

It's All About Relationships

Matthew 22:36-40

“Teacher,’ he asked, ‘which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus answered, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.’”

As a Director of Christian Education, I often asked the children "What are the two greatest commandments?" Every time without fail they responded, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." I explained that they rightly identified the second commandment and then asked what Jesus said was the first? They usually looked at me with a blank stare. It finally occurred to me that perhaps the second commandment resonated with the children because it is reinforced by our culture while the first commandment gets very little support. However, now as I sit with clients in my new role as a counselor, I see how truly significant that first commandment is to be able to follow the second commandment and how both commandments are essential for healthy living. It has become evident to me that the quality of our lives has a direct correlation to the quality of our relationships and our ability to nurture healthy relationships has a direct correlation to the quality of our relationship with God.

As I've worked with clients for the last five years certain key ideas about God's unconditional love have emerged as essential for healthy relationships. Recognizing and understanding these truths can make a huge difference in our ability to love and enjoy one another. As I've shared some of these ideas with my clients I thought it might be fun to write them down and so I have, organizing them in three separate sections: (1) God created us for the purpose of relationships; (2) Fear and shame caused by our separation from God interferes with those relationships; (3) Jesus "fixes" those relationships. These articles do not constitute a comprehensive study of the Christian faith but merely share my understanding of God's unconditional love and express my desire to pass it on.

Table of Contents

Section 1 – God created us for the purpose of Relationships:

God created us in His image so that we can be in a relationship with Him.	5
God gave us autonomy which is a requirement for relationships.	5
Only God can grant autonomy.	5
Since we have autonomy, we control the condition of our heart, mind, and soul.	6
God gave us the ability to reason with Him.	7
God gave us the ability to create with Him.	7
God designed us for relationships.	7
God is in a perfect relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit – Trinity. God invited us into that relationship.	8
God values a relationship with us.	8
God values the relationships we have with each other.	9
God’s love is abundant.	9
God put us in the Garden where everything was good.	11

Section 2 - Fear and shame caused by our separation from God interferes with those relationships:

The presence of the “Tree of Wisdom” in the Garden reveals the truth that “choice” is essential to relationships.	12
Good and the opposite of good (evil) are both necessary to relationships for without the freedom to choose the relationship, there can be no relationship and without choice, there is no freedom to choose.	12
Good is choosing relationships and as we grow our relationship with God, we learn to trust Him and give up our need to control.	12
As we reach beyond ourselves, our desire for relationships grows and we learn to consider and care for others.	13
Evil is choosing against relationships and when we trust only ourselves we have a need for control.	14
When our focus is on self, our desire is to consider and care only for ourselves.	14

The story of Adam and Eve explains what happens when we consider ourselves equal to God.	15
When we consider ourselves equal to God, He can no longer protect us from the reality of evil and the fear of that evil destroys us.	15
When we consider ourselves equal to God, we realize we have chosen against God (evil) and the shame cuts us off from His life giving Spirit.	15
There was also a Tree of Life in the Garden explaining why God had to send us out of Paradise. If we (Adam and Eve) had eaten from that tree we would live forever in a fallen state – forever separated from God having chosen independence from God.	15
We suffer from all the wrong choices of our ancestors.	16
We suffer from the consequences of those wrong choices.	16
We suffer from the influence of their example tempting us to make the same wrong choices.	17
Our concept of “Fear the Lord” can negatively affect our relationship with God.	17
We may fear God because we don't understand His love for us.	18
We may fear God because He is all powerful and could protect us and yet, He allows us to hurt ourselves and each other.	18
We are aware of our imperfections and ashamed to be in God's presence.	19
We are afraid people will hurt us so we build protective walls to keep others at a safe distance.	19
We are ashamed of the ways we hurt others.	20

Section 3 - Jesus “fixes” those relationships

Jesus’ reconciliation frees us from our fear.	21
Jesus was victorious over death so we no longer have to fear death.	21
Death is no longer the end.	22
Death is Nothing at All	22
Death is the beginning of a new life in a place where there is no evil.	23
Jesus reconciled us with God	24
Jesus’ reconciliation frees us from our shame.	25
The blood of Jesus has washed us clean.	25
God sees the righteousness of Jesus when He looks at us.	26

Jesus helps us understand that God sees past our sin.	26
Jesus has redeemed our poor choices and righted the wrong.	26
Jesus' resurrection lets us know that Jesus is always with us.	27
Jesus made it known that nothing can separate us from God's love.	27
Jesus is the New Covenant	27
Jesus made it known that God's love is sufficient for all our needs.	28
Jesus ushered in God's Kingdom and invited all to enter in.	29
Jesus' redemption transforms this world as we invite him into our lives.	30
Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit.	30
The Holy Spirit helps us.	31
The Holy Spirit comforts us.	31
The Holy Spirit gifts us.	32
Jesus has redeemed all the pain and suffering of this world.	33
Because Jesus suffered greater physical pain than anyone, He can walk with us through our physical pain.	33
Because Jesus suffered greater humiliation than anyone, He can show us how to endure our emotional pain.	34
Because Jesus suffered greater abandonment than anyone, He can comfort us when we feel alone.	34
Jesus reconciles us with others.	35
As we recognize Jesus' authority over everything in heaven and on earth we are reconciled with others.	35
As we recognize that we are all dependent on the redemption of Jesus Christ, we understand that we have no right to judge others and others have no right to judge us. (Matt. 18:23-35/Parable of the Unforgiving Servant)	36
As we receive God's forgiveness, Jesus helps us to forgive others.	36
As Jesus heals our wounds, we are free to forgive those who wounded us.	37
As Jesus frees us from the fear of others, we are free to forgive them.	37

Section 1 – God created us for the purpose of Relationships:

God created us in His image so that we can be in a relationship with Him.

Genesis 1:27 – “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

I have often wondered why we don't spend more time on this scripture. It's such a huge idea! In the beginning of the Bible God has basically said, "*Kids, you have in your DNA the possibility of resembling me. Pay attention, learn from Me and you will become just like Me.*" Whoa!!! I can't help thinking that if we **did** spend more time sharing this truth, it would inspire us to spend our lives in pursuit of nothing less!

At first we may think it is overreaching. God is Holy and we are sinners. God is omnipotent, omniscient, omni-present and loves unconditionally. We are none of those things. And yet, God sent His Son to redeem us and reveal Himself to us. And then He poured out His Spirit to transform us so perhaps that is exactly what God had in mind when He created us.

The *Westminster Catechism* states that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. I can't think of anything more glorifying than wanting to be just like Him. And nothing could be more enjoyable than learning how to love as He loves! Others suggest that God created us to praise Him, but perhaps that is because God knows praising Him is the best route to resembling Him.

Many years ago I attended a workshop for Youth leaders where Mark Devries was the speaker. It was an outstanding workshop and I left with lots of material but the one thing that made the biggest impact was the idea that our children will resemble us whether they want to or not. Therefore, our concern should be more about who “we” are and the image “we” are giving them than who “they” are and the things “they” are doing. What they see us do as parents has a much greater influence on who they become than any rules or consequences we may enforce. When we apply that same principle to our Heavenly Father, we realize the time we spend praising God with our focus on His image portrayed by His Son will have a far greater influence on who we become than the time we spend focusing on how we are following His rules. It makes me wonder if perhaps we should spend less time in our Christian Communities critiquing our own behavior and more time in God's presence worshipping His.

God gave us autonomy which is a requirement for relationships.

The reason healthy relationships are so wonderful is the same reason they are so difficult – both parties give up any kind of control over the other person. If we try to “force” the other person to agree with us, obey us, or love us in any specific way, the relationship dies. However, when we are free to choose the relationship with compassion, understanding, and a desire to forgive and bless, the relationship blossoms and grows. God has shown us how to have these healthy relationships by giving us the freedom to choose a relationship with Him. As we experience His unconditional love, He shows us how to pass it on!

Only God can grant autonomy.

Every now and then the idea of machines becoming autonomous stirs the creative juices of those in Hollywood and we get a movie such as *I Robot* and a TV show like *Person of Interest*. It is an entertaining concept but one that's not very plausible. Mankind has the ability to create wonderful things but we do not have the ability to give those things autonomy. Only God can do that. However, in regards to those creations, I find it fascinating how Hollywood usually has the machine perceiving its creator as the enemy and if/when the machine does become autonomous, it tries to destroy

its creator. I can't help but wonder if these creative writers in Hollywood are wishing they could destroy their creator. I wonder if they are wishing they could be free from the restrictions they feel under the watchful Eye of the One who created **them**. Men (and women) have tried over the years to get rid of God just as they have tried to be free of the restrictions any kind of relationship requires. Fortunately God's Spirit cannot be extinguished and it's never too late to recognize that love's restrictions are also love's greatest joys.

Since God gave us autonomy, we control the condition of our own heart, mind, and soul.

Sometimes it's hard to believe I have control over anything in this chaotic world where I feel so powerless. In fact, it is a constant temptation to see myself as an innocent victim. That way I can blame the world for all of my difficulties, absolving myself of any responsibility. The only problem with that attitude is the way it leads to paralysis and keeps me stuck in my mess. A much healthier mentality is the one that encourages me to take control of all that is under my jurisdiction.

For example – the **heart**. Although I may not have any control over the way people offend me, I do have control over how I allow those offenses to affect me. I can forgive the offense (Matthew 18:23-35) and continue to work on the relationship; I can forgive the offense but walk away recognizing that person does not want a relationship with me; or I can hold the offense against that person and allow the offense to build up resentment in my heart.

I also may not have any control over the way “other” people behave, but I do have control over how I allow their behavior to affect me. I can choose to embrace their behavior and enjoy the diversity (Galatians 3:28); I can choose to appreciate the diversity as I keep a distance recognizing I am more comfortable with those who have more in common; or I can choose to be critical of all those who are different and allow that critical attitude to build up prejudice in my heart.

And when it comes to love, although I may not have any control over the love I receive, I have total control over the love I give away (Acts 20:35). If I am not happy with a relationship, I can choose to do more to bless the other person in the hopes that it will foster a deeper relationship; I can choose to respect the other person's level of commitment and enjoy the love they are able to give as I continue to look for deeper relationships with others; or I can choose to be angry with the person for not loving me the way I want them to love me and let that anger build up hatred in my heart.

Now, I realize that those three examples aren't nearly as “simple” as I just laid them out to be. Plus, our ego and our wounds make it extremely difficult to pick the healthier choice -- a good reason why the first commandment, to love God, is essential to the second. Until we are right with God and have the help of the Holy Spirit, our choices are limited. I deal more with this in **Section 3**. However, ultimately, the condition of my heart is always under my control and therefore my responsibility.

In addition to the heart, I also have complete control over my **mind**. Here again, although I may not have any control over the messages that are communicated to me, I do have control over which ones I choose to believe as the truth and which ones I choose to ignore as deception (John 8:31, 32); I also may not have any control over what people around me believe, but I do have control over the influence they have on my beliefs (Psalm 1:1-6); and I may not have any control over the faulty information I receive, but I do have the ability to change my mind when I recognize the information isn't true. (Matthew 10:16).

The mind controls the body. It tells me when to breathe and blink and move every muscle. It helps me reason out solutions to my problems and create beautiful masterpieces. It warns me of danger and

remembers what is safe. It steers my choices and must be protected at all costs because what I believe as truth dictates the life that I choose.

Finally, I have total control over my **soul**. It is totally up to me whether I choose or reject God (John 3:16). Do I choose to receive His unconditional love as His treasured child, subject to His authority, receiving His wisdom, and dependent on His mercy? Or do I choose to go it alone? He has given me the freedom to make that choice because a relationship must be chosen. Love cannot be forced. So, while I have no control over anyone else's soul, I do have complete control over my own and can blame no one but myself if I miss out on the love, the joy, and the glory experienced through a relationship with the God who created me and loves me perfectly.

God gave us the ability to reason with Him.

Philosophy was one of my favorite subjects in college. It was fascinating to read the "reasoning" of all the great philosophers. In fact, my decision to write this document came from a desire to put "my" reasoning down on paper. I have found over the years many have the opinion that believing in Jesus Christ is similar to believing in Santa Claus. It's a lovely idea that makes life a little sweeter but it's **just** a lovely idea. Over the last 30 years as I studied the Bible and read the work of countless theologians I discovered that Christianity has more excellent "reasoning" than any of the other philosophers I have read. And I am not alone. One of the reasons I enjoy C.S. Lewis so much is the fact that he was a great scholar who was also an atheist. One day someone challenged him to take the time to critically look into the man named Jesus and so he did. Using his great critical skills (which he shares with us in so many of his books), he discovered that if one actually looks at all the evidence and uses their ability to reason which was given them by their Creator, there is only one conclusion to be made -- Jesus is Lord.

God gave us the ability to create with Him.

There are those who believe humans evolved from other species and although I don't agree, I see no reason for the debate. I don't think it matters how God created us as long as we recognize we were created in God's image and we have many qualities that are unique to our species. One of those is our ability to create. I know other animals build homes but art, music, dance, sport, cooking, architecture, poetry, fashion, and so many other avenues of creativity are peculiar to the human species. And from what I have observed, we get tremendous pleasure out of the creative experience. In fact, when we cease to create we often suffer depression and anxiety for the simple reason -- we were created to create!

God designed us for relationships.

I will never forget an experience I had my freshman year at Muskingum College. It was a lovely school with lots of friendly people but it was the first time in my life when I lived in a place where no one knew me. I had this feeling that if the earth opened up and swallowed me, people might wonder why they had not seen me for a while but no one would really miss me. One day when I was feeling especially lonely I can remember sitting on the floor of my dorm room with my back against the door sobbing. I felt so alone even though I was surrounded by wonderful people. Fortunately, I soon got to know all those wonderful people and thoroughly enjoyed my experience at Muskingum College. However, until I made connections and developed those relationships, I was miserable.

Since that time, I have experienced over and over again how closely my emotional health is linked to the health of my relationships. My level of joy and peace is directly connected to how I am relating with the people in my life. All of the joy I experience involves positive interactions with people and except for the times when I've been physically ill, all of my suffering has involved negative interactions with people.

Even with my failures, my unhappiness stems from my concern over how that failure will affect those I love. And I have noticed in observing others (throughout history as well as in the present), I am not unique in this. Neither talent, I.Q., economic situation, physical beauty, etc., etc., affects the quality of our lives as greatly as the quality of our relationships.

So, if we were created for relationships and need healthy relationships to enjoy a rich and happy life, I cannot help wondering why we spend so little time with the Master of Relationships. We teach our children the golden rule and grade them on their social skills and yet we hesitate to direct them to the One who can give them the greatest instruction. Perhaps part of the problem is the way Christians have misrepresented Jesus and misunderstood the role of God's Law. God gave us His Law to help us with our relationships and sent Jesus to make sure we understood -- "*The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath*" Mark 2:27 and "*The Greatest Commandment is Love*" Matthew 22:36-39. And yet, we have largely misunderstood. Too often our churches worship God's law focusing on our sin revealed by our inability to obey that law instead of focusing on God's love revealed by Jesus' grace. Maybe it is because we prefer to be in control and it is easier to try and control each other by keeping track of how we obey God's law than it is to control God's gracious love. Whatever the reason, many have been greatly wounded by our legalistic tendencies and instead of being drawn to Jesus' unconditional love and grace, society hears the demands of a rigid law.

God is in a perfect relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit – Trinity. God invited us into that relationship.

The Trinity -- God in Three Persons -- is one of the more difficult concepts to grasp. How can God be 1 person and 3 persons all at the same time? Many have tried to explain it in various ways but what is most helpful to me is to understand them in relationship. God is Love and in order for there to be love there has to be an equal flow of give and take; service and gratitude; appreciation, admiration and emulation. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share that with each other perfectly and hence there is Holy Love. The GOOD NEWS -- they welcome us in to that circle of perfect love. We do not belong there because of our brokenness but Jesus invited us in and covered our sin, so we are welcome. As we spend time in that circle, we are transformed, and our love begins to resemble Theirs.

God values a relationship with us.

One night I was praying over my middle son after he had fallen asleep. He had been particularly unkind to his younger brother that day and I was asking God to help me teach him how to be kinder. While I was praying it occurred to me that if I had the power to control his will and make him be nice, I would do it. As I stood there trying to imagine what that would look like, it dawned on me that God has that power but refuses to use it. All of a sudden I felt this tremendous love for our amazing Creator who loves us too much to manipulate us. Instead, He sent His son to redeem us.

I began to understand that if God took control of our choices to make this a kinder, gentler world we would no longer have the autonomy we needed to enjoy a unique and distinctive relationship with Him. I realized that if I took control of my son, he would no longer be my son. He would simply be an extension of me. I decided that if God valued a relationship with me enough to give me the freedom to mess up His world, I would value the relationship I had with my son enough to respect his freedom. And if God loved me enough to sacrifice His Son so that I could have a relationship with Him in spite of the mess I made, I would sacrifice whatever time and effort it took to show my son that same kind of love.

God values the relationships we have with each other.

One of my favorite parenting books is *Siblings Without Rivalry* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. The main idea of the book suggests that children who do not feel a need to compete for Mom and Dad's love have an easier time getting along with each other. I love all the practical suggestions it gives but mostly I appreciate the core principle as I think it also relates beautifully to our relationship with God and each other. As we become more and more confident of God's love for us, it becomes easier and easier to get along with all the other children.

Sometimes when I am really struggling with another individual I imagine the other person is one of my sons, I am another one of my sons, and God is me. It helps me to remember that God loves that other person every bit as much as He loves me and He would really appreciate it if we could "get along." One of my greatest joys in life is watching my boys enjoy each other. I am often left out of the conversation as it usually involves sports of some kind but I don't care. I am totally content watching them take pleasure in their love for each other.

God's love is abundant.

Many years ago when my youngest son was in third grade, I was helping him with a project that involved the culture of the American Indian. Later that night as I was tucking him into bed he asked me, "How do we know Jesus is for real?" I assumed he had asked the question because we had been studying a different culture. However, I wasn't sure, so I inquired as to why he asked. To my surprise he replied, "Because he just seems too good to be true." That was more than twenty years ago and those words still ring in my ears today. I cannot help wondering if that is one of the reasons so many people ignore Jesus. He just seems too good to be true.

I do not remember my exact response but I think I said something like, "That is exactly why we know he IS true." Unconditional love is not something we can fully understand. Our sense of justice and fair play gets in the way. Surely if you are good, God will love you more and if you are bad, God will love you less. But that is not the message of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection reveal a love that is absolute regardless of our behavior and cannot be exhausted no matter how often we fail; a love that satisfies every need with abundance and never ends, continuing on for eternity; a love so perfect no human could have possibly made it up. Only the Son of God could have revealed such a love.

Whenever I doubt the authenticity of Jesus I only have to remember some of His parables and I am assured that this man was the Son of God. One of the most popular is *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* (Luke 15:11-32). This parable is a story about a typical dysfunctional family. There is no mention of a mother, just a father and his two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance so that he can leave behind the tedious life on the farm to embrace an exhilarating life in the city. The older son remains faithful, continuing to work hard alongside his father. Time passes and the younger son, having squandered the entire inheritance, finds himself slopping food for pigs. One day it occurs to him that he would be better off working as a hired hand for his father so he returns home, hoping that his father will pity him enough to hire him. As he approaches home the father sees him coming from a distance and runs out to greet him, embracing him as the long lost son who has finally returned home. The father calls all his friends and throws a big party to celebrate. The older brother, who has been working hard all this time, comes in from the fields and sees all the fun everyone is having including his younger brother, who had betrayed the family. Naturally he is furious, especially since his father has never thrown a party for him. The father tries to calm him down by pointing out that everything he owns has always belonged to him and now that the younger son has been found there needs to be a celebration. The older brother could not understand and walked away unable to share in the joy.

Many who read this parable feel a terrible injustice has been done to the older brother. He is the one who should be rewarded for his faithful service, not the son who squandered the family riches. Others doubt the younger son's true repentance and wonder how long it will be until he gets tired of the work and leaves again. Still others think the father foolish to so quickly take him back into the fold. And even those who can relate to the younger brother have trouble believing there could be such free forgiveness.

Another parable that makes us squirm is *The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard* (Matthew 20:1-16). A landowner hires laborers early in the morning and agrees to pay them the usual daily wage. He goes out again at 9:00, 12:00, 3:00 and 5:00 and hires additional laborers agreeing to pay them a fair wage. At the end of the day he pays those who were hired last, first, and gives them all a day's wage. When those who were hired at the beginning of the day see what those who were hired at 5:00 receive, they get very excited, imagining what the landowner will be paying them since they worked all day. Much to their dismay, they get the same wage. When they complain to the landowner, he reminds them that he has paid them exactly what they had agreed upon.

Here again most of us who read this parable feel that an injustice has been done. How is it fair that those who work in the hot sun all day long get the same wage as those who only work for an hour in the cool of the day? It just does not seem right.

But I wonder if one of the reasons we have trouble with these parables is the lens through which we read them. We look at life through a worldly view of limitations while God in His Kingdom has no limitations. Families and corporations have a finite amount of resources so they need to be distributed fairly, and members of those families and corporations have a finite number of hours in the day so the work should be doled out equally. Jesus came to give us a Kingdom perspective that takes us beyond those limitations. Jesus came to show us there is no limit to God's supply. God's offer of salvation is to everyone and His relationship with us satisfies every need and fulfills every desire. The older brother and the day long workers could not see that abundance. The older brother couldn't see that the joy the father felt in welcoming the lost son didn't lessen the joy he felt towards his older son who had remained faithful all those years. And the workers couldn't see that the wage someone else received didn't lessen the value of the wage they received. God's love is available to everyone and sufficient to bless every life in every situation.

Another mistake that I see us making all the time is thinking God has to obey the same laws of time and space that limit us. We can only be in one place at a time, tending to one affair at a time; hence we have to prioritize. God, on the other hand, is in all places at all times, able to tend to everyone and everything. I wince every time I hear a sports commentator criticizing a player for thinking that God cares about their sporting event. Surely God has better things to tend to. The GOOD NEWS -- God is big enough to tend to everything so He's able to care about everything. God wants us to seek His help and enjoy His companionship with everything we do.

And finally, it is hard for us to believe in this world of comparing and competing that there are no favorites or requirements. We are a little skeptical that Jesus would offer the gift of eternal life to everyone and anyone, regardless of the way the world values them. Could it really be true that all we have to do to enjoy God's favor is to desire God and recognize what Jesus did for us? Surely there must be more for which **we** are responsible? However, if this is true, and we recognize that we are made right with God because of what Jesus did for us and it had nothing to do with anything we have done for ourselves, than perhaps we will be so grateful that we will not care if the person whose sin is more severe than ours is included. Maybe we won't worry about the fact that we worked really, really hard and the other person hardly worked at all. Maybe we will be **so grateful**, we will want **everyone** to join in the celebration.

God put us in the Garden where everything was GOOD. (Genesis 1:31)

The subject of suffering can be very confusing. We read scriptures that suggest God's plan for our lives includes suffering but we see Jesus relieve suffering wherever He went. We cannot find any stories where Jesus said to those who came to him for healing, *"Sorry, God wants you to suffer a little bit more."* Instead He tells those who are weary and heavy laden to come to Him for relief (Matthew 11:28-30). And He tells his disciples to go out into the world to heal the sick and ease their suffering (Matthew 10:1). And yet, one cannot deny the countless scriptures where God seems to require that His children suffer.

So, which is it? We know we can never fully understand God's ways for then we would be God. However, Jesus told us to continuously seek greater understanding (Matthew 7:7-8) so maybe it is okay if we pore over the scriptures in an effort to figure out this apparent contradiction.

At the very beginning of God's Word, we find the story of creation and then the story of Adam and Eve in this beautiful Garden of Eden. Adam represents mankind and Eve is "woman." Through this story we understand that God created a beautiful world for His children and everything was **good**. God and His children were in perfect harmony walking together freely until the children ate from "the tree" and felt they had to hide (Genesis 3:8, 9). So, perhaps our suffering is connected to the reason the relationship between God and His children was broken. We know that they lived together in peace until the serpent showed up and brought with him a lie that ruined everything. He convinced Woman that God's warning was not to be taken seriously. God did not really mean that they would die if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge. He was so convincing that Woman began to wonder if God could be trusted. Perhaps she was a better judge of what was best for her than God. Believing this lie, she made the fatal mistake and bit into the fruit and then offered it to Man. Their eyes were open to the evil that God had warned would destroy them. They were afraid and they were ashamed.

Now, we also know in the story there was a Tree of Life in this beautiful Garden. The fruit of this tree was like the Fountain of Youth - eat the fruit and you live forever. The story explains that God did not want to risk the chance that His children would eat this fruit and live forever in a broken relationship, so they had to leave. They could no longer live in the Garden where everything was **good** for they no longer trusted God's love. They now believed they knew what was best, choosing to be their own gods in rebellion against God so they had to leave God's perfect Paradise.

This story suggests that our suffering has everything do with our free will and not trusting God. However, there are other stories in the Bible when God asks His children to endure suffering specifically **because** they trust Him. So, I wonder, as we look at the whole of God's Word, if perhaps our concern over "suffering" is misplaced. Perhaps if we focus on the beauty of the Garden (Kingdom) and the joy of walking with God in this Garden (Kingdom), we won't care so much about what we suffer on earth. Perhaps if we concentrate on the truth that God created us for a place where everything was GOOD and sent His Son Jesus to make it possible for us to walk with Him in that place forever, what we suffer in this place may no longer be quite so important.

Section 2 - Fear and shame caused by our separation from God interferes with those relationships:

The presence of the “Tree of Wisdom” in the Garden (the knowledge of good and evil - also called the Tree of Dependence on Self) reveals the truth that “choice” is essential to relationships. (Genesis 2:16, 17)

I have often wondered what would have happened if in the story, Eve had never taken that first bite. How might the story have gone? How many generations might have enjoyed the Garden before someone finally succumbed to the Serpent’s temptation to take charge instead of trusting God? Perhaps the fact that it was the first generation is meant to reveal the truth that our desire to be in charge is so great no one can resist it without help from the Holy Spirit. However, if that is the case, why did God create us with such a strong desire for something that He knew would lead us to such suffering?

One of the things I love about being a grandmother is the opportunity I have to experience the miracle of children learning and growing all over again. It is fascinating to watch them develop from babies who are easily manipulated to toddlers who have an agenda of their own to preschoolers who finally understand the concept of sharing. It is truly magical watching children figure it out as they play together in harmony. It makes all of the temper tantrums and tears of anguish worthwhile. Perhaps that is why God took the risk. When we get it wrong it is truly awful, but when we get it right, it is a thing of beauty.

Good and the opposite of good (evil) are both necessary to relationships for without the freedom to choose the relationship, there can be no relationship and without choice there is no freedom to choose.

One of those big questions that so many people wrestle with at some point in their life goes something like this -- “If God is good and God is all powerful why is there so much evil in His world? As I wrestled with this question myself I came across a wonderful book written at the end of World War II by Leslie Weatherhead titled *The Will of God*. He divides the book into three sections – (1) The Intentional Will of God, (2) The Circumstantial Will of God, and (3) The Ultimate Will of God. He explains that God’s “Intentional Will” is for His children to trust Him. We get a glimpse of what that looked like in the Garden until Eve and Adam blew it. Everything was good and evil did not exist. However, because love must be a choice and cannot be forced, God had to give us free will so that we could love Him. Weatherhead called this God’s “Circumstantial Will.” When we use our free will to mistrust God and do what we think works best for us individually it is not God’s “Intentional will” but His “Circumstantial Will.” So, I suppose we could be angry with God for giving us this freedom and allowing us to hurt one another. However, when we understand why he allows it, we are filled with awe and praise. When we understand that the same free will that makes it possible for us to do evil is also the free will that enables us to know God, to grow into the image of God and to live with God forever, we begin to see our free will is a good thing and not a curse. And then, as we recognize what Jesus did to bring about God’s “Ultimate Will,” we are even more amazed and grateful. As we understand how Jesus took our sin upon him, redeeming our evil choices and reuniting us with God, we cannot help but **choose** God above all else and His “Ultimate Will” is realized.

Good is choosing relationships and as we grow our relationship with God, we learn to trust Him and give up our need to control.

One of my least favorite phrases is not actually found in the Bible even though many Christians quote it as if it is, “*God helps those who help themselves.*” I do not mind it so much when it is used in conjunction with the Serenity Prayer, “*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.*” If people are helping themselves to change those things that God has given them the wisdom to change, then God will definitely help them. Unfortunately, we often try to change and control things that are not ours to control by forcing our will upon the will of someone else. Those are the times when we should be letting God help instead of determining to help ourselves.

However, trusting God to help is probably the hardest thing in the world to do. How do we trust a God we cannot see, hear or touch? How do we believe in Someone who we hear others talking about but with Whom we have had no experience?

The word “experiment” comes to mind. If we look honestly at our lives, everything we believe in and accept as truth is a result of experimentation. There is a reason every parenting handbook encourages the parent to be consistent. The child learns through experimentation what behaviors produce positive consequences and what behaviors result in negative consequences. The child also learns to trust the parent who is consistent. If the parent regularly says yes to good things and no to dangerous things the child begins to believe that the parent really does have his best interest at heart and harmony ensues.

Perhaps our relationship with God works the same way. Perhaps as we ask, seek and knock (Matthew 7:7) and experience God saying yes to good things and no to dangerous things, we too will begin to trust God to have our best interest at heart. At first we may waver between “just a coincidence” and “God answered our prayer” but at some point there are so many “coincidences” we begin to believe “God answered our prayer.”

However, having said that, we always need to remember that although a relationship with God develops as we have our own personal experiences, the Bible and the Christian Community are important protectors in developing a **healthy** relationship. God’s Book and wise council can help us interpret our experiences so that we don’t get lost along the way.

We also need to be careful we don’t get hung up by forgetting that God has everyone else’s best interest at heart in addition to our own. Forgetting this truth may lead to a self-centered approach to God and cause some confusion. If we expect God to be our own special Magician serving us and our desires, we may find Him to be totally untrustworthy. However, as we experience His perfect love for **us and all others**, our trust will grow and our need to be in control will diminish.

As we reach beyond ourselves, our desire for relationships grows and we learn to consider and care for others.

One of my favorite books during the early stages of my spiritual journey was *Beyond Ourselves* by Catherine Marshall. I read it some thirty years ago but will never forget how it opened my eyes to the difference it makes in the quality of life when we reach out beyond ourselves for a relationship with God. Not only does this relationship enrich our lives as God invites us into His Eternal Kingdom but it also opens us up to a deeper level of relating with others. As we get to know God we begin to understand we are all on an equal playing field, equally loved by God and in equal need of a Savior. This truth eliminates jealousy of those we might have thought were above us and pride towards those we mistakenly

thought were below us. It also helps us forgive and extend grace to those who offend us and frees us from any kind of savior complex.

And finally, as we grow our relationship with God, He helps us look past the brokenness and see the beauty in all of His children while at the same time reassuring us that His love is constant and will not give up. We can now afford to share our pain and the pain of those around us because we know God's love is ultimately victorious. We no longer need to run away or hide but can now stand in the middle of the suffering with the confident knowledge that God is with us and will see us through.

Evil is choosing against relationships and when we trust only ourselves we have a need to control everything.

Control is a tricky thing. If we don't put any controls on ourselves in society, we have total chaos. However, if we impose the wrong controls we restrict the positive way we relate to God and each other. Everyone is created with unique gifts and talents and a way of engaging God's world that is peculiar to us. If we live in a society that dictates too stringently what we are allowed to think, say and do, we handicap our development into that unique person which interferes with our ability to develop and nurture healthy relationships.

One of the most frustrating experiences in life is having something to offer and not getting "permission" from those in power to offer it. I remember a conversation I had with an Armenian immigrant at a workshop I attended. He could not say enough wonderful things about this country which provided him the opportunity to grow his own business. It was an opportunity that was not available in Armenia where there were too many restrictions. And then I've had the opposite conversation with Directors of Christian Education where they shared their utter frustration because they were **not** given the opportunity to grow their business. They could not get permission from their church boards to try exciting new programs. There was always someone on their board who was afraid to give up control and try something different.

When we trust God to be in control, we are free to benefit from all the world's wonderful diversity, variety and creativity because we have Someone we can depend on to reveal the dangerous things we need to avoid. When people trust only themselves, their fear creates an insatiable desire to be in control. The tragedy is that while this control is stifling all freedom, it is not keeping them from danger. In fact, this need for control interferes with the development of Godly wisdom and that lack of wisdom is what leads them into the very danger they were desperate to avoid in the first place.

When our focus is on self, our desire is to consider and care only for ourselves.

In one of the Christmas Classics, *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, Ebenezer Scrooge is a perfect example of someone who lost sight of everything but himself. He could not consider or care for anyone else because his entire focus was on his goal and how he was going to achieve it. It took a miraculous event, well actually 3 miraculous events, to help him look beyond himself and acquire a new perspective.

There is a wonderful book, *Safe People*, by Henry Cloud and John Townsend that helps the reader identify the "safe" people from the "unsafe" people. Often we try to improve our relationship with a friend or family member and can't understand why our efforts fail. Cloud and Townsend explain that it is impossible to develop a healthy relationship with someone who can't respect your perspective -- who is not free to consider any perspective other than his own. Therefore, if you are working with someone who can see only his point of view, you will continue to be frustrated. It is far healthier to be as kind and gracious as you can with a servant's heart but firm boundaries (*Boundaries* is another great book by these

authors) while moving on to seek healthy relationships with people who are safe -- people who can consider and care about your perspective.

(Author's warning – some clients have discovered while reading this book that **they** were “unsafe” people.)

The story of Adam and Eve explains what happens when we consider ourselves equal to God.

We have all heard the phrase “forbidden fruit.” Tell a child he cannot have something and as soon as you do, the child wants it even if he had no interest in it before you brought it to his attention.

It seems to be human nature that we hate to miss out on anything. We want to know everything, own everything, and experience everything. We want to be Master of the Universe. Unfortunately, we are not equipped to handle the Universe. God made that very clear in the story of Adam and Eve. Equally unfortunate, however, is how quickly the Deceiver is able to convince us that God doesn't really mean what He says.

When we consider ourselves equal to God, He can no longer protect us from the reality of evil and the fear of that evil destroys us.

I will never forget the time we bought a fish tank for our oldest son when he was about 3 or 4. My husband and I did not know anything about fish so we trusted the advice of the gentleman at the pet store and bought the fish he recommended. We set everything up and in great anticipation presented our son with his very own aquarium. About two minutes into the experience one type of fish ate the other fish and our son was hysterical. Needless to say we were pretty frustrated with the man at the pet shop!!!

If our son had been older it might have been a little bit humorous but the fact that he was so young and innocent made it horrible. Our son was not prepared to deal with the harsh reality of nature. His eyes had not been opened yet. And as parents who loved him, we felt terrible that we had failed to protect him.

When we consider ourselves equal to God, we realize we have chosen against God (evil) and the shame cuts us off from His life giving Spirit.

There is nothing worse than recognizing you have totally blown it and there is nothing you can do to take it back. About thirteen years ago I made plans to meet a friend for breakfast at 6:30 in the morning. I got to my place of work at 8:00, turned the page in my calendar, saw her name written in bold letters and realized I had left my friend waiting alone in the restaurant at 6:30 in the morning. I can still feel the horror of it!

Imagine how Adam and Eve must have felt. Fortunately, my friend forgave me and we continued our friendship although we always contacted each other the night before so I could set my alarm! With Adam and Eve it was quite a bit more serious because their actions not only offended God but changed the nature of their relationship. God now knew they no longer trusted Him to be their God but considered themselves equal to Him having eaten from the Tree of Wisdom. God was no longer their loving benefactor but rather their rival and competitor.

There was also a Tree of Life in the Garden explaining why God had to send us out of Paradise. If we (Adam and Eve) had eaten from that tree we would live forever in a fallen state – forever separated from God having chosen independence from God.

I forget how old my son was at the time but he was physically stronger than me. It was time to go to piano lessons and he did not particularly want to go. He was sitting on the top step of the front porch and when I sat down next to him he pointed out the fact that I could not physically put him in the car and make him go to his lesson. I agreed with him but then pointed out all the ways I could negatively affect his life if he did not go so it probably would be better for him to go. He conceded my point and chose to go to his piano lesson. As all three of my boys grew into adolescence and then into adulthood my husband and I recognized we had less and less control and now that they are full grown adults, we have absolutely no control. Fortunately they have developed their own wonderful self-control and it is great fun to be their friends.

However, my parenting experiences helped me understand why God had to escort Adam and Eve out of the Garden. When our sons considered themselves equal to my husband and me while they were still under our care and dependent on our wisdom, there was chaos in our home. If we didn't reestablish our authority the chaos would continue. Only when we helped them understand that we were in charge was peace a possibility. When Adam and Eve considered themselves equal to God, He too had to reestablish His authority and He could only do that by **sending them out of His paradise**. If Adam and Eve (representing us) were able to eat from the Tree of Life while still independent from God – choosing against God – choosing to be their own gods, they (and we) would be living in a broken relationship with God forever and chaos would reign for eternity.

We suffer from all the wrong choices of our ancestors.

Our strength is our weakness and our weakness is our strength. The personality trait that inspires confidence is the same personality trait that makes it difficult to work with other people. And the essence of our ego that makes us separate from others is attracting us to those others while at the same time desiring to go it alone. If we (Adam and Eve) were not separate from God we would not be able to desire God. And yet, it is being separate with an equal desire to be in charge that gets us into trouble.

We blame Adam and Eve (our ancestors) for all our woes in spite of the fact that we fail the same test over and over again. However, the Bible does suggest that we fail that test and endure the hardships of life because our ancestors failed it first. Genesis 3:23, 24 reads, *“therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.”*

That always seemed a little unfair to me as did the 3rd commandment, Exodus 20:4-6, *“You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”*

However, I now realize that what we do has very real consequences and those consequences do not just affect us. They are like a ripple in the water or the wings of a butterfly. Their effects go on forever.

There is a great children's book, *Andrew's Angry Words*, by Dorothea Lachner. In this book the author follows the negative impact of the angry words Andrew speaks to his sister. It's a great lesson on the power we have to be a blessing or a curse in everything we think, say, or do. It's also a reminder of how desperately we need the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. The knowledge of all the ways we have negatively impacted the world would be overwhelming **without** that grace.

We suffer from the consequences of those wrong choices.

As Director of Christian Education I met with many parents who did not want to force their children to attend church and/or Sunday school. They believed very strongly that it needed to be their choice. As children these parents were forced to go to church and they wanted Christianity to be a totally positive experience for their children, not one that was forced upon them. I would remind the parents that they were forcing their children to go to school to learn how to read and do math equations, running the risk of turning them against reading and math for the rest of their lives but very few saw the correlation. I would explain that children who do not know how to read have a much harder time choosing to read a book just as children who are not introduced to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have a much harder time choosing a relationship with God. It usually fell on deaf ears. The GOOD NEWS -- it is never too late to learn how to read and it is never too late to choose a relationship with God.

We suffer from the influence of their example tempting us to make the same wrong choices.

One of my favorite phrases is "Non anxious playful presence." It is one of the phrases I use often with parents. Just as God helps us by letting us know that everything is going to be all right (Jesus set everything right -- John 3:16), we too can help our children by letting them know that every thing is going to be all right. Parents who experience the peace of the Lord have a much easier time influencing their children to also experience that same peace. I remember when my youngest son was in elementary school a good friend of his had parents who were getting divorced. One day when I went in to say good night he asked me all kinds of questions that led up to the "real" question, "Do I have to worry about you and Daddy getting a divorce?" I was glad I could confidently answer "no" and explain to him why there was no reason for him to worry. I explained that both his father and I believed God wanted us to be married and would help us find solutions to any problems that came our way. Life is really hard and without God's help problems can be too much for a marriage to survive. If both of the parents do not know to look to God for help and trust that God will show them a solution that works for both parents, sometimes it's best for the parents to go their separate ways. Fortunately for him, both of his parents know God and know that God will help them find a way through any challenges that life may present.

The world is a frightening place as it is constantly telling us there is much to be afraid of. Unfortunately, fear often leads us to the wrong choice. If we seek God's wisdom, He can help us identify what we are afraid of and help us replace the lie we are believing with the truth. Just a few of the lies that lead us astray: "I am all alone and no one cares;" "I am nothing but a miserable failure;" "I need _____ to be happy;" "I am responsible for my children's happiness and all the choices my children make;" "Death is the end."

Eve believed the serpent instead of God. When we follow her example, we have much to be afraid of. However, if we chose to ignore the enemy and believe our Creator, we have nothing to fear and that freedom **always** leads to a better choice.

Our concept of “Fear the Lord” can negatively affect our relationship with God.

I can remember when “The fear of the Lord” (Job 28:28, Ecclesiastes 1:11-28) was a confusing concept for me. I couldn’t figure out how we are supposed to trust God if we are afraid of Him. However, as I matured I learned that “fear” in this context means respect and an understanding of our relationship under His authority.

One of the things I appreciated so much about my mother’s parenting skills was the excellent way she made the transition from parenting to friendship. All the way through high school she made it very clear that she was my mother, an authority figure over me, and not my friend. However, as soon as I was independent she made a complete 180 no longer wanting any authority but hoping we could be good friends.

I think it was her example of demanding respect because she knew it was her responsibility to take care of me, while at the same time communicating unconditional love that made it so easy for me to “fear” God without being afraid. Because of her example it’s been relatively easy for me to believe that God loves me unconditionally. And it’s that unconditional love that makes it easy for me to respect God’s authority. I remember one day when we were sitting at the dinner table my high school son expressed pity for me for missing out on so many adolescent adventures because I was afraid of my mother. I was able to reassure him with total confidence that I was never afraid of my mother. I followed her wise council and respected her authority because I loved her and knew how much she loved me.

We may fear God because we don’t understand His love for us.

My favorite line in the book of Job is verse 4 in the 38th chapter – “*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*” In the rest of the chapter and several that follow this same question is repeated over and over again using different words and images to accentuate the message that we really have no right to question God. The Creator of the Universe does not need to answer to His creation.

And yet, He sent His Son and poured forth His Holy Spirit so that we could know Him so perhaps it is okay to ask questions just as long as we don’t insist that we **must** understand all the answers. Perhaps it is okay to ask “WHY” when hurricanes and tornadoes hit as long as we don’t present “our” answer as “God’s” answer confident that we have it all figured out. God made it clear that our perspective is too limited to understand the workings of His Universe. All we have to know is His promise “*that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*” (Romans 8:28). He can bring forth good out of evil and shower down blessings amidst the tragedy.

We may fear God because He is all powerful and could protect us and yet, He allows us to hurt ourselves and each other.

Sometimes I have an “aha” moment and I can remember exactly where I was sitting and exactly what I was doing at the time. I had one such moment when I was complaining to God about all the horrible things some parents do to their children and asking Him why He allowed those people to have children.

I was reminded of Genesis 18:23-33 - the debate between Abraham and God concerning the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Then Abraham came near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?’ And the LORD said, ‘If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for

their sake.’ Abraham answered, ‘Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?’ And he said, ‘I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.’ Again he spoke to him, ‘Suppose forty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of forty I will not do it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.’ He answered, ‘I will not do it, if I find thirty there.’ He said, ‘Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.’ Then he said, ‘Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.’ He answered, ‘For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.’ And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place.

My conversation with God went something like this:

Me: Why do you let women who are completely selfish and cruel have children?

God: What is “completely selfish?” What constitutes “cruel”? Would “cruel” include women who make poor choices and end up financially strapped with little support? Or what about women who don’t know Me yet and are therefore unable to introduce Me to their children? Or what about women who are so full of fear that they smother their children? Where do I draw the line? If I only allowed women who are sinless to have children, there would be no children. Don’t forget all the ways you have hurt your children. And yet I’m awfully glad you gave birth to them so I could enjoy a relationship with them. Besides, Jesus came to redeem your sins as well as all the sins of all those other mothers. Your children and **all** the children are **My** children and My love will ultimately heal their wounds.

We are aware of our imperfections and ashamed to be in God's presence.

Many years ago our church purchased several videos for our adult education program. These videos provided excellent studies from well-known theologians without the expense of bringing them to our campus. One of my favorite stories from these videos was told by Tony Campollo. He shared the story of a young man who came to his office one day concerned that he was having a crisis of faith. After sharing his story Tony explained that there was nothing wrong with his faith. He just wanted to do something that he knew would affect God’s disapproval and it was far more convenient to do away with God than to deal with His disapproval.

I wonder if this young man read the same article I read from a published psychiatrist. I don’t remember the author or the publication but the content stuck with me. The author made the case that guilt was the greatest contributor to depression and anxiety and a belief in God causes our guilt. Get rid of God and you get rid of guilt. Get rid of guilt and you get rid of anxiety and depression. Sounds rather simple. Unfortunately the author doesn’t deal with the fact that we are created in the image of God with an inborn compass. He ignored the reality that nobody has to tell us -- preacher, parent, teacher, or **God** -- when we have done something hurtful. We know in the innermost part of our being that we are “wrong.” Now, there are some people who are missing this inborn monitor and there is a diagnosis for that, “Personality disorder.” However, people who are healthy “know” when they have done something wrong and they feel “guilty.” And yet, I do agree with the psychiatrist that guilt is the greatest contributor to our anxiety and depression. Where he went wrong was suggesting that God is the **cause** of our guilt when in fact, He is the one who can help us be **free** of it. (see Section 3).

We are afraid people will hurt us so we build protective walls to keep others at a safe distance.

There is a popular saying - “*Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.*” I have often thought that the shame should always fall on the one doing the fooling no matter how many times they try to fool someone but I guess the author of the saying thinks it is our responsibility to be clever enough not

to be fooled more than once. Either way the saying is good proof that there is a lot of “fooling” going on out there. We have good reason to be afraid of getting hurt -- it happens every day.

When I work with clients who are lonely it's often because they have had a disproportionate number of hurtful people in their lives and so they have retreated to the safety of their own space and erected walls for protection.

It's a challenge to encourage them to tear down their walls and try once again (armed with new tools) to seek out safer people especially since no one is completely safe and there is no way to guarantee they won't get hurt again. This is the major reason why I like to point to Jesus if my clients allow. He is the only one whose love is completely safe and consistently available.

As a counselor I do my best and always encourage my clients to please let me know if they are not feeling safe in my office. And while I have had clients let me know so that I could apologize and reestablish safety, I am sure there have been those who were not able to communicate their hurt and left my office wounded.

We are ashamed of the ways we hurt others.

You can always tell when someone thinks they are guilty by the way they proclaim their innocence. I recognize from my own experience that when I knew I was guilty and had time to “worry” about it, I came up with really good proclamations of innocence. How does that saying go? “I think you protest too much.” We have all been created with an ego that **hates** to be “wrong.” We hate it so much that we go to great lengths to prove to everyone including ourselves that we are “right.”

One of the first things you're taught in a communications class is the art of listening - learning how to concentrate on what the other person is saying instead of working on your rebuttal. Some suggest you repeat what the person said back to them to make sure that you understood what they said but that can be annoying. I have found it works better to repeat what I thought they said in my own words so they know I was listening and trying to understand. However, that can be quite the challenge because it often involves admitting to myself (and others) that I may have misunderstood, that there may be another perspective worth considering, that I may have been “wrong.” And then there are those occasions when it becomes completely obvious that I **was** “wrong.” On those occasions I convince myself first and then try to convince others that it was not my fault that I was “wrong.” I come up with wonderful excuses and plausible reasons why I was “right” in being “wrong.” The problem with this strategy is it doesn't lead anywhere. If I am not willing to admit that choices I made contributed to the “wrong,” then I am not able to identify what those choices are. And if I can't identify them, I can't change them, and if I don't change them, I keep making them over and over and over again.

Section 3. Jesus “fixes” those relationships.

Jesus’ reconciliation frees us from our fear.

Some would say that “hate” is the greatest obstacle to love. Some say it is “apathy” but I think it is “fear.” We choose hate or apathy to protect ourselves because we are afraid. When there is no fear, when fear has been wiped away, love is the natural response. We are created to love. It’s in our DNA. We want to love just as a fish wants to swim but fear gets in our way.

Since I have been keeping track of my own responses, I have found that every time I misbehave and feel “hate” or “apathy” start to creep in, I can always trace it back to fear -- fear of criticism, fear of rejection, fear of being wrong, fear of not having what I need or want, fear of being overwhelmed, fear of getting hurt, fear of some sort of PAIN, whether it be physical, emotional or spiritual. I don’t want to hurt and I’ll do whatever it takes to avoid it. Unfortunately, what I do to try to avoid the pain usually makes it worse.

What I’ve learned – since Jesus reconciled me to God, I now have free access. If I take advantage of that access and reach out to Him trusting Him to help me, the fear dissipates and I am freer to love. For example: when I start to feel road rage and contemplate doing unkind or dangerous things, I reach out and He reminds me that He’ll be with me to help me face the consequences of being late; when I start to get irritated with my husband because I’m afraid he’s going to make it difficult for me to get what I want and contemplate saying hurtful things, I reach out and He reminds me that He can help me work with my husband to find a solution that suits us both; when I start to get angry with leaders in my church for making decisions that I think are detrimental to the church and contemplate criticizing their decisions, I reach out and He reminds me that it’s the relationships that make it His Church and forgiveness is key for healthy relationships; when I start to feel outrage at the incompetence of our government and contemplate ranting about that incompetence, He reminds me that He is ultimately in charge and no Man (or woman) can thwart His ultimate plan. When it’s time for the world to end in a fiery blaze, the world will end. In the meantime He will continue to work with us towards *“thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”*

There is no question that we suffer from the consequences of other people’s choices (not to mention our own) and that suffering can cause anger, hate, bitterness, or resentment. However, if (or when) we live in that place where we trust God and His ultimate plan, aware that our suffering is merely temporary while our joy will be eternal, our fear of that suffering will become less and less. When we put our minds on His Kingdom, we are no longer afraid of this world and that **freedom** makes it possible to **love**.

Jesus was victorious over death so we no longer have to fear death.

Romans 6:23, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Our sin separates us from God who is sinless. God does not want that separation. He wants to enjoy us for all eternity so He sent His son to save us, to take care of the sin that separates us.

If we don’t have to fear death than what do we really have to be afraid of?

Some people believe reading the end of a book before you get there is cheating. These purists look down their noses at those of us who find it more entertaining to read the end first so we can relax and enjoy the story. I also prefer to watch a sporting event when I know how it ends (my husband and sons cannot relate.) I like to know the ending so I can relax and enjoy the game. It’s somewhat the same with Jesus. Since he told me how my story ends, I can relax and enjoy the journey.

Death is no longer the end.

One of my favorite scriptures is John 14:1-3, *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”*

The idea that there is a special place suited perfectly for me, a place where I can be totally free from all evil to enjoy God, His children and His creation for all eternity cheers me up anytime I think of it. The idea is especially helpful when someone has been cruel or selfish. Sometimes the injustice in this world can get to me. However, when I remember that this world is just temporary while the next place lasts for eternity, I have a much easier time lifting up the evil in prayer so that it doesn’t weigh me down.

My favorite chapter in *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis is the chapter on Hope. Below are just a couple of excerpts:

“Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It doesn’t mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither. . .

*. . . The Christian says, ‘Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. **I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others to do the same.**”*

The following is a poem by Henry Scott Holland that I heard at a friend’s memorial service:

Death is Nothing at All.

*Death is nothing at all.
I have only slipped away to the next room.
I am I and you are you.
Whatever we were to each other,
That, we still are.*

*Call me by my old familiar name.
Speak to me in the easy way
which you always used.*

*Put no difference into your tone.
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow.*

*Laugh as we always laughed
at the little jokes we enjoyed together.
Play, smile, think of me. Pray for me.
Let my name be ever the household word
that it always was.
Let it be spoken without effect.
Without the trace of a shadow on it.*

*Life means all that it ever meant.
It is the same that it ever was.
There is absolute unbroken continuity.
Why should I be out of mind
because I am out of sight?*

*I am but waiting for you.
For an interval.
Somewhere. Very near.
Just around the corner.*

All is well.

Death is the beginning of a new life in a place where there is no evil.

Many, many years ago I remember being in the van and my one son was hitting my other son. I told him that he had better learn to be nice because behavior like that is not allowed in Heaven. He came back with, "He won't be bothering me in Heaven." It was a pretty effective response for it stunned me into silence. I had no counter response. He was basically saying, "We are not in heaven so the rules do not apply." His response didn't change my belief that Jesus came to give us confirmation of the next place and help us in our preparation, but it did awaken in me the realization that those who haven't met Jesus don't understand their options. Many believe they have to fight to survive this place and that doesn't necessarily mean they won't be thrilled to lay down their weapons in the next.

However, I do believe this life is to be used to prepare us for our "real" home. Several years ago I read *A New Kind of Christian* by Brian D. McLaren. His description of heaven and hell intrigued me:

"Above all, according to Jesus, going through that door can be like coming home, coming to a place where you fit, a place where you belong, a place just right for you. . . Now in contrast to this first experience, for some people, when they pass through that door, the experience will be very different. To illustrate, let me lead you on a little thought experiment. Imagine that you have just died and passed through the doorway of death. And you enter heaven. And it is a place of intense brightness, a place fragrant with goodness, a place alive with love. The presence of God seems to pervade everyone and everything, like a light that doesn't shine onto things but rather shines out of everything, everywhere. In this place, people are humble and genuinely interested in others. They are eager to serve one another, and they love to laugh and dance and be free as children. There are no inhibitions. There is nothing to hide. It is a place of true freedom, trust, and intimacy. And even though it is a place of great diversity, with people of all cultures and languages and times retaining all their uniqueness, it is a place where no one argues, no one fights, no one hates, and no one complains - not because they aren't allowed to but

because they don't want to, because they accept and love one another completely. They are fully alive. OK, do you have that picture? Think about how you would feel upon entering that place.

OK. Now I want you to imagine that someone has walked beside you through that doorway of death. And that person has lived his life cramped in hatred and fear, tight in guilt and greed, ingrown in lust and selfishness. He has spent every day of his life complaining and being bitter and blaming others and being ungrateful. He has been suspicious of those different from himself, and he has become an expert at lying and cheating and using others. He is proud, arrogant, unwilling to admit he is wrong, maybe now incapable of doing so. He is so used to getting his own way that he has never been satisfied in any situation unless he is completely in charge. These aren't just the behaviors he has practiced; these are the features of the person he has become. Now, how would that person feel?

Could it be that the very light that seems beautiful to you would seem blinding to him? Could the very warmth of the love of that place that to you is so perfect seem to him horrible? Could the acceptance and love and trust and openness that welcome you seem to him disgusting, weak, terrifying, insipid, or repulsive? Sometimes I wonder if we have it all wrong. Maybe it's not that there are two places beyond the door of death, heaven, and hell. Sometimes I wonder if hell is just what heaven feels like for those who haven't learned in this life what this life is intended to teach. I believe with all my heart that God is not willing for even one person to miss out on the joys and glories of heaven. I believe with all my heart that if there is any way for individuals to be rescued from their wrong choices in this life, I believe they will be rescued and redeemed. But I also believe that we have the sober responsibility of realizing this; that, as Pascal said, we are embarked. We are becoming on this side of the door of death the kind of people we will be on the other side."

Jesus reconciled us with God.

I can still remember as a child getting something all tangled up and then giving it to my Mom to untangle. I was always amazed at how quickly and easily she would untangle the mess that I thought was impossible to fix.

When I look at this world and the mess we've made, I'm in awe of the way Jesus "untangled it." As a counselor I've heard terrible things and I shudder at how people can be so cruel and make such horrible choices. And yet, I know there is a **reason** why we do such terrible things. We want to stop the pain the easiest and quickest way possible. And so we choose the route that we believe will ease the suffering but instead, it just makes it worse.

We've all heard the tale of Pinocchio. His nose growing longer represents the reality that when we tell a lie we are often put in the position of needing to tell another lie to cover up the first lie and then we need to tell yet another lie to cover up that lie and so forth and so on. . . Once we recognize that "telling the truth" in the first place won't hurt as much as telling a lie, we are much more likely to take the right route and be spared from all that squirming and conniving. Unfortunately for many, telling the truth as children hurts way more than the squirming and conniving so they develop the habit of lying. I've read parenting books that suggest parents should try to make the reward for telling the truth greater than the negative consequence for the "sin" that they are confessing. I heartily agree. Children need to recognize there are consequences to their poor choices. However, the praise they receive for telling the truth should always make the consequences much easier to bear.

In a way Jesus did that for us when He took our sin upon the cross. Without Jesus it hurts too much to confess so we deny, make excuses and blame others for our sin. We end up piling one denial on top of another denial on top of another denial and soon we've got a tangled-up mess. However, when we

understand through the words and actions of Jesus that God loves us regardless of our choices; that He will be with us when we go tell the neighbor that we broke his window; that He will never forsake us no matter how cruel and hurtful we have been; we are encouraged and enabled to tell the truth. We are free to repent. Then as we walk in the truth, we are reconciled with God and we see our mess unravel.

Jesus' reconciliation frees us from our shame.

I'm convinced that most of the children who have a bad attitude formed that attitude from a position of self-defense. It hurts a lot less to be the one doing the rejecting than to be the one who gets rejected. When someone is constantly being told that they're not good enough or don't quite measure up, what other option do they have but to check out?

I will never forget the story a friend from church told me several years ago about an experience she had tutoring a young man who was struggling at school. When she was helping him with one particular project, he worked really hard and did a great job. He learned the material and presented the information well. Compared to his usual work it was really quite good. My friend was happy for him too because she could tell he was proud of it. Well, he took it to school and instead of recognizing the improvement and all the hard work that went into it, the teacher graded it with a red pen. There was no praise, no encouragement, no positive marks. The teacher only pointed out what was wrong with it. You can imagine what effect that had on this young man's attitude. My friend who is a very forgiving soul was angrier than I have ever seen her. She knew that all the progress she had made with this young man had just been wiped out.

I've often wondered what this world would be like if it was a place where everyone was loved and encouraged from birth; if everyone was treasured and adored; if everyone received full forgiveness and was corrected with patient direction. The GOOD NEWS -- Jesus Christ came to let us know there is such a place and He can show us the way! (John 14:6.)

The blood of Jesus has washed us clean.

1 John 1:7, *"But if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."* Whenever I read this scripture the image of a surgeon scrubbing down comes to mind. Just as the operating room needs to be germ free to protect the patient from infection, the Kingdom of God needs to be sin free to protect His children from evil. And just as the surgeon needs to wash away the germs, so the blood of Jesus needs to wash away our sin.

Some people wonder if the whole "Sacrificial Lamb" idea isn't a bit old-fashioned. Why would God need to sacrifice His Son? He's God, couldn't he just forgive us?

I was a little fuzzy on that myself until I had an experience that helped me understand. Someone had hurt me deeply, not as deeply as many have been hurt but deeply enough for me to want revenge. I remembered the scripture, Romans 12:19, *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"* However, I wasn't sure giving it over to God was going to be the least bit satisfying and then suddenly it hit me! God already had His vengeance. Jesus already paid the price. And I saw Jesus step in and take the whipping that belonged to the person who hurt me. And it reminded me of the many times Jesus stepped in and took the beating that belonged to me.

Love demands justice. If God forgives us without a consequence for our evil, there is no justice and if there is no justice, we dare not trust God's love.

God sees the righteousness of Jesus when He looks at us.

This never really made sense to me until I read Matthew 11:30: *“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* It was explained to me that we are yoked with Jesus. We are no longer pulling all the weight by ourselves but now we have the Son of God pulling right alongside us. When I stand before God, Jesus is right beside me. It is kind of like having a really good friend introduce me to a possible employer and stand up for me. This employer knows my friend and attributes the same qualities to me and I in turn want to represent those qualities so as not to let my friend down.

Or yet another way it has been explained -- When Jesus took my sin on the cross, he swapped places with me (II Corinthians 5:17). Therefore when God looks at me, He sees the righteousness of Jesus (Romans 5:18-20). This explanation is a little harder for me to grasp which is why I shared the other one first. And yet, I do believe there is truth in it. I do believe that Jesus made it possible for me to sit with God and since God can only be in the presence of the Holy, somehow Jesus' righteousness swapped places with my sin.

Jesus helps us understand that God sees past our sin.

Whenever my children were sick and behaved poorly I always looked past their behavior to focus on their physical pain. My heart was full of compassion and all I wanted to do was comfort them. I was never disappointed or angry. I just wanted to help them feel better.

Through Jesus' relationship with the “sinners” of his day, we can see that he too was full of compassion for those who were suffering. He too saw past their behavior to love them and comfort them. He wasn't disappointed or angry. He wanted to help and so he did. And His love transformed them just as His love transforms us today.

Jesus helps us to understand that God feels our pain. He recognizes our weakness. He sees our fear and our shame. He knows why we make such horrible choices and so He sent His Son!

Jesus has redeemed our poor choices and righted the wrong.

I'll never forget the time I screwed up the projection system at a retreat center and how relieved I was when someone was able to fix it. I wanted to kiss him. If I multiply how I felt towards that man times 100 – that is how I feel towards Jesus. Well, actually 100 is probably not a realistic number for it doesn't accurately portray the things Jesus has fixed in my 60 years. Every poor choice I made, every hurt I inflicted, every lie I ever told has been “fixed” by Jesus Christ. Every sin has been redeemed.

A good sports analogy might be the fumble of Earnest Byner on January 17, 1988. If he had fumbled the ball early in the game and the Browns had had the time to redeem that mistake and end with a win, no one would have remembered his mistake. When we work for God we know He has all eternity to redeem our mistakes. When we sign up for God's team and leave our own team behind, we never have to worry about our mistakes again because God's team always wins. God works through our mistakes to bring about His ultimate will. No one can thwart His plan. Therefore, when we're out there in left field and the ball is coming straight at us, we don't have to be afraid of dropping it because whether or not we catch it, the team still wins. Some might ask, then what's the point? The point is the thrill we experience when we catch the ball! Jesus puts us on the team and NO ONE can kick us off. However, it's up to us whether we sit on the bench or get out there and play!

When we work for God, recognizing and repenting of our sin and receiving the gift of grace granted through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we no longer have to worry about failing. Every failure teaches us something new and God can use everything. And when failure is no longer a threat, we have the freedom to live the abundant life, using our gifts and talents with abandon, trusting God to show us the way forward!

Jesus' resurrection let us know that He is always with us.

One of my favorite curriculums for Christian Education is "Children and Worship." In this program God's story is told with wooden figures placed on trays stored on shelves around the room to create a special place for a special time with God. The hour is structured like a worship service. The children gather with songs of praise; the word is proclaimed with the story and a scripture reading; and the children respond with a prayer, a feast and a blessing.

Before the scripture is read the Christ candle is lit with the words "We light the Christ candle to remind us that Jesus is always with us when we read God's Word." After the scripture is read and the children pray, the Christ candle is extinguished with a candle snuffer so that the smoke will swirl up into the air. While the smoke is spiraling up from the candle the Worship Leader says "Jesus who was in one place at one time is now in all places at all times even everywhere in this room."

I always thought it was a wonderful way to remind the children that 2,000 years ago Jesus was a man with the same time and space limitations that we encounter, but since the resurrection Jesus is able to be with us at all times and everywhere we may go.

Jesus made it known that nothing can separate us from God's love.

It's been suggested that all religions are equal and a result of mankind's need for something greater than himself. I used to agree until I understood that a Christian's relationship with God depends entirely on what God has done for the Christian and not on anything the Christian can do for himself. Christianity is the only religion where God does the reconciling. The Christian understands that he can't make it up to God. He can't pay his debt. He can't fix what he has broken. God has to do it for him and so He did. All the other religions ask man to reach up and try to fix the broken relationship himself through different kinds of rituals. And while these rituals may bring mankind closer to God, only Jesus who was without sin, can bridge the gap. Only Jesus can remove the wall.

Therefore, since the Christian knows his relationship with God is based **entirely on gratitude**, there can be no boasting or competing. God made the relationship possible through His Son, Jesus Christ, not us. We cannot boast for achieving our goal or take pride in establishing the relationship. And on the flip side, we don't have to be afraid of screwing it up. God has reconciled us with Himself and if God has accomplished it, we have nothing to fear.

Jesus is the New Covenant

One thing I enjoy about being Presbyterian is the fact that we love to eat. We are always getting together for some kind of meal whether it be Easter breakfast, potluck dinners, Talent and Taters (a talent show preceded by a meal of potatoes and all the fixings), or just a cake and cookie reception to commemorate something special during Worship. I used to think meals were purely social but I've come to realize that they are spiritual as well. If you look at the life of Jesus you will find that most of his teachings and interactions with people were celebrated around a table of food. In fact, the most important lesson

involved a loaf of bread and a glass of wine. With the ingredients that nourish the body he helped us to understand how he nourishes our soul. In Luke 22:19, 20 we read:

“Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”

I didn’t understand what Jesus meant when he said -- *“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”* until I read about the “old covenant.” In the book of Genesis, chapter 17, God established a Covenant with Abraham. Circumcision was the sign of the Covenant, a sign of the special relationship between God and Abraham’s descendants. Further along in the story, God gives Moses a set of commandments to bring clarity to what God expects from them in this special relationship. Unfortunately God’s people were not able to keep His commandments. Throughout the Old Testament we can see a pattern repeating itself: God’s people would drift away in disobedience; some great tragedy would bring them back; they would repent and promise to be faithful; God would save them; they would be devoted for a while; and then they would drift away again. No matter how much God showed His commitment to them, God’s people were not able to love God as God loved them.

However, we can also see another pattern developing as we read through the Old Testament stories -- a prophecy foretelling the arrival of a Messiah who would fix this lopsided relationship. God knew from the beginning that His children were broken. He knew they were riddled with fear and shame. He knew they would be unable to love Him as He loved them. He knew they would need a Savior to fill in for them and set things “right.” And so, God established a New Covenant with us through the blood of Jesus so that our relationship with God could be perfect. Under the Old Covenant God loved His children perfectly while His children’s love for Him was imperfect. With the New Covenant Jesus stands in our stead so that our relationship with each other can be perfect; so that we can come before God without shame and embarrassment; so that our connection with God no longer depends on our holiness but on the strength and holiness of Jesus Christ. And then as Jesus stands in for us, we are overwhelmed with gratitude which releases us from our fear and shame and frees us up to love more perfectly. We are transformed and our ability to love God and others increases.

Jesus made it known that God's love is sufficient for all our needs.

Several years ago I read *The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson. It is a wonderful little book encouraging Christians to pray the same simple prayer that Jabez prayed so many thousands of years ago in 1 Chronicles 4:10:

And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, “Oh, that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!” So God granted him what he requested.

In the book the author shared his extremely successful life experiences and those of many others after they prayed that prayer believing God would do for them what He did for Jabez. It reminded me a little of Joel Olsteen. I love the positive message they share full of hope and promise. And I believe God created us to live life abundantly and He wants us to trust Him and keep ASKING! However, sometimes those messages tempt me to desire God for what He will do for me instead of desiring God because He loves me. I have found that when my desire is focused on loving Him the way He loves me, I have total peace but when I start desiring “other” things, fear starts creeping in. Jesus promised that God would take care of us and nothing could separate us. He never promised us that we would get everything we wanted or that life would be easy. And yet, He did tell us to ASK!

Jesus ushered in the Kingdom and invited all to enter in.

When I was attending Ashland Theological Seminary, I took a New Testament course the same semester I was taking a course on Cognitive Behavior Therapy. One of the assignments in the New Testament course was to do an exegesis (in depth study of a scripture passage) on any passage we chose. In the Counseling class I was learning about Chris Thurman, a psychologist and author of several books who emphasized the impact of truthful thinking on mental health and created a thirty day TRUTH program: T-trigger event, R-reflection based on a lie, U-unhealthy response, T-truth, H-healthy response. This program was developed for the purpose of helping his clients adjust their thinking to help them improve their mental health. On the first day the reader is instructed to fill out a questionnaire which lists thirty falsehoods by recording which lies are most prevalent in their thinking. During the remaining twenty-nine days the reader is led through various exercises to help eradicate the lies that are causing their unhealthy responses and to focus instead on the twelve basic truths Thurman describes earlier in his book. These truths are based on the teachings of Jesus and it is Thurman's hope that adjusting their thought process will set people free from negative behavior patterns so that they will begin to enjoy life with much healthier responses.

As I was learning about this TRUTH program the scripture verse in the Gospel of John, chapter 8, verses 31-38 came to mind: *"Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.' They answered him, 'We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, 'you will be made free'?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father's presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.'"*

For my New Testament assignment I decided to exegete the passage to see if Jesus would support Chris Thurman's program. I was totally surprised by what I found. Up until this assignment I had always thought that "believing Jesus' words to be true" set us free. However, after the assignment, I realized it is the "relationship" with Jesus that sets us free. "Accepting the invitation" from the Son who has a place in God's household **enables us to abide there** not "our knowledge or belief system." Knowing what Jesus said is not the same as knowing **Him**. Memorizing His words and repeating the Parables He told is not the same as inviting Him into your life and depending on Him to show you the way. I can quote His words that tell me God's love is a gift to receive and not something I can earn, but until I experience Him loving me the way He loved Zaccheus, I won't be **free** from the need to earn God's love. I can memorize His words that invite me to ask, seek and knock, but unless I actually ask Jesus and then receive that which I asked for, I won't be **free** from believing I'm on my own. I can recite His words that tell me He paid the price for my sins, but until I feel His forgiveness for a specific sin I committed, I won't be **free** from feeling like I don't really belong in God's Kingdom.

This little assignment opened my eyes to the importance of a "relationship" with Jesus. It's good to know His teachings but it's the **relationship** that sets us free. It's our relationship with Jesus that gets us in the door.

Jesus' redemption transforms this world as we invite him into our lives.

A practice that often helps when I'm struggling to make the better choice is to mentally take the task out of the "should" column and put it into the "want" column. If it's something I should do, I have a hard time choosing it but if it's something I "want" to do, it's a piece of cake.

The word "transformation" didn't mean a whole lot to me until I understood the difference between living under the law – I should do this – and living under grace – I want to do this. When we live our lives with Jesus, his unconditional love and free gift of forgiveness transforms our entire perspective so that we "want" to be a blessing to others. We "want" to use our gifts and talents to create, produce, organize and serve. We are so grateful for Jesus' redemption and salvation that we "want" to love and forgive others. We **want** to choose God's way. It's when we listen to the lie that we find ourselves struggling with the "should." When we believe -- "*God wants you to do this thing so you **should** do it but it's not something that will benefit you so you really **don't want** to do it*" we're in the "should" column. But when we believe -- "*God has made it possible for you to live the most amazing life full of love and joy and this task is part of that life*" we're in the "want" column. Whenever I find myself struggling with "I should do this" I ask God to help me discern whether I am believing the lie or letting someone use guilt to manipulate me. It's a process and I still struggle but I'm getting better at finding my way back to the "want" column.

I have also found that there is power in "wanting" something with all of our heart, soul, and mind. Many times we are conflicted. We may want something with our mind but not with our heart and soul. We have a great idea but we don't have the heart or the soul to bring it to fruition. Or we may want something with our heart but not with our mind and soul. We love someone but the mind doesn't want to do the work it would take to understand that person and the soul isn't willing to make room. Or we may want something with our soul but not our heart and mind. Our soul may ache to be free of an addiction but our heart and mind convince us that we can't live without it. I think there is a reason the first Commandment tells us to "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" When we're all in, when we **want** something with every fiber of our being, we will accomplish it. When we love God with all that we have and all that we are, transformation **will** take place.

Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 3:11, Acts 1:5)

I was shocked in my late twenties to find out how ignorant I was about the Holy Spirit. I was raised in a Presbyterian Church and regularly attended Sunday school and church as far back as I can remember. I also graduated from Muskingum College, a Presbyterian College, with a major in religion. However, through all those years and all those experiences I had never been made aware of the importance of the third person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit. Now, I'm sure part of the reason is the fact that I didn't have "ears to hear" so I don't think it is fair to blame the church I attended as a child or Muskingum College. However, I have found that I am not the only one who was raised in church and grew up knowing very little about the Holy Spirit. It seems everyone knows all about Christmas and Easter but not about Pentecost, the third Christian holiday. It appears that everyone is familiar with the Christmas story and the story of the resurrection but not with the story of Pentecost found in Acts 2:1-12. So many seem to miss the story of the Holy Spirit descending on those who were told to wait for the gift that God had promised them in Acts 1:3-5: "*After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'*"

Fortunately the church I attend now has a great celebration on Pentecost with balloons, cake and everyone wearing red! I hope it's a little harder to miss this Holiday as we spend several weeks leading up to it and then make a pretty big splash on the day itself. I've also noticed that we are very intentional about asking the Holy Spirit to come into our lives and transform us, gift us and empower us to learn to love as God loves.

The Holy Spirit helps us. (Luke 12:12, John 14:26)

I have already mentioned Catherine Marshall and how much her book, *Beyond Ourselves*, blessed me. Well, she also wrote, *The Helper*, which blessed me even more! It was my first in depth look at the role of the Holy Spirit and my first introduction to the amazing help the Holy Spirit has to offer. Thanks to Jesus, the Creator of the Universe has offered me the assistance of His Spirit 24/7 to help me with my work, my relationships, and most importantly, my worship. All I have to do is thank Jesus and open my life to the Spirit as much as I know how. It's a learning experience and I'm still discovering new ways of letting Him in as well as identifying those things that close Him out - unforgiveness and ignoring His counsel, to name just a few. However, it has become obvious to me that the Holy Spirit **wants** to help us as much as we will let Him.

When it comes to my work, an example I have shared with clients is the way the Holy Spirit helped me with projects in school. When I was attending Ashland Theological Seminary, I hadn't written a paper or turned in an assignment for over 30 years. Needless to say, I was a bit nervous. However, every time I asked for help, the Holy Spirit transformed a daunting task into creative play. Now, as I sit with clients, the Holy Spirit helps me share thoughts, resources, ideas, insight, and most importantly unconditional love. I have found I need His help most when I start to judge a client. As a counselor, it is essential that I create a safe place for my client. If the client feels judged, my office is no longer that safe place and I can no longer be of any help. Therefore, when I have a critical thought, I call on the Spirit to help and immediately the Spirit shows me something about the client that erases my criticism and fills me with compassion.

In my relationships, the Holy Spirit helps me with discernment: recognizing whom I can trust; figuring out what is helpful to say; deciding when I should speak up and when I should let the Holy Spirit handle it; and understanding what the other person is thinking and feeling.

And finally, with my worship I have found that the Holy Spirit helps me focus and brings the words in the Bible to life. Without the Holy Spirit, the Bible is merely a collection of poetry, parables and stories but with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Bible helps me know God.

The Holy Spirit comforts us.

One of my least favorite sayings is, "*You made your bed now you need to lie in it.*" Unfortunately people have attributed that saying to God but it couldn't be further from the truth. Whenever I've recognized that I've made a mess of things, the Holy Spirit is **always** right there to comfort me and assure me that Jesus has redeemed the mess. The Spirit immediately comes alongside and promises me that everything is "ultimately" going to be all right – God loves me, treasures me and forgives me. Hang tight and everything will be made right. The Spirit also reminds me of the 7 steps that will help me move forward and be free of the shame: (1) repent (recognize I blew it); (2) ask for forgiveness (of God and anyone I have hurt); (3) make amends if possible (fix the window); (4) learn from the mistake (try to figure out why I made that mistake, what lie I was believing); (5) change my life, put something in my life to help me not make that same mistake again (set my alarm so I don't leave her sitting alone in the restaurant); (6)

use the memory of it to grow compassion for others who make mistakes; (7) and put it in Jesus' hands to take it from there so I can move forward.

I have also found the Holy Spirit comforts me when life hurts. The Holy Spirit has the **perfect balance** between: (1) That really had to hurt. I'm **so sorry** you got hurt. AND (2) Let Me help you be open to see the way God can use that pain to bless you.

The Holy Spirit gifts us. (I Corinthians 12:1-11)

One of my favorite scriptures is Paul's analogy of the physical body representing the Christian body: I Corinthians 12:12-26 – *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body’, that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.”*

It's one of my favorites because it explains “why” there is no hierarchy in the Kingdom. We are all equally important and equally treasured. We are all on an equal playing field with no competition and no reason for pride. Therefore, we can ALL celebrate together when someone is celebrating and console one another when someone is hurting.

It also helps me appreciate the scripture that comes right before – I Corinthians 12:1-11: *“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.”*

We all have different gifts for different tasks. When we are working for God's Kingdom, we can appreciate each other's gifts and love each other as equals. If we are working for our own kingdom we may become jealous or prideful. I've found that whenever I notice jealousy or pride creeping in, the Holy Spirit reminds me of I Corinthians 12:1-26. It helps me recognize that I've turned my back on God's

Kingdom and I'm working for my own. The Good News -- the Holy Spirit is ready and waiting to help me turn around!!!

Jesus has redeemed all the pain and suffering of this world.

I've often wondered when I watch *Law and Order SVU* if I would rather have a child who suffered some unimaginable terror safe with Jesus in heaven or surviving in this world to deal with the horror. Fortunately I have not had to face that reality and I pray every day for the Holy Spirit to protect my family from the evil of this world. However, knowing that Jesus has redeemed all the tragedy helps calm my fears when I recognize that man's "free will" factors in.

One amazing example of that can be found in the wonderful masterpiece, *The Hiding Place*, by Corrie ten Boom. In this book Corrie tells the story of how she survived the evils of Hitler and Nazi Germany. Her Christian parents hid Jewish friends in their home in Holland and so suffered the same fate as their friends. She and her sister were separated from their parents but at least had each other as they were sent to the same concentration camp. Corrie survived but her sister died shortly before they were freed. Throughout the book Corrie gives examples of the work of the Holy Spirit amidst the evil that surrounded them. Just one example was the time their tent was filled with fleas which kept the guards away making it possible to share the Good News of Jesus with all the other inmates. Some would have seen the fleas as a terrible curse but Corrie and her sister saw it as an answer to prayer.

Because Jesus suffered greater physical pain than anyone . . .

Many Christian authors make the point that we have "desensitized" the horror of the cross by using the symbol to make lovely jewelry. You don't see a gold or silver image of an electric chair or a hangman's noose hanging on a chain around a woman's neck but you see all kinds of beautiful crosses. I've also noticed over the years there isn't much in the way of Sunday school curriculum that deals with the effect that death by crucifixion has on the physical body, not to mention the whipping that came before. And I remember when "*The Passion of Christ*" came out in the movie theaters, people were shocked by the violence.

Some suggest that since Jesus was God it was no big deal but if you read the Gospels it is clear that Jesus knew He was the Word made **flesh** and that his flesh was going to hurt. Up until the end He was hoping God could figure out some other way. We read in Luke 22:42, "*Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.*" And then in Luke 22:44, "*In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.*" Jesus knew the pain that was about to be his.

. . . He can walk with us through our physical pain.

All the experts agree – support groups are extremely helpful! Encouragement from people who had a similarly painful experience and understand your situation can be incredibly supportive. I'll never forget when my first pregnancy ended in a miscarriage. The greatest comfort was hearing all the stories from so many other women who suffered the same grief. Knowing that I wasn't alone, and that others survived and went on to have healthy babies was a huge blessing.

And yet, people can help only so much. No two people have the exact same experience so understanding has its limitations and no person, however helpful, can guarantee the ending. Ultimately we are alone in our pain, **unless** we let Jesus walk with us. Jesus understands our situation completely; Jesus will never leave our side; Jesus can carry us when we don't have the strength to carry ourselves; and Jesus

guarantees our ending -- John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*"

Because Jesus suffered greater humiliation than anyone. . .

Jesus not only suffered physically but also suffered emotionally from the moment he was arrested to the moment he gave up his life on the cross. No one has suffered greater humiliation. Some might say that He didn't suffer because He knew that He was innocent but it has been my personal experience and the shared experience of others that even the innocent suffer. Even when we know we have done nothing to deserve the humiliation it still hurts when others accuse us, dismiss us, judge us and berate us. Even though we know that one day God will reveal the truth and we will be vindicated, it still hurts!

. . . He can show us how to endure our emotional pain.

One of the biggest lies ever told - "*Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.*" While I would agree that physical abuse using sticks and stones can lead to broken bones and the ultimate tragedy of a physical death, I cannot agree that words do not hurt. Every day I see the tragic effects of humiliation and emotional abuse communicated through words. And since not everyone is physically abused but **everyone** struggles from emotional pain, one could make a case that words actually cause more pain and suffering than sticks and stones. As we live and work with other people we will hurt them and they will hurt us - there is no way to avoid it. And if we **try** to avoid it by hiding away from the world, we will suffer the humiliation of our cowardice and shame. Whatever we choose, this world hurts!

Another scene in *The Hiding Place* that had a huge impact on me was the scene where they were naked standing in line for a shower. Corrie's sister reminded Corrie that Jesus had suffered the same humiliation and could show them how to get through it. When I read that scene I was much younger and obsessively frightened by the horror of rape. After reading their story I decided that if I ever had to endure such a terrible humiliation, I would call out to Jesus and follow him through it. The knowledge that He would be with me and could show me the way through comforted me and although I continued to be diligent, I was no longer afraid.

Because Jesus suffered greater abandonment than anyone. . .

I used to wonder why Jesus accused God of forsaking him when he cried out on the cross. Mark 15:34 reads, "*At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'*" Jesus had agreed to the plan. He knew what was going to happen. Why was he blaming God for forsaking him? It wasn't until I understood what it meant for Jesus to take our sin upon Him that I understood His anguish. It wasn't until I realized what it would mean for Jesus who was sinless to suddenly be full of sin that I appreciated His lament. Imagine, one moment you are without sin in a perfect relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit and the next minute you become the sin of the world, weighed down by every evil thing mankind has ever done in the past and will ever do in the future. One minute you are filled with the brilliant light of perfect love and the next you are alone in the darkness with nothing but evil engulfing you. No wonder Jesus cried out!

. . . He can comfort us when we feel alone.

Jesus also knows the pain of betrayal, rejection and abandonment. He was betrayed by Judas, rejected by Peter, and abandoned by all of his disciples except for one. He watched fear take hold of his loved ones and drive them away. He understands. He knows the pain of it better than anyone. He knows what you are feeling. He sees what you are thinking and He can help. He wants to help!

And if we ever feel abandoned by God we need only remember what Jesus did for us. We need only replace the lie we are believing with the truth found in Romans 8:31-39:

“What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Jesus reconciles us with others.

A good teacher must have control of the classroom. A good coach must have control of the team and a good parent must have control of the family. If the students don’t respect the teacher and know her to be fair and effective, there is chaos in the classroom. The same goes for the playing field and the home. If we don’t believe the person in charge has our best interest in mind and knows what they are doing, we are not willing to make the sacrifices it takes to work together for a common goal.

I think one of the greatest stumbling blocks for people to accept the Christian faith is the conflict between “all powerful” and “all loving.” They look around and figure God can’t possibly be both. God obviously is not in control OR He is a sadistic god which is even worse. Jesus came to reveal the truth. If we study His life, death and resurrection we grow to understand how God can truly be both. We learn that God does have our best interest in mind and does know what He’s doing. We learn to trust Him. And as we learn to trust Him we become more and more willing to make the sacrifices necessary to work together with our fellow sisters and brothers in Christ for a common goal -- the Kingdom of Heaven.

As we recognize Jesus' authority over everything in heaven and on earth, we are reconciled with others.

I love to counsel couples who want Christian counseling and are willing to invite Jesus to be the authority in their marriage. It is always easier to help spouses understand the “other” point of view when they know that Jesus cares about each one of them equally and can help them find a solution that honors **both** of them. When Jesus is in charge of the marriage, both the husband and the wife are safe and when both spouses feel safe, they are free to communicate honestly. When honest communication takes place, understanding follows.

I’ve also noticed that recognizing Jesus’ authority can help me deal with the injustice in the world. Life seems so unfair to so many. Those who are cruel and selfish seem to get away with all kinds of evil while others who are kind and compassionate end up suffering. It can be overwhelming. However, I have found that it helps to remember that no one really gets away with anything. Remembering that Jesus is the authority over everyone and holds us all accountable, takes away the sting. We can receive His salvation or go it alone, but someone is going to pay the consequences for our sin.

Understanding his authority also helps me forgive others. I’ll never forget a Bible study I attended a long time ago when we were looking at Matthew 6:14, 15, *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive*

your trespasses.” One of the participants got really angry. I felt so sorry for the woman in charge because she didn’t know how to handle his anger. I had never seen anyone so angry in a Bible study before and I’ve never experienced such anger since. There was someone in his life who he could not forgive and the thought that God would not forgive his trespasses unless he forgave this person, put him over the edge. I wish I had known then what I know now because I might have been able to help the leader respond. As it played out, we all just kind of stared at the guy until he left in a huff. I wish I could have told him that God has already forgiven his sins through the blood of His son, Jesus, and God understands his pain and has eternal patience. I wish I could have told him with gentle grace that while Jesus’ blood has washed him clean it has also washed clean the sin of the person who harmed him. Until we understand that truth we are ignoring Jesus’ authority and free gift of grace. We can’t have one without the other. We can’t accept Jesus’ forgiveness for ourselves but not for our enemies. Jesus’ forgiveness is for everyone! And if Jesus has forgiven someone, we have no right not to.

Whenever I get angry with someone, I try to remember that just as my own sin has been covered so has the sin of the person who angered me. If I don’t let go of my anger, I’m not recognizing Jesus’ authority or my need for Him to cover **my** debt. And if I don’t need Jesus to cover my debt, I’ll be covering my own debt. And if I’m covering my own debt, I will be paying the consequences of my own sin and if I have to pay the consequences of my own sin, well, I don’t want that!

When we understand that Jesus has the **ultimate** authority and no one is going to **ultimately** get away with anything, we are free to lift up the injustice and let Jesus deal with it so we can move on to celebrate life!

As we recognize that we are all dependent on the redemption of Jesus Christ, we understand that we have no right to judge others and others have no right to judge us. (Matt. 18:23-35/Parable of the Unforgiving Servant)

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant has probably had more of an impact on me than any other Parable. Every time I have a critical thought or an unforgiving attitude, the Holy Spirit uses this parable to correct me. The Holy Spirit reminds me of the huge debt I owe to God. Since He has wiped that debt clean, surely I can let go of the minor debt owed to me. And if that doesn’t work, I may find myself in the exact same situation of the person I am criticizing and I immediately let go of my critical attitude in an effort to convince God that I don’t need the lesson!

However, the opposite also holds true as the Parable helps me to understand that no one has the right to be critical of **me** either. They have the right to disagree and think that my ideas, words or actions are wrong. In fact, it is our responsibility to judge these things as we figure out the best way forward. However, Jesus is the only one who has the right to judge the person responsible for those ideas, words or actions because he is the only one who has no debt. One of my favorite phrases is “separate the sin from the sinner.” Some people say it’s impossible to separate the two but we do it for ourselves all the time. We constantly separate what we do from who we are. And since we give **ourselves** that grace, Jesus asks that we extend it to others.

As we receive God's forgiveness, Jesus helps us to forgive others. (Matthew 3:11)

Several years ago I heard a young man give a sermon in a church I was visiting that had a lasting impression -- so lasting I still remember it some twenty years later. The basic message was one of gratitude. If we truly understood what Jesus did for us, our gratitude would be so great we would never do an unloving or unhelpful thing ever again. We would be so full of gratitude it would spill over onto everything that we touched.

Sometimes I think we get it backwards when we interpret the scripture, James 2:17, “*So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*” Some say it means that if we are not doing good works than we don’t really love Jesus. I think it’s the other way around. When we understand how much Jesus **loves us**, we can’t help but do good works. It’s impossible to keep still. There’s a scene in *The Little Mermaid* where everyone knows Ariel is in love because of the way she is behaving, singing and smiling and being nice to everyone. She can’t help herself. As we grow our understanding of who Jesus is and what He did for us, our gratitude grows until we can’t help but pass that love and forgiveness on to others.

As Jesus heals our wounds, we are free to forgive those who wounded us.

I’ve always thought that Stephen’s stoning was the catalyst for Saul’s conversion. I realize Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus had a great deal to do with it but hearing Stephen cry out “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*” had to have had an impact. I can’t help but wonder if it caused Saul to start questioning if perhaps he had been mistaken about “those” Christians.

As for me, Stephens’ **vision** before he was stoned had the larger impact. Acts 7:56 reads, “*Look, he said, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!*” His vision helps me understand how he could be free to forgive those who were stoning him. He knew Jesus would heal his wounds. He knew Jesus would come and lead him home. As we trust Jesus to heal our wounds, as we trust Jesus to ultimately lead us home, we too are free to forgive.

As Jesus frees us from the fear of others, we are free to forgive them. (Acts 1:8)

One of the reasons it’s important to “*continually look forward to the eternal world*” as C.S. Lewis puts it in *Mere Christianity* is because it frees us from the fear of others. If our goal is to eat, drink and be merry we have good reason to be afraid of others for they will definitely get in our way. However, if our goal is eternal, if our goal is to learn how to love as God loves, than we really have no one to fear but ourselves for we are in control of our heart.

Jesus has invited me into a holy relationship with God and covered my sin so if I want that relationship, it’s mine. No one can take it away from me. I have total control over whether or not I receive God’s free gift of grace and pass it on. I have total control over the condition of my heart. No one can make me hate. Therefore, if all I want is God, if all I want is to love as God loves, I have all that I want because of **who Jesus is** and what **he did** to hook me up. It’s only when I want other things that I need to be afraid. If I want others to respect me, than I’m in a position to be afraid. If I want others to hold me in high esteem, I’m in a position to be afraid. If I simply want people to love me, I’m in a position to be afraid. I have no control over what anyone else thinks, says or does so if I want something from someone else, than I am in a position to be afraid. However, if all I want is eternal life with God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, I am free from all fear. And if I’m not afraid of what someone is or is not going to give to me – love, respect, admiration - I am free to forgive. And if I am free to forgive, I am **free to love**.