise:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (II Timothy 4:3-4)

Paul’s description of people having “itching ears” is picturesque. The Greek word, *knethomai*, literally means “to itch, rub, scratch or tickle.” This figure of speech implies that they have an itch that must be scratched, or as William Barclay puts it, “they have ears which have to be continually titillated with novelties” (*The Letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, p. 202). Such people open their ears to any teacher who will relieve their particular “itch” regardless of how it measures against the truth.

The solution to this resides in proper discernment based on God’s infallible Word. John writes, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1). Christ commends the Ephesian church for this: “I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars” (Revelation 2:2). Paul says it most simply, “Test all things; hold fast what is good” (I Thessalonians 5:21).

As the fall festivals approach, it may be a good idea to evaluate the “causes” we endorse. Are they truly of God, or are they itches we want scratched? Have we allowed the world to influence our thinking, or are we on solid biblical footing? Have we held our ground against Satan, or have we given in to his relentless onslaught?

Our effort now should be presenting ourselves “blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (verse 23), for God is not concerned with scratching our itches but transforming us into the image of His Son. That is our only cause!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

BIBLE STUDY:

THE EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

The eighth commandment of God's law—"You shall not steal"—reflects our sense of responsibility toward others and their possessions. It exposes whether we understand the motivating principle and purpose of the entire law of God, the principle of give rather than get (Acts 20:35). This commandment, found in Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:19, is interwoven with the other commandments. Breaking it usually begins with

covetousness. Such greed can lead to physical or mental violence and murder. It often involves fraud, deceit and lying. Stealing to acquire the objects of our worship is spiritual adultery and idolatry against God. Succumbing to Satan's "get" way of life dishonors our spiritual Father and elevates the self above God. Would we consider stealing if we truly and deeply respected God's power and office?



1. Did Jacob know stealing is sin? Genesis 30:29-33.

COMMENT: Jacob lived long before God gave the Ten Commandments at Sinai, yet he understood theft. Stealing is taking or appropriating another's property or ideas without permission, dishonestly or unlawfully, usually in a secret manner. The apostle Paul reiterates the eighth commandment in the New Testament (Romans 13:9), showing that it is clearly a sin to steal.

2. What was the penalty in ancient Israel for stealing to avoid starvation? Exodus 22:1-4; Proverbs 6:30-31.

COMMENT: The penalty for thievery to avert hunger was not as severe as stealing motivated by greed. Nevertheless, any kind of stealing is shameful (Jeremiah 2:26). We should ask God to provide for our needs so that we will not be tempted to steal to survive (Proverbs 30:7-9).

3. What happens when we associate with a thief? Proverbs 29:24. Does God hear the cry of those cheated by a dishonest employer? James 5:4.

COMMENT: Having a thief as a partner will only bring shame and harm upon ourselves. We become liars because we share in the lies of the thief. Two principles relate to the responsibilities of the employer/employee relationship: "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work" and "a fair day's work for a fair day's wage."

4. Should we fellowship with a spiritual brother who is an extortioner? I Corinthians 5:11.

COMMENT: An extortioner obtains things from others by force, intimidation or undue power. Parents can train a child to extort if they give him everything he demands through his cries and tantrums. That child is stealing what he wants from his parents. Christ condemns the Pharisees for extorting from the people. They used their office to intimidate the people into giving offerings (Matthew 23:25). Christ admonishes the tax collector to avoid stealing from people by not collecting more than his due (Luke 3:12-13).

5. Is stealing sometimes hidden behind the appear-

ance of benevolence? John 12:4-6; Acts 5:1-11.

COMMENT: Ananias and Sapphira not only lied against the Holy Spirit but they also stole from God by appearing to give all the money from the land they sold instead of part of it. Within the spirit of the law, they were stealing the part they retained under false pretenses.

6. Are false shepherds comparable to thieves and robbers? John 10:1-10. Are they held responsible for their actions? Jeremiah 23:1-2; Ezekiel 34:1-10.

COMMENT: A false minister tries to steal people from Jesus Christ, the True Shepherd, by enticing them with false doctrine mixed with some truth. A sign of a false shepherd is neglecting the flock while looking out for himself, accumulating material possessions in the process.

7. Does stealing defile a man? Matthew 15:18-20. Can a thief inherit God's Kingdom? I Corinthians 6:9-10.

COMMENT: Defilement comes from within a person's heart and mind. Stealing defiles because it begins in the mind with covetousness and greed spawned by a selfish character.

8. What is the opposite of stealing? Ephesians 4:28; Acts 20:35; Luke 3:11.

COMMENT: In contrast to getting, acquiring, taking, extorting and embezzling, God's people must give, produce, work and be resourceful. Paul advised, "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you" (II Thessalonians 3:7-8). The eighth commandment guards our relationship with others, urges us to produce and accomplish so that we can take care of those in need. It should stir us to service and usefulness on behalf of our fellow human beings. Such an attitude is pleasing to our Judge, who wants such people in His Kingdom (Matthew 25:31-40).