

Keeping Love Alive (Part 1)

Contributing Toward A Good Relationship With Christ

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 13-Oct-07; Tape #850

In light of the three messages I gave during the feast regarding God's faithful providence toward us shown through Eden and its Garden, the Tabernacle and the Temple design, and His continuous consistent working within the same general geographic area of Mount Moriah, the Mount of Olives and Mount Zion, He is not working through the families of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from whom also the Savior arose, but His purpose is now spread out to include those called from all people from all nations.

It was done by God in this manner to hold us steadily focused in faith on His steadfast adherence to the outworking of His purpose. Even though the events in that area may have occurred hundreds, or even thousands of years apart, they always happened in the same area and to the same people. Furthermore, when Christ returns, He will return to where He was crucified, and from where He left.

This week I received a phone call from a woman which kind of touches on this. This woman is not a member of the Church of the Great God, or any Church of God for that matter. I believe she is attending a Methodist Church that split away from the United Methodist Group because they did not like the way the Methodist Church Conference was conducting their doctrinal position. She is in anguish over this congregation that she is still a part of and their teaching regarding what they termed as "God's endless grace." She was complaining about the Eternal Security doctrine that she finds as "disgustingly deceptive." I believe those were her words.

This phone call added to my motivation, because what that doctrine essentially does is virtually guarantee that, though people may indeed have an intellectual appreciation for Christ and for what He has done, their faith will be essentially passive. It will be dead, as a matter of fact, because it will produce little or no works.

I am going to give you a quote from another paper on the Eternal Security doctrine written by a man who again has no connection to the Church of the Great God, or any Church of God for all I know. I received this as an email this week. By the way, it is a very well-written paper. It was not done by some ignorant clod-buster from some backwater area. You could just tell by the way the man wrote it that he is well educated, thoughtfully thinking these things through. Thoughtfully, yes, but not thoroughly taken from the Scriptures.

He said, "Any denial of Eternal Security is, in its essence, a belief that we must maintain our own salvation by our own good works. This is completely antithetical to salvation by grace." Now if that does not put a stop on works, I do not know, because it is going to give somebody the idea that since it is antithetical to grace, then maybe we should not work. Do you think human nature does not think like that? Oh yes it does.

Why then did James write that "Faith without works is dead"? A dead man produces nothing. A

dead faith produces nothing. Is a dead faith going to provide a person with salvation? The inference there is so strong that it cannot be avoided. God wants a *living* faith. Paul completely agrees with that, because in Ephesians 2:8 he said, "For by grace are you saved *through* faith," and then two verses later he said, "For we [meaning Christians] are His [meaning God] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *unto* good works which God has ordained [commanded?] that we should walk in them."

Now you tell me the difference between the approach I just gave you from God's apostle out of the Bible and the writing of this undoubtedly well-educated man who intimates, implies very strongly, that works get in the way of salvation. It seems like the apostles had a far different idea.

Any true Christian—and by that I mean a person who is truly involved in a personal relationship with the Father and the Son—knows, and knows that he knows, that he cannot save himself by his works. This is because he grasps the incredible wide gulf between God's holiness and his own insipid weak and putrid human nature. How could anything done by such a creature earn salvation before this holy God?

It should be easily seen by us that these people writing papers, such as the one from which I just quoted, do not have anything but the foggiest idea of the part that works play in God's salvation. Let me make it very simple. Works *demonstrate* our faith. Works *are* our response to God's calling and freely-given generous grace. They do not seem to understand that God *demand*s a response to the love that He gives us. It is not that His ego needs appreciation like a hungry person needs food, but because our response is good for us. It fits right within His purpose. Reciprocity is always a part of our relationship with God. He gives love, and He expects love from us in return for our good.

Later on in this paper the author said this: "Eternal Security is not a license to sin; rather it is the security of knowing that God's love is guaranteed for those who trust in Christ." Now did you catch what he said right at the end—one key word? He used the word "trust."

These people talk in circles regarding this false doctrine. Do you know what trust is? Trust is belief demonstrated. It is not merely intellectual. It is action *in* faith. It is the demonstration of faith. Now God demands of His begotten children that they demonstrate their belief. To ensure this He puts us to tests. Let us turn to Genesis 22 to one of the most famous tests of all time.

Genesis 22:1 And it came to pass after these things that God did test Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

You know the story. Drop down to verse 12.

Genesis 22:12 And he [God] said, Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do you anything unto him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son from me.

Let me amplify verse 12 in part. "God said, Now I know that you believe Me. You fear Me. You

respect Me. You reverence Me." Abraham's work demonstrated those things to God. What if Abraham had said, "Well, I am absolutely safe in security because of Your grace." Do you think that would really have flown with God? I do not think so. What Abraham did demonstrated, it reciprocated, his love back to God in obedience. This in turn leads to a very important Scripture in regard to love not reciprocated. We will see this in Revelation 2 in the letter to the Ephesians.

Revelation 2:4-5 Nevertheless I have somewhat against you because you have left your first love. Remember therefore from whence you are fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto you quickly and will remove your candlestick out of his place, except you repent.

There is a true saying that "hope deferred makes the heart sick." There is another true saying which says "familiarity breeds contempt." These verses show that a Christian, if he is not careful, can become subject to any number of persuasions or influences that produce a decline in his attention to his calling. The contempt, or the heart-sickness, does not have to be at a very intense level. It only has to be of enough force so that we lose our edge, which athletic-team coaches call "their spirit"—that attitude which motivates the athletes to excel in their game. The loss only has to be enough that it causes careless, small deviation so that we neglect doing things we previously would not have permitted ourselves the liberty of doing. But because of human nature, unless one is careful, the neglect or the deviations can quickly become habits themselves.

I am going to read those two verses out of the *Amplified Bible*.

Revelation 2:4-5 [The Amplified Bible] "I have this one charge to make against you, that you have left, abandoned, the love that you had at first. You have deserted *Me*, your first love. Remember then from what heights you have fallen. Repent. Change the inner man to meet God's will, and do the works you did previously when first you knew the Lord, or else I will visit you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you change your mind and repent."

Does that not make it clear that Christ demands works? He said, "Go back and do the first works." He expects works to be a part of Christian life.

This translation makes the departure, the desertion from love very personal. It is a desertion, an abandonment, not from an enormous large body of people or even from a number of beliefs, but from a singular Being—our Savior. This gets real close. It is a departure from loving *Him*.

Now what are the Ephesians told by Christ to do? They are to demonstrate that they are repenting and recapturing their first love. Then verse 4 tells us that they are to go back to doing the first works. So much for the Eternal Security doctrine.

In this message, I want us to consider the fact that relationships *must* be worked at for improvement's sake, whether in our relationship with Christ, in our marriage, or within the

fellowship in the Church. We cannot just sit and drift, expecting things to take care of themselves. This is most especially true, though, of our relationship with Christ, because *that* is the driving relationship to everything else.

Acts 3:19-21 Repent you therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things which God has spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

The message the apostles took to the world was and is one of great hope for anyone truly concerned about the future of mankind because it offers a Savior, a Redeemer who will establish His government of truth and justice, with the Christians bearing rule under Him if they remain loyal, grow in His way, and overcome.

But things have not worked out or happened according to the apostles' expectations or ours for that matter. This is especially true for those of us who are older in the faith who heard this message through the Worldwide Church of God. Evelyn and I first heard of it in 1959. There were people at the Feast of Tabernacles with us who heard it way back in the late 40s and early 50s and were baptized during that period of time.

I know very well that things have not gone the way in the world or in the church that they expected. Evelyn and I thought that our children would never have to go to high school—that by the time they would get to that age the Kingdom of God would be on earth. So whatever date we would figure on—1975, or 1982, or 1989, or 1999—here it is 2007, and Christ *still* is not here. The apostles had to go through the same thing, and the people who were converted by the apostles' preaching had to go through the same thing, and maybe even longer since the lives of many of the apostles were cut off pretty quickly. They had lived 50 or 70 years, and Christ still was not on earth.

There are still quite a number of people who are part of the Church of God who have been waiting, looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ for a long period of time. Evelyn and I have just passed our 48th year since baptism. We are now in our 49th year, and an awful lot has happened that we did not expect.

The important thing now is are we taking advantage of the time, or are we allowing ourselves to grow depressed, to grow casual, lethargic in our approach? Is our love for Jesus Christ hot enough, zealous enough that we can continue to drive ourselves forward, still looking forward with a great deal of anticipation for His return and our marriage to Him? An awful lot of people have fallen by the wayside during that period of time.

It is very easy for one to lose the essential element of his zeal when expectations are not met and frustrations begin to enter into the picture, and with it perhaps cynicism, sarcasm, and doubt right along with them. What I am saying is, that unless one actually works to keep the flame alive, whether in marriage, in family life, or on the job where one earns his income, or in

his relationship with God, it is actually very easy for one's devotion, and therefore one's growth, to decline.

Considering marriage, relationships seem to come and go at an appalling rate if we look at the divorce statistics. How many people are living together because they do not think marriage can really last and they can walk away with a lot more freedom because they are not really hitched by the state or by a church? When things do not go quite as planned, there will be adjustments made, except by those who are really zealous.

We will be looking in Hebrews 2:1—at a writing that was made to a group of people who were sliding away. There is no doubt about it. The rest of the book shows that very clearly, and Paul, who we believe is the author of the book, was very concerned about their backward regression into apostasy. Maybe some had already gone that way. I think that overall the book of Hebrews is the most exhortive book in the entire Bible, urging people to hang on and grow, to turn themselves around. This book, brethren, was written to the Ephesian era of the church, and there is a lot of meat in it for those of us who are now in the Laodicean era which bears a great number of similarities with the Ephesian era. So Paul says the following:

Hebrews 2:1 Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.

The word "Therefore" is a conjunction tying what follows it with what preceded it. Now what preceded it was a description and an explanation of the exalted dignity, power, and authority of the One with whom Christian life is associated with—Jesus Christ. He is our Creator, brethren. He is our God. He is our Savior. He sits at the right hand of the Father. He is the Head of the church, and all angels, who are far more powerful than we are, submit to Him. He is the One we have to love. That is why the word "Therefore" is there.

Seeing what He is, what should we do in relation to this? It has to be written, because Christians have shown that they have the proclivity of letting this privileged relationship with Him slip from life's activity.

The word-picture that is contained in the word "slip" has a couple of applications. It is of a boat whose mooring to a dock has become untied and the boat is drifting away with the tide or the current because there is nothing to hold it there. Now assumed in the verse is that whoever secured the boat to the dock did not do a good job of it, indicating a lack of attentiveness to his responsibility. It can also have the meaning of letting something leak away, and thus some have translated this as "Lest me let them (which is what the "therefore" was pointing to) flow from our mind."

Now what is it that ties us to Christ? How is it that we hear the message? It is not the means of hearing that is my concern, but rather the intensity of the seriousness with which we hear.

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," so says Romans 10:17. But there is a difference between merely hearing and truly listening. One commentary I looked at said that listening is the most frequently-issued exhortation by Jesus. Jesus said, "Listen!" I never counted them, but this commentator said Jesus said this over and over to people. "Listen!"

Jesus emphasized it with saying, "Verily, verily I say unto you." This was God in the flesh speaking to people, and it is God speaking to you and me. It is our Savior.

There is an example that I think illustrates how one is able to hear without really listening. It comes from children. The parent may be giving an instruction to the child, and the sound truly reaches the child's ear. The child continues right on doing what he was doing when the sound reached his ear because he was not taking heed to any sense of urgency contained within the parent's voice; and thus he dawdles. The sound produces no action. The child did not put into his hearing the attentiveness that he should have. There may be other factors working in this, but I think you get the illustration. Do we really listen to Christ's word? That is the point.

Do we listen thoughtfully, thinking of examples, making comparisons? The thought here, then, is that humanly we are frequently deceived as to the importance of things, and before we perceive the value of them, perhaps they are irretrievably gone. This most often happens to young people, and thus it most often happens to us when we are young in the faith. There is so much in the world to influence and to distract us. The world is so attractive and so appealing to human nature, and human nature, being the way it is, really listens to those things coming from the world.

This sort of approaches this problem we Christians have in allowing our zeal to wane:

Galatians 6:7-10 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap. For he that sows to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that sows to the Spirit shall of the spirit reap life everlasting. and let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.

These verses generally say that if one does the right thing, the right result will occur; however, it does not tell us right in this context that life is full of twists and turns, so much so that Solomon said in Ecclesiastes that he had seen good things happen to evil people, and bad things happen to good people. But Solomon did go on to say that the answer to this perplexing puzzle is, regardless of one's age, station in life, or whatever circumstance, to accept the fact that seemingly unavoidable perplexing twists in life will occur, but one must continue to push on, fearing God and keeping His commandments.

How easily are we turned aside when we, as Christians, see strange, sometime hurtful, painful, disturbing, frustrating twists and turns take place in life? Are we not supposed to be blessed by God? Here we are, keeping His commandments. We are trying to sow the right things. We think that we are, we will say, generally good. I am not saying that is bad. I am saying that is good. We think we really are in Christ, then why are these things happening to us? What affect does that have on you psychologically?

See, *that* is another experience that can turn us aside, and our zeal begins to wane because we are trying to be good, and everything is going wrong. Good things happen to bad people, and as

Solomon said, "They go to their grave in peace." Bad things happen to good people like happened to Job. There he was, sick, miserable, faced with the taunting of these people who thought that he was evil, and trying to defend themselves in the midst of all this.

We have on the one hand things that did not go the way we thought because we thought Christ would be on earth very quickly, and when He did not come, it got wearying and frustrating. Then on the other hand, instead of sailing smoothly into the Kingdom of God, being lifted up into the air at Christ's return, we are stumbling and tripping all over the place, saying "Woe is me! I've got this great big load of problems on my back." So it seems like Galatians 6: 7 and 8 is working backwards. The better we try to be, the worse things go.

Things like that are circumstances we can easily become subject to. What was bearing on those people in the book of Galatians that Paul would say such a thing? That series of verses does exhort us to address the pushing on regardless of what is happening in our life, knowing the certainty that neither God nor His word can be outwitted, and knowing that whatever one sows is absolutely true while taking hope in the certainty of reward for doing the right things regardless of present circumstances.

So what was it that was bearing on these people's faith and love that would lead to them "being weary in well doing," as Paul said? The book itself gives no indication of a bloody persecution, so it must have been the combination of the general difficulty of Christian living, social and economical persecution possibly, and maybe the really big one was that Christ had not yet returned.

Circumstances like this tend to draw human nature into a gradual lethargy, and they, like us, undoubtedly fervently desired that He would come quickly, and when He does not, it is not that difficult for a weariness with the present threatening conditions to build an attitude to become depressed. Hope deferred does make the heart sick.

I think I know the real reasons why they had to be exhorted in this manner. Recall that Christ said in Revelation 2: 1-7 that He knew their works, both good and bad. The bad one was that they had left their first love. Because of human nature's devotion to Christianity, Christianity is never easy even under good circumstances. Christ said it is difficult. That comes right from the Boss. Human nature always presents reason for relaxing one's devotion, and those reasons are the broad way Jesus mentioned.

These people were losing their attentiveness because they were losing sight of the real goal. It was slipping away, and they were almost entirely neglecting what Christ was doing for them on a daily basis. When the lover is sliding away, (or actually we are sliding away from the lover), the proximity gets ever more distant and it affects the attentiveness greatly. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Are you beginning to see that one of the things we have to do in our love for Christ to keep it alive is to seek Him out constantly so that He does not get far away? Remember, I said they were forgetting what Christ did for them every day.

John 15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches: He that abides in me,
and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit: for without me you can

do nothing.

This pinpoints their problem. When tied together with Revelation 2, and especially verses 4 and 5, we can begin to see that they were losing their devoted love for Him personally. How quickly they forgot that without Him we can do nothing; that He is daily working to prepare us for His kingdom by forgiving us, leading us, being patient with us, instructing and protecting us. "I know your works." He was well aware of what was going on in that group, and He said that to those whose works had tailed off badly.

And just as surely as a branch cut from the trunk of a tree withers and dies, producing no fruit, so do we, if we do not work to develop and strengthen our relationship with Christ. It has taken me a long way to get around to this, but this is our responsibility in this love relationship. We cannot sit by passively, just waiting for Christ to do everything. We have to respond in love to Him too.

Brethren, this relationship is *everything* to growth and salvation itself. That is what John 15: 5 is telling us. "You can do nothing without Me." Either the relationship is viable and growing, because we are responding to Him, seeking Him, trying to do everything we can to please Him, or we are slowly getting ready to drift away. Is that not what happens in human relationships? It is, brethren. They are kept alive by constant contact. Human relationships are kept alive and growing and fresh and energizing by two people who are both contributing to the well-being of the relationship. This relationship is everything to growth and to salvation itself.

Christ's metaphor indicates that we are as totally dependent on our relationship with Him as surely as a branch is to the tree trunk. He is the source and the sustainer, and the provider of our spiritual life. The Ephesians were not overcoming any longer, and thus the energizing effects of success were not fulfilling them. Instead, probably, without even realizing what was happening to them, they were turning longingly, as human nature is prone to do, toward the world for gratification and relief.

If one feels that his affection and expectation are abused by such things as thinking that the trials are too hard, or Christ's delay is frustrating, it impairs one's power to keep on track and grow, because one tends to follow where one's emotions lead. What one likes and wants to do gradually becomes what one thinks about, and then wills to do.

Turn with me to Exodus 32: 1 for an example. Listen to what it says here. This of course takes place out in the wilderness. It is just a short time after God gave them the law on Mount Sinai.

Exodus 32:1 And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, up, make us gods which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him.

Exodus 32:6 And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.

Moses' return to the camp was delayed longer than the people thought he should be gone. (Are you making a parallel with Jesus Christ?) Thus, within a few weeks human nature's affection pulled their attention elsewhere. Now in regard to the people in Ephesus, their mind had subtly deceived them into justifying what they were doing because Christ was not returning.

Here it was (as far as we know when the book of Revelation was written) in the mid 90s AD. Christ had been resurrected over 60 years, and He still was not back. Those impatient people were human just like we are. Maybe most of them were Gentiles, but still they were impatient. They did not grasp the fullness of how long the wait might be, [even] unto death. Maybe they were even taught by the apostles and by those who followed the apostles. But Christ never promised He would come back in anybody's lifetime, because He said that was in the hand, in the power of the Father. That is why this message is in here.

It is very easy for us to lose the devoted zeal that we once had in our first love. It is something that, if we are going to retain it, has to be worked at. It has to be worked at virtually every day to keep the flame, the spark alive.

In the Exodus example, the delay for Moses not coming back and the thoughts that were in these people's minds, gave them justification to draw them back to the entertainments learned in Egypt—entertainments that would surely work to destroy any devotion to Christ who was perceived by them as not paying attention to them. They could easily convince themselves that, "Well, if He really wanted to, He would come down off that mountain." But He was not listening to them.

How many appeals have we made, "Come, Lord Jesus!" and every time the answer has been, "I will, but not yet." If we think of it that way, at least there is some hope in it. "I will." He does not just shut us down and say, "You just mind your own business." No, that hope is always there, but we have to be of the mind that we do not let it depress us, because if He is not coming yet, it is good for us. Do we ever think of it that way? That is the right way to think of it. His way is always better, and it is good that He does not come.

You know what happened there in Exodus 32; that His delay in returning when they wanted Him to come became a justification for that wild, idolatrous celebration, and He became their enemy when they bowed themselves down to another god—from Savior to enemy in a matter of days.

I have experienced in my years in the ministry some things somewhat similar to this in that two members become offended with each other. I am over here, off to the side, you see. But eventually they feel that I am not giving them what they want, and so for no good spiritual reason they leave this fellowship, not realizing that they are taking most of the problem with them. If you think that does not hurt me, you are wrong. It does hurt me. It gets me depressed that they would leave over something so simple maybe that did not even involve me or the Church of the Great God, or back in the Worldwide Church of God for that matter, for those things were happening very often.

Let us go back to the book of Colossians as we begin to turn this toward what we have to do.

Colossians 3:1 If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God.

Reflect on that just a minute, and let your reflection take you back to Hebrews the first chapter. That is the way that whole book begins, giving us a picture of Jesus Christ and His power, and dignity, and authority—our Creator, and our Savior, seated at the right hand of God, and "He is the One with whom we have to do," as it says in Hebrews 4:12.

So here in Colossians 3, Paul is saying that we have got to turn our attention back to Him. You might wonder why Paul is saying this at this point. You might know the answer if you know what is in Colossians the second chapter. In Colossians 2, Paul was warning these people of being turned aside by a vain deceit, a philosophy. In that chapter he was essentially saying, "This you do not want to do." He told them not to get drawn off by this demonic, philosophic thinking that was infiltrating the church of God there in Colossae.

In Colossians 3, he is turning away from that, and instead he is telling them in this chapter what he wants them to do if they are going to continue growth in Christian life. The first thing he says is just what Hebrews chapter one says. "Do not let what Christ is slip from your mind. Turn your attention to Him."

Colossians 3:2-4 Set your affection [things you love] on things above, not on things on the earth, [Come away from the world.] For you are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with him in glory.

Here they were, slip-sliding away and being tempted by this false doctrine that was attractive to very many of them, and so he says to correct this that they have to turn their mind in another direction.

The exhortation in verse 2, to set our mind, more literally means "exercise your mind." It is going to take work to do this. What is contained within that direction Paul gives in that instruction is his telling us it is not impossible to re-direct our energies and feelings. Because Christ is in us, it can be done.

If we put this thought together with Galatians 6:7-10, then Paul is