Navigating the Stumbling Blocks to Success

How to Be a Stumbling Block

Clowning Around With Anemones

Did Jesus Teach All 10 Commandments? Part 1

That Time I Was an Astronaut

What is success, and how do we reach it? Here’s how applying purpose, preparation and perseverance can help us achieve the most important things in life.

You can find dozens of business and self-help books giving keys to success, but most overlook this vital key that makes all the difference.

Part 1 of “Searching for God” in Discern focused on answering the questions, “Can we find God if He is hiding from us? Would He do that and, if so, why?” This time we look at the other side of the coin: Can God find us?

Jesus Christ uttered this reassuring promise just before His ascension: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Its fulfillment on Pentecost continues to reverberate today!

What you choose to say at the end of your life isn’t the most important thing in the world. What God says about you is.

To those who don’t believe in God, biblical morality seems arbitrary and restrictive. Secular humanism seeks to find human solutions, presenting a mixture of good intentions with an underlying approach that allows what the Bible defines as evil.

Even one person reaching the point of giving up all hope is too many. So it is alarming that we seem to be facing a hopelessness epidemic. Our loving Creator recognizes the problems and offers the solid solutions—and real hope!

Resisting the constant influence of this Satan-inspired world as well as our own human weaknesses can make overcoming sin a daunting task. Are we approaching some aspects of this process the wrong way?
Brimming with self-confidence, the young minister boldly strode up to the pulpit to deliver his first sermon. But as soon as he looked out at the congregation, a wave of panic swept over him. His thoughts froze in mid-sentence, rendering him fearful of even opening his mouth. He eventually managed to stumble through a few sentences, but the sermon he felt so assured would awe the audience dissolved into a disaster. Red-faced, he hurriedly exited the stage.

After he slid into his seat, an elderly lady leaned over and offered him a bit of sage advice: “Young man, if you had gone up the way you went down, then you could have gone down the way you went up.”

Was the young man humiliated or humbled? (There is a big difference between the two!) It depends on how well he took her advice and whether he learned the right things from the experience.

One would hope the wise counsel did not fall on deaf ears and that he succeeded in something far more important than impressing people—becoming more humble. Being a better man is far more important than being an awesome speaker.

Learning the big lessons

I suspect we can all see a little bit of ourselves in his story. Like all of us, he desperately wanted to succeed, but also like all of us, he felt the sting of shame that comes from failure.

Success sometimes seems so elusive and the bitter pill of failure tastes a lot worse when we realize that we have been our own worst enemies in achieving it.

There are a lot of stumbling blocks we have to navigate on the road to success. Among the most dangerous is pride.

While this old story goes back to at least the 1840s, its lesson is timeless. It reminds me of an even older saying that goes back around 3,000 years: “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

This adage is one of many such bits of wisdom that King Solomon collected for his son in the biblical book we know today as Proverbs. You read that one in chapter 16, verse 18. Here’s another gem we find later: “A man’s pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honor” (Proverbs 29:23).

Solomon wrote and collected hundreds of such “success proverbs” because, like any good dad, he was trying to help his boy achieve his full potential. So he coached his son on subjects such as anger, correction, counsel, envy, honesty, kindness, laziness, leadership, lying, controlling the tongue, self-control, tact and wisdom. All of these—and the proverbs associated with them—are worth closely examining to understand how they affect our character and our odds of success.

Had the story of the young minister and the elderly lady been around in his time, Solomon may have included it in his collection too.

One’s success depends on learning the big lessons about life.

Stepping-stones to success

Big lessons are the focus of the lead articles in this issue. So many entire books have been written on how to succeed—in careers, marriages, finances or life itself—that initially we questioned whether it was a little too ambitious for us to tackle such a huge subject with only a couple of short articles.

Then again, we’re not claiming to cover everything there is to say about success. We’re just trying to provide stepping-stones to get you started on that path.

If these articles help just one person understand three of the biggest lessons about ensuring success—and the biggest factor that will kill it—then we will consider this issue, well, a success.

If we can kindle an interest in exploring more of God’s values and His principles of success, that will be even better.

Clyde Kilough
Editor
What is success, and how do we reach it? Here’s how applying purpose, preparation and perseverance can help us achieve the most important things in life.

By Mike Bennett

How to Be Successful
How would you answer if a job interviewer asked, “What is your definition of success?”

What about if a family member asked you? Or your minister?

For that matter, what will it take for you to consider your life a success?

Looking at all the famous quotes about success by successful people, you could conclude there are many definitions of success. It’s broader than money and fame. In fact, those with wealth and celebrity often have been burned by them and mention other things instead:

- “Success comes from knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming”—John Wooden, renowned UCLA basketball coach.
- “If you carefully consider what you want to be said of you in the funeral experience, you will find your definition of success”—Stephen Covey, best-selling author of The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People.
- “I measure success by how many people love me”—billionaire and philanthropist Warren Buffett.

Boiling it all down, success is achieving the most important things in life.

And there are practical steps that lead toward success.

These keys to success have been stated and numbered various ways. As a quick memory aid I like the three Ps: purpose, preparation and perseverance.

Purpose and passion: setting the right goals

“The secret of success is constancy of purpose”—Benjamin Disraeli.

Early in my college career I was asked to read a book titled, If You Don’t Know Where You’re Going, You’ll Probably End Up Somewhere Else.

Defining your goals—having the end in mind—is an essential starting point. You can redefine goals as you go along, but if you don’t have goals, you can end up running in circles.

Every book on success has a section on goals, so instead of covering all the same ground, let’s focus here on identifying what God wants us to put first.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37; see also Matthew 6:33 and Ecclesiastes 12:13).

This doesn’t immediately sound like the standard definition of success. But, actually, putting this overarching goal first brings everything else into perspective.

Becoming more and more like God is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). God does want us to enjoy life abundantly and rejoice (Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; John 10:10; Philippians 4:4).

So after putting God first, we can set our other priorities, such as loving others (Matthew 22:39) and pursuing a career or calling with passion.

Learn more in our online article “Christian Priorities: Putting God First.”

Preparation: growing in knowledge, understanding, skill, resourcefulness and wisdom

“Before anything else, preparation is the key to success”—Alexander Graham Bell.

Every goal requires knowledge. Develop a plan to gain the facts and information you need about how to achieve your goal. Formal education is vital, but hands-on, self-directed training is also important for taking your knowledge to the next level: understanding.

Along with understanding, we must develop the necessary skills, and that takes practice. “The idea that excellence at performing a complex task requires a critical minimum level of practice surfaces again and again in studies of expertise,” writes Malcolm Gladwell in Outliers: The Story of Success. He quotes neurologist Daniel Levitin, “The emerging picture from such studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert—in anything” (pp. 39-40).

In support of this 10,000-hour rule, Gladwell presents examples as varied as the Beatles and Bill Gates. Those preparing for success must devote the time and practice to excel.

As we grow in mastery, we must develop the ability to find a way to overcome every challenge and obstacle that comes along. This kind of problem solving can be called resourcefulness. Creativity and outside-the-box thinking help us deal with novel or tenacious difficulties.

The Bible calls the highest level of thinking wisdom. In the book of Proverbs, wise King Solomon praised and personified wisdom: “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. Exalt her, and she will promote you; she will bring you honor, when you embrace her” (Proverbs 4:7-8).

Our preparation to achieve physical goals can lead to practical, commonsense wisdom. Our spiritual goals require a different, deeper wisdom—the wisdom from above (James 3:17). God invites us to ask Him for it: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously, and he will be given to him” (James 1:5).

In the same way that practicing a physical skill produces mastery, practicing obedience to God leads to
greater understanding and spiritual wisdom (Psalm 111:10).

Many people can’t wait to finish their education and preparation. They want to get on with achieving their goals! But in reality, learning should never end, and practice must continue throughout life. The next key helps us build on this preparation and go on to success.

**Perseverance: pushing forward and sticking with it**

“[I]m convinced that about half of what separates successful entrepreneurs from the unsuccessful entrepreneurs is pure perseverance”—Steve Jobs.

“Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do”—Pelé.

You can’t win the race if you quit. You can’t cross the finish line if you stand still or turn back.

All the preparation in the world will be worthless if you give up.

In order to persevere, we must remind ourselves of our purpose—our passion—and not let it fade. Troubles will come, so we must commit to sticking with our goals.

Our level of drive and perseverance is affected by our health and stamina. Developing good habits of exercise, diet and sleep can build a bank of health to help us face our challenges.

To be successful, we must also increase our level of diligence. The Bible says, “Diligence is man’s precious possession” (Proverbs 12:27).

Successful people are known for their drive—their intensity of effort. Musician and actor Will Smith once said, “I’ve never really viewed myself as particularly talented. Where I excel is [my] ... work ethic” (quoted in Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance, p. 46). Considering his example and many others, author Angela Duckworth concludes, “When it comes to how we fare in the marathon of life, effort counts tremendously” (p. 47).

Dr. Duckworth, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and founder and CEO of Character Lab, studies the importance of grit to success. She says, “Grit is about working on something you care about so much that you’re willing to stay loyal to it. ... It’s doing what you love, but not just falling in love—staying in love” (p. 54). Her work shows how passion fuels perseverance.

One man who displayed drive and endurance was the apostle Paul, the author of at least 13 books of the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 11 he lists many challenges he successfully faced in fulfilling his mission:

“In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. ... Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches” (verses 23, 25-28).

Through all this Paul raised up congregations, taught thousands of people and wrote a great deal of the bestselling book the world has ever known.

As British Prime Minister Winston Churchill said on Oct. 29, 1941, during some of the sternest days of World War II:

“Never give in, never give in, never, never, never—in nothing, great or small, large or petty—never give in, except to convictions of honour and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”

Diligence and perseverance are not only keys to physical success, but also—and even more so—keys to eternal spiritual success. As Peter wrote, “Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

The struggles and trials will all be forgotten. As Paul wrote, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

What does eternal success look like? David gives us this brief glimpse: “In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11). As our new booklet God’s Purpose for You shows, the Bible reveals an exciting eternal life of accomplishment as we fulfill the wonderful purpose for which God created us.

For more about the key of perseverance, see our online articles “Diligence: Why Does God Prize It?” and “Perseverance and the Science of Resilience: Applying Biblical Principles in Trials.”

For more about success, see “The Surprising Key to Lasting Success” on page 7. D
You can find dozens of business and self-help books giving keys to success, but most overlook this vital key that makes all the difference.

By Bill Palmer
I believe that key is humility—a realistic understanding of our own importance in relation to God and other people.

Without humility, whatever success you achieve will be shallow and joyless. Why?

Because humility allows you to put your accomplishments into perspective—it reshapes your goals, your passion and every other factor in your pursuit of success. Humility makes it possible for you to respond to and have a good relationship with your God, who looks “on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit” (Isaiah 66:2).

Let’s take a look at the impact of humility on three of the most commonly recognized steps necessary for success.

1. **Goal setting**

   Almost everyone who lays out a plan for attaining success includes goal setting, whether those words are used or not. For example, in his 1989 classic *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey tells his readers that they must “begin with the end in mind.” That’s just another way to say begin by setting goals.

   Humility affects the type of goals you set. Are your goals about getting as much as you can, whether it’s money, prestige or power? Then you’re setting the wrong goals! On the other hand, if your goals reflect a desire to serve God as well as your fellow human beings, then you are on the right track.

   When you set your goals, keep in mind the two great commandments: “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37) and “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (verse 39). Humility in goal setting means recognizing your God-given talents and then planning to use them in serving God and His children.

2. **Preparation and education**

   You won’t go very far in your life unless you prepare yourself for whatever path you will follow. If you want to be an electrician, for instance, you’d better learn all you can or you won’t be able—or even allowed—to do the work.

   So what does humility have to do with education? Quite a bit, actually. First, you need to recognize that you don’t have all the answers. You can learn from other individuals in your chosen field.

   That’s simple enough, but at a more basic level, humility will prompt you to assess your own natural talents and abilities against the career paths that appeal to you. You’ll ask yourself whether you are a good fit, not only because you want to succeed for yourself, but because you want to succeed for others.

   You’ll want to succeed for loved ones who depend on your income. You’ll want to succeed for coworkers who depend on your contribution to the team. And you’ll want to succeed for customers or clients who depend on you to do a thorough job.

   Then, once you’ve assessed your God-given talents honestly, you’ll be ready to prepare yourself, through the appropriate education, to use those talents well.

3. **Passion**

   Another element often included in recipes for success is passion—and the drive that comes because of it. When you don’t care, you won’t act, so you won’t succeed. But how does humility affect your passion?

   If you care about what God wants and what other people need, and if you are pursuing goals that reflect that care, you’ll find that your passion is greater.

   Let’s say, for instance, that you are in sales. If you don’t really believe a potential customer will benefit from your product, you’ll find it nearly impossible to pitch it. On the other hand, if you are convinced that your product will solve a customer’s problem, you’ll find yourself driven to share that solution.

   We could spend page after page considering the impact of humility on other traits and actions associated with success, but let’s move on to considering the inherent struggle we all face.

**Clothed with humility**

Unfortunately, as human beings we tend to put ourselves first. Our natural tendencies are at war with humility and always will be.

Pat Williams, in his book *Humility:“Humility is a choice—and so is arrogance. The wild beast of arrogance always lurks within us and can only be subdued by a more powerful, more spiritual force: the character strength of humility.”*
The Secret Ingredient of Success, came to believe that “any person of true greatness” throughout history was “also a person of deep humility” (2016, p. 18). Anyone who aspires to greatness, though, must first recognize the internal struggle and then choose humility:

“Humility is a choice—and so is arrogance. The wild beast of arrogance always lurks within us and can only be subdued by a more powerful, more spiritual force: the character strength of humility. We must continually choose an attitude of humility—or we will choose arrogance by default” (pp. 40-41).

The apostle Peter describes this choice as “clothe yourselves with humility” (1 Peter 5:5, New International Version). That seems like a strange way to describe the choice we make until we look into the meaning of the Greek. According to The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, “Clothe yourselves’ (egkombosasthe) is a rare word that refers to a slave putting on an apron before serving. So Christians are to imitate their Lord, who girded himself and served” (1981, Vol. 12).

Christ’s example of service

The second sentence of the Expositor’s quote refers to John 13, which describes Christ as He assumed the role of the lowest of household servants to wash the feet of His disciples. An important aspect of being clothed with humility is choosing to serve by choosing to do what the people around you need.

So what does this have to do with success? We find the answer in a companion passage. On that very night before Christ was crucified, the night on which He took the role of a servant to wash the feet of His disciples, they began to argue about who among them would be greatest in the Kingdom (Luke 22:24). In essence, they were concerned about their own success.

What Christ said is revealing. After mentioning that gentile kings routinely “exercise lordship” (verse 25), Christ taught His disciples that whoever “is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves” (verse 26).

If we want to succeed in life, then we, too, must continually choose humility.

In our narcissistic age of social media and selfies, the idea of humility being an important principle for success, let alone a critically important key, seems absurd. After all, the Western world has tirelessly promoted self-esteem as vital to emotional well-being ever since psychologist Abraham Maslow published his hierarchy of needs in 1943.

Isn’t self-esteem in opposition to humility? To be humble, don’t we have to think of ourselves as having little or no value? And if we don’t believe we have value—that we have something to offer—then why would anyone else believe we do?

The answers become clear when we begin to consider Christ’s example. No one would argue that He saw Himself as having little or no value, and yet neither would anyone argue that He lacked humility.

“Let this mind be in you”

One of the most moving passages in Scripture is in Paul’s letter to the Philippian church. Paul admonishes the Church to adopt the mind-set of Christ, and that mind-set is one of humility:

“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:3-8).

Notice that Christ “did not consider it robbery to be equal with God” (verse 6), so He did not think of Himself as having little value. On the other hand, Christ “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death” (verse 8).

Humility, then, is not just about how we view ourselves. It is about how we view others. Of course, none of us should have an exaggerated sense of importance, but denying our God-given talents is just as wrong. The right approach is a realistic appraisal of our own abilities, coupled with a desire to use those abilities to serve others. That is real humility!
Part 1 of “Searching for God” in the last issue of Discern focused on answering the questions, “Can we find God if He is hiding from us? Would He do that and, if so, why?” This time we look at the other side of the coin: Can God find us?

By Clyde Kilough

Thrusting a Bible toward his brother, the man threw down the challenge:

“I want you to show me in here exactly where it says that we are to worship on Saturday instead of Sunday!”

The conversation at the family gathering had grown heated. One person, particularly offended that one of his kin abandoned the family’s faith, had zeroed in on the Sabbath-or-Sunday doctrine, aiming to prove him wrong and return him to the fold.

“I can do that, but first answer this,” his brother calmly countered. “If I prove from the Bible that the seventh-day Sabbath is the day God made holy, will you change your worship from Sunday to Saturday?”

As a dozen witnesses looked on, the man stared hard at him for several seconds, then angrily blurted out, “Oh, forget about it—I can’t reason with you!” Turning on his heels, he walked away.

Or, to put it a different way, he went into hiding. He hid his eyes from seeing the truth of the Bible, from seeing the knowledge of God.

In the first of this two-part article series we saw from the Bible that, yes, God does hide from humans, but for good reason. It’s because His children, beginning with Adam and Eve, have continually hidden from Him!

That leads to the second critically important question for anyone who says he or she is searching for God.
The true story of the family argument is one of someone hiding from truth that could have come to light. Perhaps it was pride at work—it’s common for us to fear embarrassment over being proven wrong.

Maybe it was subconsciously hiding from the commitment to change that the truth would require.

The proud young man who came to Jesus asking what he had to do to obtain eternal life fell victim to that fear when Jesus revealed a spiritual weakness that he would have to change. “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me,” Jesus said. “But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matthew 19:21-22).

He, too, went into hiding from God.

Adam and Eve hid from God, conjuring up the excuse that they feared Him because they were naked.

In the Isaiah 53:3 prophecy of Jesus Christ’s first coming, it says, “And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”

When He did appear on earth, He told a group of the most religious people of the day, “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40).

In other words, even when we humans say we desire to know God, we easily find ways to hide from Him, His truth, His authority over our lives. We hate to admit it, but it is a common trait of human nature!

“We hide from God when we are not wholehearted and deeply humble.”

God has seen so much pride and stubbornness from humanity, but rarely meekness and submissiveness toward Him and His Word.

We find a great lesson about this in the story of Judah’s captivity. For many centuries they played around in their relationship with God, repeatedly crying out to Him in times of trouble, promising to follow Him, only to go straight back into the same sinful practices. Finally, to their shock, God ended their game, allowing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take them captive.

But in His mercy He sent Jeremiah with a message that after 70 years their plight would end. Notice His admonition, though, in Jeremiah 29:13: “And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.”

Hundreds of years before that, David explained the same principle to his son Solomon. He instructed him, “Know the God of your father, and serve Him with a loyal heart and with a willing mind; for the Lord searches all hearts.
and understands all the intent of the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9). God reiterated this in Jeremiah: “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings” (17:10).

Back to David’s counsel to Solomon—David assured him, “If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will cast you off forever.”

God is clear: If you search for Him with all of your heart, with a deeply humble approach of trembling at His Word, you can find Him.

- **We hide from God when we change or misinterpret what He tells us to do in order to fit our own desires.**

Both biblical and historical records show people have always done this. In His time, Jesus confronted the Pharisees with a quote from Isaiah, “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:6-7).

He continued, “For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men,” and “all too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”

Finally, He concluded, they were “making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down” (verses 8-9, 13).

Nearly 2,000 years later, human traditions have pervaded the various Christian religions more than ever.

If you are willing to recognize and discard “the traditions of men,” and instead live by God’s pure Word, you can find Him.

- **We hide from God when we are not willing to do what He tells us.**

When being tested by Satan, Jesus countered, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God’” (Luke 4:4). Searching for God includes searching ourselves. Lamentations 3:40 says, “Let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD.” As God reveals Himself through His Word, the test for us is whether we are willing to “turn back to the LORD” and live by “every word of God.”

This is where many people have stumbled in their search for God—they want to pick and choose what they are willing to do.

Remember Jesus’ statement that He was the light that came into the world, but that humans tend to love darkness rather than light? He was so right! However, in that same conversation, found in John 3:19-21, He offers a wonderful promise—and a big test: “But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”

God wants us to find Him, to come to the light! In fact the goodness of God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4). But the test for us is always whether or not we will do the truth. Are we willing to act upon the truth that He reveals, to follow and obey Him, even if it means completely changing our way of life? Our deeds, He says, will clearly show Him the answer!

Coming to the light is actually a lifelong process of steadily learning more and more about the mind and ways of God. The Holy Spirit—which works with people who are responding to God and which resides in those who have repented of their sins and been baptized—continually “searches all things, yes, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). But God gives His Spirit only “to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32).

If you show God that you will indeed do the truth—conduct your life according to the understanding He shows you in His Word—you can find Him.

**Where are you?**

Someday all humanity will discover that God was hiding in plain sight—but we couldn’t find Him if we were hiding our eyes from Him. Proverbs 2:1-5 gives us the critical keys for successfully searching for God:

“My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”

**Finding God**

What happened to the man in India described in the last issue, who typed into the Internet search engine the question, “Where are you, God?”

Well, he prepared his heart according to those criteria! He sincerely, wholeheartedly and humbly searched God’s Word; he rejected the reasoning and traditions of men and accepted only what he read in the Bible; and, most important, he was willing to change his life to follow what God showed him to be true.

There is no greater quest for each of us than to seek the answer to “God, where are you?” And there is no greater test for each of us than when God says, “I’m right here, revealed in My Word—but where are you?”

Take the next step by studying our guided Journey “Knowing God.”
Jesus Christ uttered this reassuring promise just before His ascension: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Its fulfillment on Pentecost continues to reverberate today!

By André van Belkum

Even from an early age, we are fascinated by feats of power. From a rocket spewing fire and smoke as it leaves the launchpad, to a Formula One racing car exceeding 200 miles per hour, to an Olympic weight lifter achieving new world records, we are enthralled by displays of power.

However, few realize there is a source of dynamic, supernatural power that supersedes all humanly produced powers. We need this transforming power if we want to please God and receive the gift of eternal life.

What is this power?
It is the awesome power of God’s Holy Spirit!

**Pentecost and power**
Seven weeks after Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, His disciples waited expectantly for the power He promised. On the Day of Pentecost they were all together celebrating God’s holy day, when God began to demonstrate that power.
God used physical miracles to draw attention to a much greater spiritual miracle. First God sent a sound “as of a rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2:2). Then came the appearance of “divided tongues, as of fire,” on the disciples, and God gave them the ability to speak in languages they hadn’t learned (verses 3-4). “Everyone heard them speak in his own language” (verse 6). All this drew a crowd of amazed people wondering, “Whatever could this mean?” (verse 12).

God used Peter to powerfully proclaim that this was beginning to fulfill Joel’s prophecy, “I will pour out of My Spirit” (verse 17). Joel’s words clearly showed that God’s Spirit is a spirit of power, and when many of the people recognized their sins and asked what to do, Peter said:

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (verse 38).

About 3,000 responded! By being baptized and receiving God’s Holy Spirit, they received the awesome spiritual power that transformed their lives. That day the New Testament Church was launched with power!

**What is the Holy Spirit?**

God’s Holy Spirit is the marvelous creative power of the Father and Jesus Christ. Through His Holy Spirit, God created the heavens and the earth: “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30).

His absolute control and power over everything in heaven and earth is described in the Scriptures. There is nothing impossible for God (Luke 1:37). He designed and planned the physical universe, and at His command the heavens and the earth were formed (Psalm 148:5). Through His mighty power, He controls and sustains everything.

The creative Spirit of God was present at the beginning, including the creation of the first humans—Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:1-2; 2:7).

**Promised to humans**

God’s desire when He first created humanity was to offer us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the tree of life, it was symbolically offered to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But instead of accepting it, they made a horrible choice to reject it and disobey God, swayed by Satan’s deceptions. Ever since then, Satan has continued to deceive mankind into casting aside God’s blessed way of life (2 Corinthians 4:4).

But there is good news! God has planned ahead.

God’s plan for mankind calls for the removal of Satan and his ability to deceive the nations (Revelation 20:1-3). In the meantime, God is calling only a few people out of Satan’s world (John 6:44; see our online article “God Calling!”). He places them into His Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit by which personal and spiritual development is possible. “For through Him [Christ] we [Jews and gentiles] both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Ephesians 2:18, emphasis added throughout).

As members of the Church they will be trained to fulfill future roles in His Kingdom.

**A transforming power**

Someone receiving and being guided by the Holy Spirit can become a changed person. He or she undergoes a renewing of the mind—a total change of attitude, direction and purpose in life (Romans 6:4).

God wants us to develop godly, righteous character, and this requires our participation. He does not want us to be robots, so He has given us free will. He wants us to choose to follow His Son’s example.
As we allow God’s Holy Spirit to work in us, it transforms us to begin to think and act like Christ: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). God reveals spiritual principles through His Spirit. “Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

Furthermore, the Spirit, which is “given to us by God,” leads us to an understanding of “spiritual things” that the natural mind (devoid of the Holy Spirit) cannot grasp: “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:12-14).

Clearly, humans need the power of God to uphold, honor and please Him. **Securing our incredible potential**

Christ referred to the Holy Spirit as the Helper (Comforter in the King James Version), the Spirit of truth, available from the Father (John 15:26).

Years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the apostle Peter wrote about how God’s “divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness... by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Peter 1:3-4).

With God’s Spirit in us we have an astonishing future inheritance—to become children of God (Romans 8:16-17).

But first read carefully what Paul wrote in Romans 8:11: “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit.”

True followers of God are presently composed of flesh and blood and cannot enter the Kingdom of God and gain their inheritance (1 Corinthians 15:50). But there is coming a time when they will be changed from corruptible flesh into incorruptible spirit (verses 51-54). Finally, we will inherit eternal life in the Kingdom of God, ruling under Christ (Revelation 3:21).

We have been called to “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away” (1 Peter 1:4). When we are tempted to put something else before these promises, we should first ask if it is as valuable and enduring!

**Fulfilling our astounding potential should be our yearning desire and goal. It is God’s ultimate purpose for each of us. It is up to us to grasp the opportunity as we strive to please Him through the indwelling power of His Holy Spirit.**

**Why is the Holy Spirit important?**

As astonishing as this may sound, unless we have God’s Spirit, we cannot claim to be true Christians. “So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. **Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.** And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:8-10).

If we are filled with God’s Holy Spirit:

- God will work in us “exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us” (Ephesians 3:20).
- Our future inheritance in the Kingdom of God will be “sealed,” that is, God will set a mark of ownership on us, “with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:11-13).
- As we show a willingness to obey and respond to God, the Spirit “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13). True Christians cannot succeed in living God’s way without the guidance and support provided by His Spirit.
- It will help us overcome our weaknesses (Romans 8:26) by giving us additional spiritual strength (Philippians 4:13).
- Most importantly, we will produce the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Life is a constant struggle against ourselves, the world and the devil. Each of us needs to grow closer to God through regular prayer and Bible study—continually growing in the character of our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ. Only through the help of the Spirit of God can we succeed and fulfill the very purpose of our existence.

Learn more about Pentecost and God’s plan in our free booklet From Holidays to Holy Days: God’s Plan for You. And discover more about the Godhead in our booklet Getting to Know the God of the Bible.
Famous Last Words (That Actually Matter)

What you choose to say at the end of your life isn’t the most important thing in the world. What God says about you is.

By Jeremy Lallier

Judging by the popularity of famous last words, there’s a lot of pressure to be exceptionally clever with your final breath. Or profound. One or the other. Or both, if you can manage it. After all, these are going to be your last words—your final bit of wit or insight to share with the world. They’re going to remember these words long after you’re gone.

Probably.

Well, maybe.

Okay, so there’s a good chance they’re going to forget them or misremember them or substitute something wildly apocryphal. But don’t worry; you’re in good company. The Internet and some quote books will tell you that Beethoven said on his deathbed, “I shall hear in heaven,” that Groucho Marx exclaimed, “Die, my dear? Why, that’s the last thing I shall do!” and that Oscar Wilde griped, “This wallpaper will be the death of me—one of us will have to go,” but there’s not always much evidence to support those quotes as last words. In fact, for quite a few popular famous last words, there’s quite a bit of evidence they were never said at all.

Ah, well.

So much for making your last words count. As much as we might romanticize them, history shows that deathbed remarks rarely survive the sands of time intact—and the truth is, there are other words that carry far greater weight than anything you could think to say before this life ends.

Let’s talk about those instead.

Two parables about two kinds of servants

A long time ago, Jesus told His disciples stories about “a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them” (Matthew 25:14). With that delivery came a responsibility—in a similar parable, the man told his servants, “Do business till I come” (Luke 19:13). In one parable, the servants were given talents, while in the other parable, they were given minas—two measurements of money in the ancient world.

Some servants obeyed their master. Some didn’t. When the man returned and took stock of his goods, he praised and rewarded his faithful servants, chastising and punishing those who ignored his instructions.

His words to those servants are iconic. The praise, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21), contrasts harshly with the censure, “You wicked and lazy servant” (verse 26).

These parables are metaphors for the Christian’s responsibility in this life—to take the gifts he or she has been given by Christ and do something with them. Like the servants in the story, we can either live up to that charge or hide from it—and like the servants in the story, we can expect either praise or censure depending on our actions.

Good and faithful.

Wicked and lazy.

At the end of it all, which set of words will God use to describe you?
The line between good and wicked

Those are the last words that really matter—the ones God says about you. Mutter whatever profundities you like with your last breath; be as clever or as insightful as you can be. But for Christians, God's final assessment of our time on earth is the only thing that really matters.

There's quite a gap between, “Here lies a good and faithful servant who will enter into the joy of his Lord,” and, “Here lies a wicked and lazy servant who will be cast into outer darkness.” If we want to be in one camp and not the other, now's the time to do something about it.

What exactly is that something? Well, in these parables, the distinction is as simple as this: the faithful servants did what they were told, and the wicked servants didn't. It's about obeying God. Jesus said, “Keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). He said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Christianity isn't a free ride—if we don't put what we've been given to use, Jesus isn't going to be pleased with us at His return.

But there's more to it. To understand more about how to improve ourselves, we'll have to dig a little deeper. Here are three keys to making sure you hear the last words that really matter.

Faithful servants understand what they've been given

In the parables of the minas and the talents, the master entrusts his servants with money. The money doesn't belong to the servants; it belongs to the master. And while he trusted his servants to manage it, that trust came with a responsibility and an expectation. In the master's absence, the servants needed to put the master’s goods to use.

But the parable isn't really about these fictional servants. It's about you. It's about what you've been given. It's about what you'll do with it. God has entrusted you with knowledge of His truth and the purpose of your life. You have access to His Holy Spirit as you look to overcome your sins and strive to live more like your Creator.

What the servants were given was precious. Though scholars are not entirely certain about the relative values of these monetary units in modern terms, one theory holds that a single talent of silver would have been the equivalent of 20 years of wages for an ordinary worker, and a mina would have represented about four months' worth. But the treasure you have access to? There is no equivalent value to it on the whole of this planet.
The masters in these parables were giving their servants the ability to accomplish more than they ever could aspire to do on their own. The gifts God gives us come with responsibility and expectation, but they also enable us to do more, to be more, than we could ever be on our own.

2 Faithful servants do what they can with what they have

In the parable of the talents, the servants given five and two talents both managed to double their starting amounts. They both received the same praise: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21, 23).

This is important. The servant who started with two wasn’t criticized because he failed to produce five. They both started with different amounts, but they both seem to have put in the same effort with what they were given, and that’s what the master focused on. If the servant who only had one talent had been able to say, “Lord, you delivered to me one talent; look, I have gained one more talent besides it,” his master would have praised him too.

Instead, that servant hid the talent and did nothing with it (verse 25). That’s what made him a “wicked and lazy servant”—an unwillingness to even try to do something with what he’d been given.

You’ve been given a gift by God, but He’s not measuring your progress against your fellow Christians’ progress (2 Corinthians 10:12). He cares about what you’re doing with what you’ve been given. Are you out there trying to put it to use, or are you burying it all in the ground?

Paul explained to the Corinthians, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. ... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4, 7, English Standard Version). And he told the Ephesians that God’s people are “knit together by what every joint supplies” (Ephesians 4:16).

If you’re using what you’ve been given to become a better Christian and to support others as they do the same, then you’re on the right track. You’re putting your Master’s goods to use—and that’s what matters.

3 Faithful servants grow as they work

In the parable of the minas, each servant received the same amount of money, and they received further assignments based on how they managed that money in their master’s absence. For us, though, the goal is character growth. The more time we spend focused on growing spiritually, the more minas we’ll be able to present to Christ at His return.

Paul echoed this thought when he compared the Christian journey to a building project: “Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is. If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

Building on the foundation is important, but so is the quality of our material. We might be able to get by with the bare minimum, but God is going to be far more pleased with a finished product that incorporates beauty and durability. As we put a greater effort into our relationship with God, we’ll be able to put finer and more durable materials into our building efforts.

In so many ways, what we accomplish with God’s minas and talents is a reflection of how close we are to our Creator.

Preparing for the Master’s return

That’s what God is looking for in His good and faithful servants. That’s part of what sets them apart from the wicked and lazy ones—a willingness to engage with the work they’ve been given to do. Good and faithful servants understand the priceless treasure they’ve been given, they put that treasure to work, and in the process, they build something beautiful that reflects who they’re becoming.

There are a lot of things you could choose to say with your final breath in this life, but at the end of it all, that’s not what matters, is it?

Good and faithful servants understand that the Master will return one day—and when He does, He’s going to have something to say about what they’ve accomplished and what they’ve built with His goods. They’re keeping busy today to make sure that, one day, they hear the only last words that really matter:

“Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.”

For more insight into what God expects from His servants, read our free booklet Change Your Life.
How IS SECULAR HUMANISM Changing Our World?

To those who don’t believe in God, biblical morality seems arbitrary and restrictive. Secular humanism seeks to find human solutions, presenting a mixture of good intentions with an underlying approach that allows what the Bible defines as evil.

By Becky Sweat

We live in an upside-down world. What was once deemed wrong is now acceptable or even considered good, and what was once right is increasingly viewed as wrong.

Consider some of the stories that have been in the news in recent years:

- An Oregon bakery is fined $135,000 for refusing to make wedding cakes for lesbians.
- A Florida boy is reprimanded by his teacher for reading his Bible during “free reading time.”
- New York passes a law that could allow women to abort their babies as they’re exiting the womb.
- A Pennsylvania school district permits transgender students to use bathroom facilities based on their gender identity rather than their biological sex.
- An Air Force veteran is forcibly removed from a retirement ceremony for mentioning God in his speech.
- In Britain, a lesbian couple prepares to “transition” their 5-year-old son into a daughter.

What’s particularly disturbing to Bible-believing Christians is that there are many people who actually see what’s happening as progress. They do not accept the authority of the Bible. They believe individuals should be free to live life as they choose, without having to consider what God says.

One term used to define this belief system is secular humanism.
Definitions and development of secular humanism

Those who espouse this ideology are doing their best to put a positive spin on it. They show their concern for the happiness and welfare of their fellow man. The problem is, they don’t believe in or want any guidance from a supreme being.

Humanist advocate Jim Herrick describes secular humanism as “a most human philosophy of life. Its emphasis is on the human, the here-and-now, the humane.... Humanists are atheists or agnostics and do not expect an afterlife. ... Morality is social in origin. It comes from the way we have evolved and from our ability to see that there is a general benefit if we behave well towards each other” (Humanism: An Introduction, pp. 1-2).

Secular humanists believe mankind evolved with all the inherent abilities necessary to create a peaceful, well-functioning society. They believe that trust in a God who hears prayers and cares for people is superstitious and outmoded. They think that science and human reasoning have the real answers to the world’s problems.

Of course, not everyone who has been influenced by humanist ideas necessarily realizes all the ramifications of the humanist belief system. But the ones who are leading this movement certainly do. They are at war with God and doing everything they can to destroy His moral, ethical and spiritual standards.

In one sense, humanism isn’t new. People have been turning their backs on God since the time of Adam and Eve. However, the secular humanist movement that we’re seeing today is a fairly modern development. It got its start in the 1930s and really took off amid the radical political and social change of the 1960s.

Since then, humanist ideology has been spreading like wildfire. It permeates virtually every aspect of contemporary society. It’s being promoted through our educational systems, news media, entertainment, advertising and governments. It is at the heart and core of today’s so-called culture wars.

The secular humanist agenda

Over the years, humanists have released a series of “manifestos” or declarations stating their beliefs and goals. The two most recent are the Humanist Manifesto III, which was published by the American Humanist Association in 2003, and the Humanist Manifesto 2000, which was published by the International Academy of Humanism. Previously, the Humanist Manifestos I and II were issued in 1933 and 1973, and A Secular Humanist Declaration was published in 1980.

Looking over these documents, certain objectives stand out as being top priorities for humanists. These include:

• To advance the doctrine of evolution while diminishing the concept of God. Humanist Manifesto I describes the universe as “self-existing and not created,” and declares that man “has emerged as a result of a continuous process.” Humanist Manifesto II states, “We find insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of a supernatural; it is either meaningless or irrelevant to the question of survival and fulfillment of the human race.”

• To replace the traditional family with alternative lifestyles. Humanist Manifesto II declares that “the right to birth control, abortion, and divorce should be recognized.” Humanists are not concerned with keeping marriages and families intact. In fact, many go so far as to say traditional marriage and family arrangements are undesirable because they perpetuate the domination of women by men. In their eyes, open marriage, triads, same-sex marriage and cohabitation are all acceptable, and may even be better options than traditional marriage.

• To replace biblical standards of conduct with human desires. Humanist Manifesto II states, “Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest.”

By denying the existence of God, humanists are also rejecting the existence of an absolute moral code that must be obeyed, thereby freeing them to make their own rules for how to live.

• To keep religion out of politics and government. A Secular Humanist Declaration argues for a secular state that gives “no special consideration to any theological or religious systems.” Humanist Manifesto II states, “The separation of church and state and the separation of ideology and state are imperatives.”

Traditionally in the United States, many have taken the separation of church and state to mean that religious belief and practice should be protected from government interference. Secularists want this phrase interpreted to mean there should be no references to God in government venues and no public displays of faith.

• To replace the traditional family with alternative lifestyles. Humanist Manifesto II declares that “the right to birth control, abortion, and divorce should be recognized.” Humanists are not concerned with keeping marriages and families intact. In fact, many go so far as to say traditional marriage and family arrangements are undesirable because they perpetuate the domination of women by men. In their eyes, open marriage, triads, same-sex marriage and cohabitation are all acceptable, and may even be better options than traditional marriage.
By rejecting God, secular humanists are left with no real meaning to life, no “big picture” to live for.

_Humanist Manifesto II_ also states, “Individuals should be permitted to express their sexual proclivities and pursue their lifestyles as they desire.” Believing it is wrong to repress sexual desires drives some to accept unbiblical sexual practices like pornography, pedophilia, bestiality and homosexuality.

Other issues humanists promote include abortion, feminism, equal rights for homosexuals and transgenders, redistribution of wealth, and the legalization of assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia.

They’re headed down a dangerous path. Isaiah 5:20-21 warns against being arrogant and contrary to God: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil... Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes.” Yet this describes the manner in which humanists operate.

The ramifications of secular humanism

We can see the results of their efforts all around us. Courtrooms and city halls have removed their plaques of the 10 Commandments. Public libraries display books like _Heather Has Two Mommies_ and _Atheism for Kids_ in the children’s section. Schools and universities indoctrinate students with evolution and alternative lifestyles.

If we dare watch a TV sitcom or movie, the characters portrayed are often gays or transgenders, spineless husbands, overbearing women, and Christians who are made out to be narrow-minded fools. The family structures presented are often divorcées with their kids, same-sex couples or adults of the opposite sex living together, instead of the traditional nuclear family. That’s what humanists want everyone to see as “normal.”

Where is all this leading? A society built on a secular belief system is doomed to destroy itself. The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “The way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). While mankind was “wonderfully made” by God (Psalm 139:14), we do not have the innate wisdom to decide how to best live. Jeremiah 17:9 warns us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”

Secular humanists can’t prevent wars, end crime, stop suffering, restore peace or build a better world. They can’t because they leave God out of the picture. We need God’s help, strength, guidance and direction if we are to succeed as a society. Only God can bring about a true solution to humanity’s problems (Proverbs 14:12).

Think through some of the basic tenets of humanism. If the basis for ethics revolves around what makes us happy or relieves our misery, then being dishonest, stealing, divorcing, having affairs, viewing pornography or undergoing abortions all become acceptable if that’s what it takes to satisfy these desires—even if we hurt someone else by doing so.

By rejecting God, secular humanists are left with no real meaning to life, no “big picture” to live for that goes beyond this present existence, and no reason to put the needs of others ahead of their own. Their objective becomes solely to gratify the self as much as possible during this short physical life, which only leads to self-centeredness. Can any nation—or even any family—survive when everyone is just focused on himself or herself?

We must be on guard against the dangers of secular humanism

Ultimately, the driving force behind the spread of secular humanism is none other than Satan the devil. Just as Satan convinced Adam and Eve to make their own rules about right and wrong, we, too, can be duped by faulty thinking if we’re not on guard.

Satan is extremely clever and knows how to mix good with evil. That’s why certain issues advocated by humanists might sound good on the surface or even have some validity, but in reality be quite destructive. Peter admonishes us, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We must understand the ramifications of humanist thinking so we don’t become deceived ourselves.

This isn’t just a matter of being aware of what’s wrong with issues like evolution and abortion. Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us to not rely on our own understanding and to acknowledge God in everything we say and do. Every decision we make in our daily lives can be influenced by secular humanist thinking—including routine matters like what to post on social media or what type of clothing to purchase. If we don’t look to God and His Word for guidance in these things, we are acting like we don’t think He exists.

God wants us to use our minds, to think and reason, but He doesn’t want us to do it apart from Him. We must avoid the human-centered approach to life and instead make God the center of our lives. That is the only way to true, lasting happiness—for ourselves and for all of mankind. D
Even one person reaching the point of giving up all hope is too many. So it is alarming that we seem to be facing a hopelessness epidemic. Our loving Creator recognizes the problems and offers the solid solutions—and real hope!

By Mike Bennett

Wisconsin dairy farmer Randy Roecker became suicidal a decade ago when the recession hit just after he had invested millions of dollars expanding the family farm. “You feel like you’re in this pit, and you’re climbing to try to get out of it,” Roecker said. ‘We are all struggling so bad. My friends in the city, they have no idea what we’re going through. … Every load of milk that goes out, we’re losing money” (Drovers.com).

A 35-year-old woman told this poignant story of her life:

“I feel like a ghost. …
“I used to consider myself creative—a good writer, poetic, passionate, curious. Now, after many years of demanding yet uninspiring jobs, multiple heartbreaks, move after move, financial woes, I’m quite frankly exhausted. …
“My apathy is coming out in weird ways. I’m drinking too much, and when I do see my friends on occasion, I end up getting drunk and angry or sad or both and pushing them away. …
“Now I feel incredibly hollow” (“I’m Broke and Mostly Friendless and I’ve Wasted My Whole Life,” medium.com).

Each individual story is heartbreaking, and there are so many of them.

Throughout history, the common people have felt helpless to change the world—and often helpless to change even their own situation. But we humans are amazingly resilient with a stubborn streak of optimism. We generally harbor some hope that someone can do something, or just that conditions can change.

But sometimes life beats down on us to the point we slip over the line from helplessness to hopelessness.

Hopelessness in the news
Consider a few recent headlines:
• “Suicides Surge in Hopeless Venezuela” (Bloomberg.com).
• “Civilians in Israel, Gaza Feel Helpless Amid New Fighting” (APNews.com).
• “Hopelessness and the Increasing Suicide Rate in America” (AJC.com).
• “Behind the Badge: High Stress and Hopelessness Contribute to High Suicide Rate for Police” (The Trentonian).
• “After the Overdose: A Family’s Journey Into Grief and Despair” (TheIntelligencer.net).

(Note: If you or someone you know may be considering suicide, in the U.S. contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. For other countries, see suicide.org/international-suicide-hotlines.html for suicide hotlines around the world.)

Unhealthy coping strategies
Many people face similar challenges and may be on the brink of hopelessness. Too often they find unhealthy coping mechanisms to try to mask or forget their frustrations, discouragements and anxieties.

Those who turn to alcohol can find themselves stuck in a Margaritaville of regret.
What the World Needs Now Is Hope

Chemicals and addictions do nothing to solve the problems, and inevitably make them worse. The opioid epidemic and spiraling suicide rates demonstrate the dead-end nature of these coping strategies. Our whole world seems to be on a similar path of despair and self-destruction. We, knowingly or unknowingly, break laws that automatically produce bad results. Then we try to escape the negative consequences by doing things that only make things worse. We all need—this whole planet yearns for—real solutions and genuine hope.

Our Creator recognized this gaping hole in our hearts and minds, and He has recorded the solutions in His instruction book, the Holy Bible. The Bible is full of real people facing real problems. And it provides real, lasting solutions. It gives us access to “strong consolation” and a “sure and steadfast” hope (Hebrews 6:18-19)—if we will listen and heed.

Jeremiah’s message

Jeremiah himself faced a seemingly hopeless task. After 23 long years of preaching God’s message of repentance and hope, he summed up the result: “I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, but you have not listened” (Jeremiah 25:3).

And it was not just Jeremiah. All of God’s prophets had been saying, “Repent now everyone of his evil way and his evil doings” (verse 5). If the people had repented, they would have been secure, but their continued disobedience to God’s laws eventually led to 70 years of captivity in Babylon (verse 11).

If we look at today’s world from God’s perspective, we can see that our sins are just as bad or worse. (For examples, see our article “Why Is God Angry With America?”) And the stakes now are even higher. As Jesus prophesied, lawlessness is abounding, love is growing cold and human survival is on the line (Matthew 24:12, 21-22; see our article “Understanding the Olivet Prophecy”). But God had not given up on the people of Jeremiah’s day. And He has not given up on us today.

A future and a hope

God inspired Jeremiah to record these words of encouragement to send to the Jewish captives in Babylon: “After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:10-13).

Finally, after defeat and captivity, the people were ready to listen and to seek God. Will it take the same today? Sadly, it seems so. As a symptom of our upside-down world, after years of tribulation and a lack of widespread repentance, people will mourn when Jesus Christ returns (Matthew 24:30)! Armies will gather “to make war against Him”—against our Savior and the returning King of Kings (Revelation 19:19).

This misguided, futile effort will be quickly put down, and people will finally be ready to listen and repent. Then our loving God will extend His gift of “a future and a hope” to all humanity. It will be a matchless future of peace and prosperity, of meaningful lives with awesome potential.

Read more about the hope God offers in our online articles “Hope for the Hopeless,” “Second Coming” and “Our Future Hope.” D
Overcoming Sin: Restraint vs. Constraint

Resisting the constant influence of this Satan-inspired world as well as our own human weaknesses can make overcoming sin a daunting task. Are we approaching some aspects of this process the wrong way?

By Thomas L. Clark

Would you describe yourself as a person with a high level of self-control?

I suspect we would all like to say that about ourselves. And perhaps in some areas we can, but in other areas we seem to fail.

For example, perhaps you’ve made it a goal to be healthier, so you’ve decided to stop drinking soda (soft drinks) entirely, and you’re doing well. But chocolate is another matter entirely. You may resist for a day or two, but then that Snickers bar calls your name, and before you know it, you’ve purchased the jumbo-size bar and have nothing left but the wrapper!

Is it just a matter of self-control?

Many of us have concluded that people who are good at resisting temptations are just very good at exercising self-control—they have a lot of willpower, and they know how to use it—while people who don’t do so well at resisting temptations, well, they must have weak self-control and need to work on that aspect of their lives.

The need to have and exercise self-control is real and invaluable to living the Christian life. There are elements we need to entirely remove from our lives because they
are sinful, or because of the effect they have on our health, career and relationships. We can’t do that without self-control!

**Restraint vs. constraint**

But there is another element in the struggle to resist and overcome that we should consider. Think of it in terms of restraint vs. constraint.

Restraint is the ability to exercise self-control, check an impulse, hold yourself back from doing something.

Constraint, on the other hand, is a limitation or boundary you build into your life in advance.

Let’s explore this a little further.

Michael Inzlicht, a University of Toronto psychologist, has been studying the subject of self-control, and trying to determine why some people are better at it than others. While he did not approach his research from a religious perspective, his findings provide some food for thought for us as Christians.

When undergoing rigorous testing and “brain twisters” to test their “powers of inhibition,” people who claimed to be rather self-controlled scored little different from those who did not feel they were. That was not the result that researchers expected.

But a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* shed some light on this paradox. A study of 205 people who were tracked for a week discovered that those who said they were good at self-control reported far fewer temptations—in other words, they rarely had to use their willpower at all!

**A key is in how we structure our lives**

What can we learn from this? Psychologist Brian Galla said, “People who are good at self-control... seem to be structuring their lives in a way to avoid having to make a self-control decision in the first place.” Author Brian Resnick added, “And structuring your life is a skill. People who do the same activity, like running or meditating, at the same time each day have an easier time accomplishing their goals, not because of their willpower, but because the routine makes it easier.”

So it seems a powerful tool to overcoming is to practice constraint—deliberately structuring our lives so we eliminate or minimize our time around those things that tempt us. If we want to cut out chocolate, we avoid the candy aisle at the store and don’t look longingly at the Snickers bars. It means thinking ahead and making concrete plans to avoid and overcome temptations.

**The Bible encourages us to think this way**

Twice in the book of Proverbs Solomon spoke of this important principle:

“A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished” (Proverbs 22:3 and 27:12). Solomon understood the importance of looking ahead and making plans to avoid the temptations to sin that would come his way.

Everyone’s life is filled with potential traps, temptations and sins. We each probably know our personal weaknesses, and we know we have to overcome for the sake of health or righteousness. We want to have more self-control, and we pray for God to give us more. But do we also take active steps to hide ourselves and guard our minds as well?

To do so may require a big change in our lives. An alcoholic may need to drive another way home to avoid going past the liquor store, and to pour out everything he or she currently has in the house.

It may require a change in the people with whom we socialize. If our current friends are involved with sinful or harmful practices, the association alone will pressure us to become involved too. It is much easier to say “no” to an illicit relationship if you don’t allow yourself to get in the situation to begin with.

**Another tool for overcoming sin!**

Where does this leave us? This does not negate the need to exercise self-control, but it does give us another powerful tool to use in our efforts to overcome.

The Bible encourages us to examine ourselves, looking for sin and focusing on the need to repent and change (Lamentations 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5).

As we go through this process, we would be wise to consider structuring our lives in such a way that we practice constraint as well as restraint.

We could say that one of the best ways to avoid being drawn in by the temptation to sin is to steer clear of the temptation to begin with!

For more about overcoming, see our online article “Seven Steps for Overcoming Sin.”
How to Not Be a Stumbling Block

One of the most significant aspects of our Christian journey is the degree to which our actions impact those around us. What exactly does it mean to be a stumbling block, and how can we avoid being one?

By Jeremy Lallier

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!” (Matthew 18:6-7).

In a culture where it’s difficult to say two words without offending someone, somewhere, that’s an intimidating warning. Woe? Millstone? Drowning in the depth of the sea? That all feels a little extreme for an offense that might stem from a word or gesture that was unintentional or completely misinterpreted.

What did Jesus Christ mean by “offenses”? But there’s a little more to the story than that. In the original Greek of the New Testament, the word Jesus used for “offense” is skandalon—a Greek word referring to a trigger, or “bait stick,” that would cause a trap to spring shut.

That suggests something a little more malicious than “offenses” as we know them today. Jesus wasn’t necessarily warning here about affronting someone’s sensibilities. He was warning about setting a trap, enticing and ensnaring an unsuspecting victim, leading a “little one” away from the truth and into darkness.

In fact, other translations render that verse, “Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!” (Matthew 18:7, English Standard Version).

According to Jesus Christ, anyone who goes out setting skandalon for God’s people would be better off at the bottom of the sea. Paul warned about ministers of Satan, who appear to “transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works” (2 Corinthians 11:15).

Paul also wrote about offenses Speaking of Paul, he, too, used the word skandalon when he told the Romans, “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather
resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall \textit{skandalon} in our brother’s way” (Romans 14:13).

There’s no question that as Christians, we should all share this goal. “So we, being many,” wrote Paul, “are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another” (Romans 12:5). There’s no benefit to making life harder for the other members of our own body, and there’s every advantage in strengthening and supporting them.

The big question, then, is how? How do we keep our actions from becoming stumbling blocks and \textit{skandalon} to our fellow Christians?

Avoiding offenses requires awareness

Well, the good news is that the first step to not being a stumbling block is the awareness that we even can be stumbling blocks. Not everyone makes that connection. It’s easy to see how the actions of others affect us, but harder to remember that our own actions can affect others. Just by turning our attention to others, we’re already making big strides toward not putting stumbling blocks in front of them.

But that’s only a start. When Paul wrote about not being a stumbling block, there was a broader context. Some Roman brethren had serious reservations about eating meat that had been involved in sacrifices to pagan idols. Leftover meat from those sacrifices, which some members saw as tainted by the idols, was often sold in the market. This led to debates and contention within the Roman congregation.

Paul explained two things. First, he said, there was nothing morally wrong with purchasing and eating these meats (Romans 14:14). And second, there was something more important in this situation than the freedom to eat. He wrote, “If your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died” (verse 15).

Stumbling blocks aren’t always about “right” and “wrong”

Some first-century Christians—many of them converts from the religions that sacrificed to these idols—couldn’t help but see that meat as tainted by idol worship. To them, eating it would feel uncomfortably close to participating in that worship. And watching their fellow believers partake of it might either drive them away from the faith or else get them comfortable with the idea of blending pagan practices with Christianity (see 1 Corinthians 8:4-13).

In other words, the act of eating this meat could easily become a stumbling block, or \textit{skandalon}, for Christians who were new to the faith. Even though Christians had the freedom to eat that meat, they also had the responsibility to consider how it would impact the faith of those around them.

“Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble” (1 Corinthians 8:13).

Learn to identify modern stumbling blocks

It all comes down to this: as Christians striving to avoid being stumbling blocks, the best thing we can do is focus less on what we have the \textit{right} to do and more on what we have the \textit{privilege} to do to strengthen our brothers and sisters in the faith.

Two thousand years ago, that involved being careful about purchasing meat. Today, it involves paying attention to things like:

- How we portray ourselves online. (Ask: Is it possible what I’m about to post might incite envy, jealousy or resentment from the people who see it?)
- The activities we participate in. (Ask: Will what I’m doing in my spare time negatively impact how others perceive me, my religion or even my God?)
- What we say and how we say it. (Ask: Does my choice of words and tone make it easier or harder for those listening to hear the things I’m trying to communicate?)

And here’s the big key: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3, ESV). None of us is perfect. We’re all Christians in progress. But if our goal is “not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother’s way,” the best place to start is by turning our attention to the impact our actions have on those around us.

Suggestions welcome

If you’d like to suggest a topic for future editions of “Christianity in Progress,” you can do so anonymously at lifehopeandtruth.com/ideas. We look forward to your suggestions!

Note: Thanks to the many ministers with years of counseling experience who gave their input!
Clowning Around With Anemones

God created an odd pair when He designed the clownfish and the sea anemone. Sea anemones look like plants, but are fish-eating creatures equipped with toxin-filled tentacles designed to quickly incapacitate their prey and drag it toward their terrifying, hungry little mouths.

Clownfish are fish that live among those tentacles (merciless, fish-killing tentacles, in case that was unclear).

When God designed the clownfish, He gave it a protective layer of mucus that seems to block the sea anemone from identifying it as a meal and attacking it. The result is a peculiar symbiosis—a fish that makes its home among the tendrils of a fish-killing trap.

Both parties benefit from this arrangement. The clownfish finds a safe haven from would-be predators and food scraps from the sea anemone’s meals, while the anemone gains a live-in groomer whose movements and excretions allow it to grow bigger and healthier than it would on its own. The clownfish’s bright colors may even help to lure in potential prey. It’s a perfect setup—unless, of course, you’re an inquisitive fish who swims in for a closer look.

Pictured here: the lightning maroon clownfish (*Premnas biaculeatus*) and the “wild green” bubble-tip anemone (*Entacmaea quadricolor*)

Photo by James Capo, with special thanks to Fishy Bizness Saltwater Fish and Corals; text by James Capo and Jeremy Lallier
DID JESUS TEACH ALL 10 COMMANDMENTS?  
PART 1

Some believe that Christians only need to obey a commandment if Jesus specifically reaffirmed it. If the commandments did stand or fall based on Jesus’ endorsement, would they all stand?

By Erik Jones

In this column we’ve been exploring Jesus Christ’s teachings on the 10 Commandments. We have asked if Jesus replaced the 10 Commandments with a more simple command to love and if He reaffirmed all 10.

The many scriptures we have examined in these last two articles show the New Testament position on the 10 Commandments: They are still relevant and binding on Christians.

This article will look at the topic from a different perspective. What if we ignored all the scriptures where Jesus (and later, the apostles) reaffirmed the commandments? Instead of resting the case for Christian commandment-keeping on scriptures that in a general sense support the 10 Commandments (such as Matthew 5:17-19; John 14:15; 1 Corinthians 7:19; and 1 John 2:3), can we find New Testament support for each one of the 10 Commandments individually? If we were to accept the premise that a commandment is only applicable to Christians if it’s reaffirmed in the New Testament, would all 10 Commandments stand?

In this issue we’ll examine whether or not the New Testament reaffirms each of the first four of the 10 Commandments.

First Commandment: “You shall have no other gods before Me”

The First Commandment teaches us to put God above all other things and to worship nothing above (or in place of) Him.

Jesus said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). In essence, this summarized the first four commandments, and especially this first one. One of the major ways we love God with all our being is to put nothing—not false gods, not people, not things—before Him.

When Satan tried to tempt Jesus to worship him (which would have broken the First Commandment), Jesus refused in obedience to this law: “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve” (Matthew 4:10). And Jesus made other statements that clarified that God should be first in our lives (Matthew 6:24, 33; Luke 14:26).

The First Commandment—to have “no other gods” before the true God—is clearly still to be obeyed by Christians.

Second Commandment: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image”

The Second Commandment teaches us not to worship idols or use any image to represent the true God.

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Jesus addressed the intent of this commandment during His conversation with the Samaritan woman in John 4:24: “God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.”

Trying to portray and worship the true God though any man-made image always leads to worshipping God in error.

Paul clearly made this point in His address to the Athenians on Mars Hill: “We ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man's devising” (Acts 17:29). God’s power and glory cannot be captured in any image, and any attempt to do so only serves to limit the unlimited God. Paul also wrote that idolaters will not be in the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

The Second Commandment against idolatry is clearly still to be obeyed by Christians.

Third Commandment: “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain”

The Third Commandment teaches us to treat God’s name with honor and reverence, instead of blaspheming and abusing it.

Jesus had a lot to say about proper speech—which is part of the intent of the Third Commandment. He taught us to respect and praise God’s name (Matthew 6:9), not to vainly repeat prayers (Matthew 6:7) and not to worship God in vain by teaching man-made commandments (Mark 7:7). He warned that being careless with our words can lead to spiritual defilement (Matthew 15:11).

The Third Commandment, designed to govern irreverent speech, is clearly still to be obeyed by Christians.

Fourth Commandment: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”

It is really the Fourth Commandment that the Christian world has the most issues with. It specifies that the seventh day of the week is to be a day of rest and observance, but the vast majority of the Christian world treats the seventh day (Saturday) just like any other day. In fact, it is this command that motivates many of the arguments against the 10 Commandments.

But, contrary to what some believe, Jesus reaffirmed the Sabbath command. Not only was He a faithful Sabbath-keeper Himself (Luke 4:16), but He also declared that the Sabbath was created for man and that He was, in fact, the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27-28).

After His ascension, the early Church continued keeping the Sabbath (Acts 13:42, 44). In fact, it was the apostle Paul (the likely author of the book of Hebrews and a man many believe taught against the Sabbath) who said that “there remains therefore a rest [or a keeping of the Sabbath] for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9).

But what about the last six?

We’ve looked at each commandment that falls under what Jesus called the first and great commandment. We’ve discovered that each applies today and helps us love God with all our heart, soul and mind (Matthew 22:37).

But what about the last six? In our next issue, we will explore each of the final six commandments and see what Jesus and other New Testament writers had to say about them.

For more insight into the issue of Jesus and the commandments, read “Jesus and the Law.”
That Time I Was an Astronaut

Several amusing cases of mistaken professions caused me to reflect on how appearances can be deceiving.

Strasbourg, France. Through the open windows of the historic restaurant, we heard the river murmur its way through the summer night. From observation during a previous dinner, I knew that the owner had a private photo album of famous clients that was shown only to a select few. I surprised her by asking if she would show it to my guest.

She looked at me quizzically, then said with a warm smile, “You’re the American astronaut, aren’t you?”

I smiled back warmly but noncommittally. The album appeared, and we enjoyed very attentive service.

Mahé Island, the Seychelles

This equatorial haven targets upscale tourism, so there are few inexpensive hotels, but this was one, far from the hot spots. The German couple managing the establishment had been watching me surreptitiously since people interested by our church magazine had begun calling me to arrange visits.

Finally, the couple asked me my profession. “I’m a pastor,” I replied. The man said, “You came alone, don’t go to the beach, bankers call you; we thought you were a drug dealer.”

St. Louis, Missouri

About to board a flight to Paris, I met former classmates from a graduate program. While trying to support my family on a grad student stipend, I had done French interpretation for an FBI investigation. It was confidential, but my department chair had to be told why I needed time off, which created curiosity in the office. The curiosity lasted.

“So what are you doing now?” my classmates asked. I said I was a pastor once again. “Oh, we thought you had become a spy.”

Collioure, France

This Mediterranean village near the Spanish border is a holiday destination, but rarely for Americans. Using all my accrued vacation time one year, we stayed several weeks. Our daughters made friends at the beach, and their parents became curious. Who was this discreet American family that spoke French and spent weeks of vacation in the south of France?

In a café one father began telling me about a screenplay he had written. Might I be willing to have a look at it? Did I have any associates who might be interested? “You work in Hollywood, right?” he asked.

Outward appearances

These are all true stories that make me smile. It’s a bit of fun to fantasize about being an astronaut, a Hollywood mogul or a spy. They also illustrate how appearances can be deceiving. We can only know so much in certain situations, so we have to fill in the gaps using visual clues, past experience and guesswork, which lead to assumptions.

God, however, does not rely on appearances; He knows people, inside and out. He told Samuel, “The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

In the long run, one can’t flourish with a pleasing, misleading show. One’s true inner self must be clean. Jesus told hypocritical Pharisees, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15). Those are strong words that apply to so much of our present age where appearance dominates.

So when we have our morning look in the mirror to tidy up before others see us, it would be wise to ask ourselves, “As God looks at me today, what will He see?”

—Joel Meeker
@JoelMeeker
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