

2005

Prayer's Priority Over Performance

Dear Friends,

When King Artaxerxes detected a sad face on Nehemiah, he asked his Hebrew cupbearer what was making him sad. The question struck fear into Nehemiah, for to appear unhappy before those ancient oriental kings was taken by them as a dishonor to them—a practical indication that they were not as capable of absolute rule, in which all of their subjects rejoiced, as they deluded themselves into believing that they had. Nehemiah answered, telling the king of his grief over the demolished state of Jerusalem. When the king then asked Nehemiah what he requested for relief of his sadness, Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven, then he spoke to the earthly king (Neh. 2:1-5).

The priority of prayer over performance was maintained by Nehemiah throughout his work on the wall of the capital city of the covenant nation. When enemies mocked the work, Nehemiah did not waste words on them, but cried out to the Lord (Neh. 4:1-5). When enemies threatened to fight against the people repairing the wall, Nehemiah did not turn first to the critical and vital matter of instituting steps to protect the workers, but rather his priority was prayer for divine protection, then a plan for securing the people (Neh. 4:7-14).

Nehemiah is not alone in maintaining the priority of prayer over performance. David and other psalmists put prayer to God before any of their own devices to thwart their enemies (Ps. 3, 102, 139:19-24). The apostles did likewise (Acts 4:23-31). In fact, we might say that Paul and Silas broke out of their Philippian dungeon by prayer and praises to God (Acts 16:25,26).

Our natural, (not spiritual) inclination, however, is to let prayer fall into being for us an irrelevant relic. The pressing affairs of our lives and the practical things apparently demanded of us in response to them, leave no room for prayer. Yet, especially for believers, who should know better than to forsake one of the offensive weapons of the full armor of God, when our performance takes priority over our prayers, failure, frustration, and fruitlessness ensue.

It is right for us to consult in prayer our Lord, without whom we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5), before we venture to say or do anything on our own. If we view such prayerful communion as an added burden rather than the energizing power for our projects, we will not pray. Prayer is not a burden, but the highest privilege we have on this earth. In it we relate rightly to our God, humbling ourselves before Him and requesting things of Him that He will hear and answer above what we ask or think. Why should we seek to prosecute our work or face our challenges without availing ourselves of the Lord's almighty arm? It is ridiculous for us to rely on our finite and fallible understanding to form our plans, when infallible divine wisdom is ours for the asking

(Jas. 1:5). It is sinfully arrogant of us, and insulting to our God, that we should trust in our own puny efforts rather than call upon omnipotence to help us.

I realize that the devil, who often has a greater respect for the power of prayer than do we, is ever active, suggesting to us that prayer is useless, and distracting us by many things that seem more vital and urgent than the one thing necessary. But our maintenance of a consistent, vital prayer life, and our resisting the enticements and intimidations of Satan that threaten to swamp us with demands that leave no place for prayer are disciplines of faith that we must exercise if we truly rely on the Lord for salvation.

As we begin yet another new year, I see many exciting projects and prospects before us. The Lord is raising up pastors and missionaries from amongst us; we have grown to the point of needing to expand and improve our building, and that work is under way; children in our families are growing into fine servants of the Lord; many of our members who were broken and burdened last year are finding relief this year. Added to this, there are challenges, such as the pressures of the secular culture in which we live which have not decreased but rather increased. With all of these prospects and challenges, we can easily neglect the vital work that our Lord says should fill the house of His Father (Mt. 21:13).

Therefore, I encourage each of us to examine ourselves to see whether for us prayer continues to take priority over performance, or whether a host of pressures, personal preferences, and distractions have not succeeded in forcing prayer into irrelevance. When our prayer meetings are poorly attended (as sometimes they are) I ask myself if the business occupying those not in attendance is more vital than what we are doing at the meeting. I wonder, especially regarding those members whose voices used to join with ours in the chorus of intercession, but who have been increasingly absent from the prayer meetings, if what they are doing is really more important and sure to provide more lasting fruit and holy satisfaction than what would issue from their spending 90 minutes with their brethren in corporate prayer. Surely, my dear brethren, we all can profit from asking ourselves these same questions, and committing ourselves to making whatever changes may be necessary in our priorities.

Prayerfully yours,

William Harrell

Raising a Contribution

Dear Friends,

I cannot recall a time when I have addressed the matter of money in these minister's letters that I have been producing for more than 20 years now. I have preached on the subject when, in a series through a given Book of the Bible, the matter was contained in the Scripture passage under consideration. Hence, my reticence on the money topic is not out of reluctance to address the issue. Rather, there simply has been no need to devote one of these monthly letters to the question of Christian stewardship in all of the years of our church history. You, the members of Immanuel, have simply been faithful, cheerful, generous, and at times, sacrificial givers to the work of the Lord. I believe that most of you tithe and more than tithe, and for that I sincerely and deeply commend and thank you.

Now, however, I take up the subject of monetary contributions to the Lord's work for very specific reasons. First, I have recently preached from the passage in Exodus 25, where the Lord tells Moses to raise a contribution from the people for the construction of the tabernacle. The voluntary nature of the giving to that project and the overwhelming response to the appeal of Moses are quite instructive and heartening. Coupled with that passage have been readings in our own family devotions from Nehemiah, where the story of the people of Jerusalem being led by Nehemiah to rebuild their city wall is recounted. It is clear from the account that the wise apportioning of the work and the call for the people each one to do his part in the sure knowledge that his neighbor on either side of him would be serving likewise, galvanized the people into a united body that exerted itself to accomplish far more than the people could have done as a disorganized, uninformed, and discouraged assortment of individuals.

Thoughts in connection with our church at this time have occurred to me in light of these passages of the Word. For example, the contribution raised by Moses was for a special purpose in addition to the regular tithing that the people were to give. At this time in the life of our church, we have special projects that will either be delayed or never completed if we, as a congregation, do not realize that while our regular tithing and giving have been commendable, we are now being called to consider excelling still more in our stewardship.

Here I refer to our building expansion project and to the recent commissioning of two of our own Immanuel families to missionary work. Our regular level of giving has been carefully calculated by our diligent treasurer to be sufficient to make the monthly payments on the loan we took from a financial institution for the building expansion work. However, if we are to keep making those payments, we will be limited in what we can devote in our regular budget to the monetary support of our missionaries, the Tilletts and the Wiltbanks. At our last Session meeting we pledged \$250 per month to each of these families above what we had reported as our giving to them at our recent

congregational meeting, and we have funds marked to help with their moving expenses. However, without increased giving, there is little more that we, as a Session, can do.

We were committed to our building expansion prior to the Lord's calling of our two families to mission service, and we were driven to the expansion work by our crowded worship condition. So, we do not regret the commitment to the expansion work. However, if we did not have the mortgage payments, or if we were to receive contributions above regular giving, we could get our missionaries to the field much sooner than it appears they will be able to be there otherwise. Therefore, I am, as your pastor and on behalf of your Session, appealing to us all prayerfully to consider making a giving commitment above our current levels, and that we devote such extra giving to the regular, monthly support needed for the Tillets and Wiltbanks. Coupled with this call, I share with you information that should serve to encourage us in our extra giving. That information is this: If we all committed to giving extra in support of the service of these living stones of the temple of the Lord, the amount we would each have to give to get them on the field is not impossibly high.

Our current membership roll lists 96 communicant members. That number includes some who have gone from us due to career moves, but who have yet to transfer their membership to another local church. The number also includes multiple members within family households. The monthly support yet to be raised by the two missionary families totals approximately \$5,000. After adjusting our membership figure to reflect current giving households—whether they be individuals or families—the extra giving required for us immediately to put our two families on the mission field is about \$100 per household per month.

No doubt some of our families will be unable to give \$100 a month more, but then others will be able to give more than that amount. If our average giving per family could increase towards the goal of \$100 per month per family above regular giving, two of our best families would be on the mission field no doubt serving the cause of Christ even more fruitfully than they are doing here with us.

Such extra giving will entail some degree of self-denial, and perhaps even sacrifice, for some, if not all of us. Yet, if we could find expenditures in our family budgets that could be reduced or cut out entirely, would not such investment in the spread of the gospel be more than worth the sacrifice? Yet, I conclude by stressing that any response to this appeal must be voluntary—even cheerful, for our God neither accepts nor blesses any other sort of giving, and ultimately, it is for His service and glory that this contribution is being raised. I thank you all for what I know will be your prayerful and carefully considered response to this appeal.

Gratefully yours,

William Harrell

Missions on our Doorstep

Dear Friends,

In last month's letter I wrote concerning the opportunity we at Immanuel have to support two of our families in their call to foreign missions. The appeal I made for those families was for your prayer and financial support. This month I write to you concerning another opportunity that is within our own fellowship. It requires no monetary support, but does depend upon your prayers and the commitment of time for those intending to be involved in this ministry. I refer to the work of our small but dedicated team that has been meeting with a growing number of Muslims for a mutually respectful exchange of beliefs.

This team generally follows the principles commended by our dear brother, Anees Zaka, in his work through the Church Without Walls and its satellite Meetings for Better Understanding. Anees has a special love for and understanding of Muslims, and it is his belief—one that we heartily share—that we Christians can gain a hearing from and build bridges to the hearts and minds of Muslims by giving a sincere hearing to their beliefs, while sharing with them our own faith. This method is founded upon absolute trust in the power of the truth as it is revealed in the gospel of Christ. In a sense, it is similar to Elijah's engagement with the Baalites on Mt. Carmel, where the Lord's servant and those devoted to Baal, each agreed to present their petitions and offerings to their respective divinities, with the concession that the true God would answer by fire from heaven. Our own Bridge Team, of course, does not expect fire to fall from on high in response to their presentations of the gospel, but they do rightly have confidence in the gospel as being the only power of God unto salvation for all who believe, and thus they welcome these opportunities to share it.

In these times especially, it is most fitting that we seek to engage those who are Muslims with faithful and loving respect, with candor, and with practical demonstrations of the truth as well as clear articulations of it. It is fitting that we give to them what we seek to have them give to us, namely, a sincere attempt to learn and understand what it is that they believe. Our understanding of their beliefs and cultural features will equip us better to pray for them and speak to them in terms they understand. Such exchanges also serve to clear misunderstandings and mutual suspicions between us, and to enable us to concentrate on our true differences and seek a reconciliation of them.

These Meetings for Better Understanding have been taking place between our own Bridge Team and our Muslim friends for several years now. I believe that the time has come for us, as a church, to become more involved in this ministry. There may be some of our members who do not even know of this ongoing ministry. There may be others who know of it and who, perhaps, have attended some of the suppers we have had with our Muslim friends, but who do not realize that they can be more directly involved in this work.

Therefore, I am seeking to give to you all more information about this work, as well as an appeal that each of you prayerfully consider how you might become more involved in it. Under the capable leadership of our own Eric Dunn, those of you desiring more information, including training for your participation in the actual Meetings for Better Understanding, will find all that you need to carry your desire into action. This is a significant and vital ministry that has come to us. We have a growing number of Muslims coming to our area as students and workers, and coming to these meetings, wanting to know what we, as Christians believe. The Word of God tells us that we should ever be ready to give to those who ask of us an account for the hope that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15). May it never be that any who come to Immanuel seeking such an account would fail to receive it due to there being insufficient workers to labor in this field that appears ready for harvest.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Faith and Reason

Dear Friends,

The relationship between faith and reason in the Christian life has long been studied and debated by theologians. The history of this debate can be productively studied, although such an inquiry tends to be admittedly rather dry and arcane.

The Bible has some significant things to say about the believer's exercise of his faith and of his powers of mental reasoning. In Proverbs 3:5,6, we are told positively to trust in the Lord with all of our heart, and negatively to lean not on our own understanding. This would seem to denigrate wisdom. However, practically the whole Book of Proverbs exalts wisdom, although it defines wisdom not as the sagacious employment of human reasoning, but rather as the exercise of faithful reverence toward the Lord (Prov. 1:7).

We are also told in the Word of God that our religion is reasonable. We are to trust, obey, pray to, and praise our Lord, not with blind faith or groundless emotionalism, but precisely because of who He is and what He has done for us. Our worship of our God, if it is true worship, is reasonable (Rom. 12:1,2), being grounded neither in flights of our fancy nor in our arid mental speculations, but rather in the facts of redemptive history.

Hence, we find that Scripture seems at the same time to negate man's reasoning (Prov. 3:5,6), and to extol it (Rom. 12:1,2). What are we to make of this apparent inconsistency? There are three terms containing the word, *rational*, by the consideration and comparison of which we can better understand the biblically ordered relation between faith and reason.

The word, *rational*, is synonymous with the term, *reasonable*. It means one's ability to reason logically and rightly. Yet, too often we are inclined to understand the reference to reasonable worship in the Bible, not as rational, but as *rationalistic* worship. The difference here is that *rational* or *reasonable* thinking admits to certain limits, whereas *rationalistic* thinking depends wholly upon human reasoning, which, being finite, fallible, and sinfully perverse, is really a foolish and rationally suicidal thing to do. Our religion is not rationalistic.

The word, *irrational*, means something that is contrary to reason. Some take Proverbs 3:5,6 to be speaking about precisely this annihilation of human reasoning, but those who understand those verses in that sense are mistaken. The exercise of true faith is not a mindless leap into the dark or into the light. For our God often clothes Himself in dark providences, while Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. The Lord, who made our minds, is committed to transforming them so that we might rightly use them.

The third term is *suprarational*, meaning above or beyond rational. Strictly speaking, this term best describes the believer's right reasoning, for the one possessing and exercising saving faith is neither blindly emotive, as are the irrational, nor narrowly cognitive, as are the rationalistic. Instead, the faithful are, by the precious power of their faith, enabled to take in all of the facts, not just those apprehended by our physical senses and processed by our finite, fallible, and sinful minds.

Let us consider some biblical examples that show us the correct relation between faith and reason. Abraham, the father of faith, was a man living in tents in a foreign land. That is all that his rationalistic, unbelieving neighbors saw. Yet, by faith, Abraham understood that he was, by God's promise, the owner and master of Canaan, and that the Promised Land itself was but a token of the celestial city wherein his true affections were anchored (Heb. 11:8-10). By faith, Abraham regarded not only his aged body—the determining factor for the rationalist—but he considered something above human reasoning, namely, the power of the God who promised him that a son would be born to him.

Perhaps the classic Old Testament example of faith in comparison with rationalism, is that of Elisha with his servant when they were surrounded by the Syrian army (2 Ki. 6). The servant and Elisha both saw the Syrian soldiers, as it would have been reasonable to acknowledge them and irrational not to do so. Yet, Elisha perceived something more, something beyond the capacity of human reasoning alone. He beheld the great, unseen reality of the angelic hosts surrounding the Syrians, and prayed that his servant would be enabled to see them as well.

Finally, John, in the Book of Revelation, writes of things he saw while in the Spirit. He paints a vast mural of the unseen realities of heaven and hell, God and the devil, and of the Church in her tribulations and triumphs.

Thus, the right relationship between faith and reason is that in which reason is led, enlightened, and empowered by faith. Mere human logic can only see a criminal dying on the cross, absurdly offering to save others. By faith, we reason rightly, perceiving in the cross the demonstrated love, justice, and grace of God, as Jesus, by His death for His people, provides a righteous peace securely made. We, therefore, must make our reason to be the handmaid of our faith. Reason alone will be like Hagar, usurping the master's place and begetting bitter fruit. Reason submitted to faith will be like Sarah, perceiving God and his great and precious promises, and producing glorious fruit.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Forgiveness

Dear Friends,

Forgiveness is no minor aspect of the Christian life. It is an incalculable blessing that we receive from the Lord when we exercise saving faith and repentance. By divine forgiveness, the Lord imputes no iniquity to us, but rather counts us to be as righteous as His beloved Son (Ps. 32:2). The forgiveness of our God not only frees us from the burden of all our sins, it restores to us all that sin had ruined in our lives, and leads to the provision of much more besides. The very nature of such forgiveness should make us treasure it and ask for it more often from God than we do (1 Jn. 1:9). In addition, its vital necessity should spur us to persevere in our asking, seeking, and knocking for it, should the Lord ever seem reluctant to grant it (consider the parable of the importunate widow, Lk. 18:1-8), or should we ever have reason to question whether we have truly requested and received it. The fact that such monumental forgiveness is free to us for the asking should remove any and all impediments to our asking our Lord for it.

Some alternatives to our asking our gracious God that He might forgive our sins are: our delusional denials that we have sinned; our defensiveness wherein we excuse, rationalize, and point to mitigating factors in an endeavor to minimize our sin; and our feeble and foolish efforts to redeem and justify ourselves by doing some seemingly good deed, hoping that thereby we shall cancel out the sin that, in fact, stubbornly refuses to be covered by such fig leaves. As ridiculous as it may seem to us, we all resort to such vain devices at times, and some of us are prone to resort to them many more times than we avail ourselves of the free, full, and effective forgiveness of our Lord.

Not only are we to ask forgiveness from our God, but we are also taught by Scripture that we are to seek forgiveness from those people against whom we sin. This we find even less palatable to do than when we ask forgiveness of the Lord. It is wrong, but at least more understandable, that we recoil from the notion of asking for grace from fellow sinners. Yet, for all the pride and graceless stubbornness that is involved in our refusing or delaying our asking the forgiveness of those against whom we have sinned, the Word of God does not place as high a premium upon our asking forgiveness from others as it does upon our granting forgiveness to those who ask it of us. Jesus tells us that we are to forgive seventy times seven those who have sinned against us and have asked to be forgiven. While such a command from our Lord is definite encouragement for us to ask of others their forgiveness, the emphasis falls more heavily upon the matter of our granting or withholding our forgiveness (Mt. 18:21 -35).

Why would we, who have tasted the sweet mercy of the Lord, be disinclined to exercise the blessed and blessing grace of such forgiving mercy toward others? For some, the reluctance is a deep mistrust of the Lord's forgiveness. They fear that they

themselves are not truly or lastingly forgiven, so they, who hold their own forgiveness in doubt, hold back their exercise of mercy toward others. For others, a perverse sense of justice drives them to be more exacting and punitive than is their Lord in His gracious dealings with them. Such ones regard a sin against themselves as being more heinous and unforgivable than a sin against the Holy Spirit. Still others know the potency and blessedness of forgiveness, but they have a misguided conviction that the hurt they have suffered from another's sins will be soothed if they hold the other to his sin, rather than mercifully releasing him from its just penalty. Why, so reason those who are stingy with their forgiveness, should they suffer hurt and then let the perpetrator off easily?

Perhaps most who are unforgiving, however, simply fail to reckon with the reality that we cannot and must not expect those who have hurt us by their sin to heal us by their own efforts or suffering. We are all experts at wounding others, while we are totally incapable of healing others whom we wound. For, as all sin is ultimately against God and only incidentally against those who are His fallen creatures, so only the Lord can forgive sin and heal its wounds.

It is foolish, wrong, and ultimately wicked of us to retain our hurts in order to make those who have inflicted them upon us feel them. However justified we may feel in our nurturing our pain and anger against those who have sinned against us, the only right and blessed way for us to be healed and at peace after we have been wounded by another's sin, is for us to be freely generous with our forgiveness. This is the grace that is supremely more blessed to give than to receive. That is because in our exercising of forgiveness toward others, we must draw upon the grace of the Lord that heals our wounds, cools our anger, and fills us with peace and true love. That blessed, divine grace, poured upon and filling those reflecting the Lord's mercy, is far sweeter and stronger than our holding a grudge, however justifiable we may think it to be.

Yours in Christ's mercy,

William Harrell

Confession and Concealment

Dear Friends,

It is a remarkable thing to note that after all of the centuries mankind has had to sin, the way men deal with their sins has never changed. The first man, Adam, foolishly tried to conceal his shame, his sin, and even himself from the Lord. His fig-leaf covering was first applied in a feeble effort to hide his shame from his own wife, while his dive into the bushes when he heard the sound of the Lord's approach was a foolish attempt to conceal himself from the omniscient God. Apart from God's saving grace, no child of Adam throughout all of the world's history has ever improved upon our first parents' futile way of dealing with their sin. We may not resort to literal fig leaves, but we do employ denial, defensiveness, and rationalization as coverings for our sin. Such suppression of the truth of our sinfulness and manifold transgressions is the only resort for any sinner apart from the Lord's grace.

In diametric contrast to the natural man's vain attempts to conceal his sin, those made new creatures by God's saving grace in Christ confess their sins to the Lord, and even to one another. It seems, of course, a suicidal thing for us to admit to the holy and almighty God that we have acted against Him in offensive rebellion and ungrateful disobedience. The thought that we have transgressed against the glorious King of the universe, who has power not only to punish us bodily, but also has power to condemn our souls to the eternal anguish of hell can be and should be a terrifying thing. When we lay ourselves open to His charges of rebellion, defiance, and disobedient transgression it can seem like we are inviting a lion, whom we have aggravated, to tear us to pieces. Yet, when we confess our sins to the holy and majestic God, far from our finding Him to be enraged against us, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins (1 Jn. 1:9).

The Lord cleanses from all unrighteousness, instead of condemning, those who confess their sins to Him. He does so because He is gracious and mercifully forgiving. He who gave His only begotten Son to die for us while we were yet sinners, will not turn His heart or hand against us when we penitentially admit to Him frankly and freely that we are ones so boldly sinful that our only hope is in the merciful provision of His Son that He has made for sinners.

By the confession of our sin to our God, we acknowledge and admit that we are as bad and have done as badly as He already knows to be the case. Our confession to Him does not inform Him of anything that had escaped His notice. This fact reveals the absurdity of our attempts to conceal our sin from Him. Therefore, confession is the beginning of our right reasoning and acting. If we conceal our sin, it neither fools the divine Judge of all the earth nor does it do anything to remove the guilt, corruption, shame, and misery of our sin. In fact, concealed sin grows worse and adds the aggravating transgression of our insulting God's omniscient knowing whatever sin we might be trying to hide from Him.

When we confess our sins, the Lord forgives us, removing from us the offending power of sin, and He cleanses us from all of the guilt, corruption, shame, and misery of our sin. If we really believed this, surely we would hasten to confess to our God our sins far more than we are inclined to do. Even as redeemed children of such a mercifully forgiving heavenly Father, we still are tempted to conceal, rather than confess our sins. It is so absurd that we should do this. It is worse than our concealing the symptoms of some grave sickness we have from the doctor who is disposed and equipped to heal us.

What I have said about our confessing our sins we have committed against God holds for our sins against each other as well. The appropriate way for us to deal with our offenses against other sinful people is not for us to deny and seek to conceal our sins against them—sins of which they more often than not have a keen and painful awareness—but, rather, to confess our sins to them and humbly ask their forgiveness.

But someone will object that if we admit our sins to other people, most of them will not forgive us, but will be enraged against us and seek to punish us for our candid admission of sin. It is true that we cannot expect forgiveness and loving reconciliation from graceless souls. However, not all souls are graceless. Our brethren, surely, will be moved more readily to forgive us when we confess our sins to them than when we seek to conceal our sins from them. Indeed, they are commanded and enabled by the Lord so to forgive us (Eph. 4:32).

With respect to those who are or act without grace, whatever they may dish out against us for our admitting that we have sinned against them is far less than we deserve. Furthermore, as all sin is ultimately against God, even if graceless souls do not accept our confession, He will accept it, and He will never refuse to bless us by forgiving and cleansing and restoring us. So let us confess more and conceal less.

Yours in His grace,

William Harrell

Control, Compassion, and Contentment

Dear Friends,

We are familiar with our Lord's teaching concerning the speck we can so readily see in our brother's eye and the log in our own eye to which we remain oblivious. Though the word is not used in that illustrative teaching, the concept of control is clearly at the heart of our Lord's message. Jesus identifies the tendency we all have to be controlling personalities. Control, of course, can be a good and necessary thing. For example, it is vital that we be in control of our cars when we drive. But there is also an unnecessary and wrong kind of control, that leads to frustration, friction, and failure.

We sinners have a propensity to misdirect our efforts to control. For example, we are inclined to think and act as though we are experts when it comes to directing the lives of others. We also tend to be determined to control, so far as possible, the various factors in our circumstances. Our technological advances have fed the conceit that we can and should be master of all that we survey. Yet, when we act on this conceit, we not only fail to maintain a right and effective priority in our controlling efforts, we also usurp propriety from our Lord. Though we may try, it is only He, not we, who can rightly and effectively move the king's heart wherever He will, without doing violence to the king's will. We, on the other hand, must resort to such manipulative tactics as enticement, bullying, deceiving, or sulking in our attempts to attain control over others.

Such manipulative controlling on our part is destined to fail on all fronts. Those we endeavor to control are, at best, minimally compliant—if compliant at all—and nurture not hearty obedience, but a growing resentment toward us. At the same time, we who seek to be the controlling ones never attain satisfaction or contentment through our efforts, for we inescapably perceive the imperfect actions, if not the resentful attitudes of those we try to man handle.

The truth is that we are not called or equipped by our Lord to control others. We are called and equipped to love and to serve others. Yet, even here we must be alert to the tendency we have to corrupt our compassion, perverting it into a tool of manipulation. We might, for example, withhold our love if the one we love disappoints us by crossing our wills, even if such crossing were warranted. We might also lavish our love indulgently on those who please us. Jesus warned us about such subjective and capricious administration of our love when He said that such love issues from those like the tax-gathers, who ever seek to get from, not to give to others (Mt. 5:46). This abuse of compassion also leads not to blessing, but to bitterness for all concerned.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit includes both control and compassion (Gal. 5:22,23). Yet, the focus of our controlling efforts must not be others, but rather ourselves. It is self-control that the Spirit of God commands and enables, not the manipulative over lording of others. By such self-control we mortify our sins and cultivate righteousness.

We also cultivate gratitude to our Lord for the blessed efficacy of His Word and enabling power of His Spirit. We love and serve our God and fellow man because our Lord first loved and served us in Christ. We cultivate peace and contentment in the approbation of our God and by the knowledge that He wisely and lovingly masters all things, rendering them to be servants for our good. Our peace, confidence, and contentment do not rest upon the fleeting and flimsy foundation of others dancing to our tune, but rather upon the sure, solid, and lasting foundation of the holy, wise, and loving plans of our God, who perfectly brings all of His eternal purposes to blessed fruition.

By such self-mastery, we are no longer akin to the demoniac who terrorized others and tortured himself, but we are, instead, clothed and in our right minds, being ready to serve for the glory of the One who loved and saved us and who is our peace. It is only in the soil of such sanctified self-control that pure and blessed compassion may flourish. Then we are genuinely determined not to view others as being debtors to our wills, but rather to view ourselves as indebted to others in the coinage of love (Rom. 13:8). Such orientation is right, satisfying, and blessed to the giver, to the one receiving, and to the Lord, who is the source of all sovereign control and pure compassion.

Yours in His law of love,

William Harrell

The Father Not Sparing His Son

(This month's letter is written by Joseph Randall, one of our members, a student at Greenville Seminary, and a candidate for the ministry doing a Summer Internship with us.)

Dear Friends,

Have you ever struggled to understand why Jesus prayed the way He did in Gethsemane? As He contemplated His death on the cross, He prayed, "Abba, Father, all things *are* possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You *will*" (Mark 14:36). We know from Matthew's account that our Lord prayed this same prayer not only once, but three times! Though Jesus did submit to His Father's will, the petition of His prayer still stands: He asked His Father to take the cross away from Him. In one very real sense, Jesus did not want to go to the cross. Was Jesus afraid? Was His love for His sheep lacking so that He was unable to go to the cross without hesitation and lay His life down for them? Why was Jesus, the perfect God-Man, struggling in the least bit to do the will of His Father? What are we to make of His prayer?

Part of the answer may be that we are seeing the fully human nature of Jesus more clearly in Gethsemane. But even in His full humanity, we know He was sinless, and therefore, we know He was without fear (except for the fear of God), and we know His love was always a perfect love for both His Father and His neighbors—especially for His sheep. So why the "sweat like drops of blood" struggle in prayer?

A better answer simply has to do with Jesus' love for fellowship with His Father. From Genesis to Revelation, we see God's people longing to be in fellowship with the Father. God was Abraham's exceedingly great reward: "After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward'" (Genesis 15:1); Moses pleaded with God not to bring Israel up to the promised land if His Presence would not go up with them: "Then he said to Him, 'If Your Presence does not go *with us*, do not bring us up from here. For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us?'" (Exodus 33:15-16); David panted for God as a deer pants for the water brooks, and his soul and flesh thirsted and longed for God: "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God . . . You *are* my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water" (Psalm 42:1, 63:1); the Apostle Paul desired to depart and be with Christ: "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better" (Philippians 1:23); and John ends his Revelation longing for Jesus' return saying, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20b).

Truly, though these men longed for and delighted in God's presence, none of them had even a taste of the glory, beauty, pleasure, and joy of the fellowship Jesus Christ had with His Father both before He came in the flesh and while He walked on the

earth. You get a sense of this wonderful fellowship Jesus had with His Father before He came in the flesh in His great high priestly prayer in John 17. He prays, “And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was . . . for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:5, 24b). Jesus had a glorious love relationship with the Father within the Holy Trinity before the world was created. This relationship continued while He was on earth. He often withdrew and communed in prayer with His Father: “So He Himself *often* withdrew into the wilderness and prayed” (Luke 5:16). As Jesus prepared to go to Jerusalem to be crucified, He knew this most prized possession, His most blessed fellowship with His Heavenly Father, was going to be cut off. When Sinclair Ferguson preached at the PCA General Assembly a couple months ago, he said Jesus had to, by necessity, pray that God would spare Him from the cross for this very reason—because of Jesus’ intense love for His Father and His Father’s presence. Jesus knew He would become sin for His people on the cross; He knew He would be smitten and bruised by His Father; He knew He would cry the cry of the Psalmist: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34b). Jesus knew His Father would pour His wrath out upon Him and forsake Him on the dreaded cross, but yet He still longed for the sweet communion and fellowship He had always enjoyed with His Father. This is why He prayed to His Father to take the cross away from Him. It was only right for Jesus to pray this way in Gethsemane because He, more than any other, longed to be in perfect fellowship with His Father. He alone prized His Father’s presence in proportion to its proper value. What else could He do but ask His Father not to take from Him His greatest treasure—the presence of His Father?

Thankfully, the Father did not spare His beloved Son, and Jesus did submit to His Father’s will, bearing the curse that we all deserve. Jesus, the only perfect, sinless One Who alone has ever treasured the Father’s presence as it deserves to be treasured—He bore the curse so you and I could enjoy the same fellowship He had and has with His Father. Jesus prayed that we might enjoy this very fellowship He enjoyed with the Father: “that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us . . . that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me . . .” (John 17:21a, 22b, 23). Jesus was willing to lay down the glorious fellowship He had with His Father for poor, vile sinners like us so that we might long for and enjoy the Father’s presence with the same intensity He does. He laid down the greatest prize for us! Oh how this amazing love ought to drive us to long for the presence of our Heavenly Father and of our dear Savior the Lord Jesus Christ where alone we find fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore!

Fighting to long for Him as He deserves,

Joseph Randall

The Strength and Weakness of Sin

Dear Friends,

Towards the end of his epistle, the writer of *Hebrews* exhorts his readers to ...*lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin that so easily entangles us...* (Heb.12:1). Within this single exhortation, we are told something about how easy and how difficult it is for us to deal with our residual sin. We do well seriously to consider this dual teaching in this one exhortation.

The writer really tells us to lay aside two things: encumbrances and sin. An encumbrance would be anything that lures us into sin, or that is antithetical to our focusing wholly upon Jesus (v.2). The man who tends to drink wine to excess, for example, would do well not to partake of the fruit of the vine except within the holy and blessed confines of the Lord's Supper. Whatever forms our encumbrances may take (and they vary from person to person) the writer commends to us a holy ruthlessness when we deal with them. We are called upon to lay aside *every* encumbrance. Such a radical commitment to push aside all that would rob or even distract us from vital communion with Christ can appear quite excessive or fanatical in our day when toleration of so much is deemed a high virtue. However, it is only by such radical casting aside of all barriers to our fellowship with Christ that we prepare ourselves to stay out of sin's grasp and to experience consistent peace and joy in the Lord, as well as usefulness in His service.

Encumbrances represent outside interference with our attachment to Christ. Sin, however, is within us. Strictly speaking, no one or nothing outside of us can make us sin. Encumbrances can occasion our sin; they can facilitate our sinning; but they are never the cause of our sin. This being the case, we would expect the *Hebrews* writer to instruct us that the way we are to deal with our sin is more complex and difficult than the way we deal with our encumbrances. Yet, he tells us to deal with each in precisely the same way. We are to lay each one aside. The image of our laying aside an encumbrance seems to be that of a rather easy one-man operation. We simply brush aside the impediments from our way. The image of our laying aside our sin appears to be one of removal of clothing. There is certainly nothing difficult about one's taking off a jacket or a pair of shoes. He requires neither a committee nor prescription drugs to do that. Can our dealing with our sin be so easy?

It is easy for us to deal with our sin when we rightly understand its power and its weakness in our lives. The nature of sin in the life of the believer is that it is a dominating enemy from which we have been delivered by Christ. Read *Romans* 6 to see how the Apostle Paul develops this. He tells us that we have died to sin through our union to Christ in His death, and therefore we are no longer slaves to sin (Rom.6:5-7). But then he tells us that by faith we must apply this truth and not let sin reign in us, as its residual dregs can be stirred by Satan into a conglomerated mass that attempts to reasserted dominance over us (Rom.6:12,14). Nothing could be easier than for us to know the facts of our redemption, to believe them, and to live accordingly. When we

identify and nip resurgent sin in the bud, nothing could be easier than for us to cast it aside as the unwanted trash that it is.

However, the *Hebrews* writer tells us something about the power of sin in addition to what he tells us of its weakness. He says that our sin can easily entangle us. How are we to reconcile the exhortation that tells us on the one hand to treat sin like a jacket we can easily remove from ourselves, and on the other declares to us that sin is a power that can easily entangle us?

These features are rightly understood in this way: If we have a mind and heart to do so, we can identify both our besetting sin and those matters that facilitate it, and put those facilitating matters out of our lives. Those who seriously make the attempt testify to how easy it can be. It should be easy, for if we determine to do what God in His Word tells us to do, He will bless and enable us in our doing it. The next thing is for us to lay aside our sin. Here it is critical for us to understand that we are to do this as soon as we recognize the sin that is trying to assert itself in us. We must ruthlessly and without hesitation flee from our lusts, and, if we do so, we shall find that we have rather easily made good our escape. But, as the common saying rightly tells us, he who hesitates, especially in dealing with his own sin, is lost. If we fail quickly and decisively to lay aside sin, we shall find it to swell up quickly into an overwhelming power that will, indeed, easily entangle us. Therefore, the key to laying aside sin is the speed with which we identify and mortify it. Delay in this matter will always be deadly.

But what becomes of us if we do delay and so find ourselves entangled in sin and its miserable consequences? Here again, swift and right action is the key. Let us without hesitation confess our sin to the Lord, and we shall find Him most faithful fully to forgive and restore us (1 Jn. 1:9). Let us, then, not empower sin by our contemplation of and delay in our rightly dealing with it. Let us rather conquer sin by our swiftly mortifying it. And if we do fail rightly to act in this matter, and so find ourselves entangled in the power of sin, let us not wallow in self-pity or guilty fears, but let us quickly cry out our confession to and supplication for forgiveness from the Lord. Then and only then will we be able to run the race set before us.

Yours striving by His strong grace,

William Harrell

Concerning Pictures of Jesus

Dear Friends,

There abounds in many churches and in much Christian educational material pictorial representations of Jesus. These pictures of our Lord are considered by many as helpful teaching tools for children, and as devotional aids for adults. If they do serve these purposes, could they be wrong? This is a question that has risen to some degree of prominence in our denomination in recent years. To some, the issue may seem like a tempest in a teapot, as Church elders make much over something that might seem to most to be a harmless practice at worst and a helpful didactic tool at best. Yet, we should have our understanding and practice formed by the tenets of Scripture, not by the opinions or prevailing practices of men. Therefore, since this is an issue now being debated in the courts of our particular communion at least, let us consider the matter to see if the Word of God sheds light on it.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this practice of pictorially representing Jesus is its being based entirely upon an impulse of men, rather than upon the teaching of Scripture. Where in all of the Word of the Lord do we find one iota of a hint that we should draw or paint pictures of Jesus? The Second Commandment explicitly forbids such visual representations of God (Ex. 20:4,5). Some say that this commandment forbids any and all visual art, or representations of false gods. Yet, the controlling context of the Second Commandment is the Preface of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1,2), as well as the First Commandment (Ex. 20:3). This context clearly establishes that the parameters of reference for the Second Commandment have to do with the one true and living God. The First Commandment tells us to worship Him alone; the Second tells us to do so not by our own devisings, but by His self-disclosure contained in Scripture. Accordingly, our *Larger Catechism* teaches that the Second Commandment forbids...*the making any representation of God, of all or any of the three persons, either inwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image...*(L/C #'s 107-110, especially #109).

Do we find the practice of making pictures of Jesus commended or even countenanced anywhere in Scripture? Where have the prophets and apostles taught us either by precept or by their example to do such a thing? How do people account for the studious and absolute absence from Scripture of any hint as to the legitimacy of a visible representation of Jesus? The iconists cannot answer these questions, except upon the basis of purported theological inference and purported rational necessity. The theological inference is that since Jesus was a Man, the Son of God incarnate, then it is as legitimate for us to conceive of and represent Him visually as it would have been for us to behold Him with our own eyes during His earthly life. Yet, men did behold Him with their eyes, such as did the two disciples on the Emmaus road, and misconstrued who He was (Lk. 24:13ff). It is with the eyes of our hearts that we truly apprehend the Son of God (Eph. 1:18ff).

The purported rational necessity is that we cannot help but form mental images of Jesus when Scripture speaks of Him in terms such as His being asleep in a boat, or riding a donkey into Jerusalem . However, in none of such accounts is anything like a physical description given of our Lord, and so, clearly, such a visual image is not the point of the passages in question. Regarding our tendency to form mental images from verbal descriptions, we are expressly forbidden mentally to form and indulge in the sinful contemplation of another woman or man. If adultery is wrong in deed, then it is wrong in depiction of any sort. Self-control, even of the mind and its contemplation of mental images, is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.

There appears, then, to be a very strong case against visual representations of Jesus. But why should we concern ourselves with such an apparently harmless matter? The answer is that all of us suffer, to some degree, from our having too low and erroneous conceptions of our Savior. Not one of us thinks, feels, speaks, or acts on too high and glorious a conception of the Christ, the Son of the living God. The most clear and accurate representation of our Lord is the inspired and inerrant revelation of Him that we have in the Bible. Our faith is designed to apprehend Christ as He is presented to us in the Word of God. The works of men's hands in their attempts so to represent Him cannot do other than fail to portray the truth. In fact, such attempts ultimately serve only to obscure the saving truth of God as it is in Jesus. Therefore, this is a serious matter. Let us, then, determine to refrain from man's attempts to improve upon the revelation of God. Let us say with the prophet Isaiah, *To the Law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light* (Is. 8:20).

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

The Believer's Precious Death

Dear Friends,

Perhaps it is because there is a greater than usual concentration of angels, or perhaps it is due to the ministry of the Holy Spirit quickening the graces of our new natures, or perhaps it is because our faith is so much more sharply focused, or most likely because of all of these things, there is a special sweetness and strong, deep exercise of mutual love and deep comfort that characterizes the gathering of the saints around those who have just lost a family member. The Word of God informs us that the death of His godly ones is precious in the sight of the Lord (Ps. 116:15). Scripture also contains the testimony of such men as Stephen, who declared at his stoning that he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56), and Paul, who proclaimed that for one to die in Christ is gain (Phil. 1:21). Such testimony alerts us to the fact that there should be in the sight of the saints something precious about their own and their beloved brethren's deaths. It has certainly been my experience that at the death of a believer, heaven seems to open to receive the deceased one, thus allowing those of us who grieve our loss not only the comfort of a sure and certain hope of the resurrection, but also a happy glimpse into that glorious realm in which righteousness and perfected love dwell.

I am writing these words one week after it pleased Almighty God to call out of this world the soul of my father, and two days after the Lord similarly called into His nearer presence my mother-in-law. The pain and sorrow to Debi and me have been excruciating and exhausting, as you can imagine. Yet, we have both at this time sensed an immense outpouring of the love and sustaining grace of the Lord through the prayers and countless demonstrations of love and practical service of the Lord's people. The healing hand of the Lord more than compensates for the work he does by His wounding hand.

Both my father and mother-in-law were faithful believers in Christ. They taught us many valuable things during their lives in this world. However, nothing they conveyed to us by their prayers, precepts, and examples blessed us in quite the same way as what they gave to us at their deaths.

They who had lived by faith in the Son of God who loved them and gave Himself for them, died in the same, saving faith. Their facing their deaths with such clear and comforting trust in the Redeemer, whose death for them removed the sting of death from them, displayed to us the triumphing power of the like precious faith that we have. Their heart melting expressions of care and love for us, even as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death, reassured us that they were drawing sustaining grace from the Lord who was with them, and this has taught us to look for the Lord and expect to find Him in the little trials of our own pilgrimage through this life. Their fearlessness in face of the last enemy provided strongest testimony to us that nothing in death or life could separate them or can separate us from the love of God in Christ.

The pain and sorrow that we have suffered has drawn an ocean of sympathy and love from the hearts and hands of our brethren. Even the rough and rude ways of unbelieving friends, family members, and neighbors, have been, for this time of grieving, subdued, and they have treated us as though they were ministering angels.

At the death of a believer, it does appear to be the case that the people near that believer are for a time lifted to a place where their attitudes and actions are more genuinely godly and caring than they were before that death. I believe that this is so because as the heavens open to receive the dying saint, the glorious felicity of the celestial realm touches our sinful, cursed world in a more potent way during the so-called dark providence of death. We can and should profit lastingly from such tastes of the tokens of that eternal glory that is our sure hope. We should seek to make the new-found quickening of our graces to be lasting treasures in our lives. We should seek to remember how sweet and consoling the exercise of grace and love are during a time of bereavement, so that we might maintain their exercise in seasons of rejoicing as well.

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Whether He is giving or taking away from us, we should perceive that He is blessed and blessing us in either case, and we should thank and praise Him accordingly. Your pastor and his wife are undeniably in a painful season just now. But we both testify to you that there is great healing, comfort, and fortifying sweetness in our painful sorrows. He who was with Daniel's friends, preserving them in the fiery furnace, is with us, upholding us in our momentary, light affliction. Thank you, dear brethren, for praying that He would be near to us in this way, and thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph, making us to be in all things more than conquerors.

Gratefully yours,

William Harrell

Loveliness of the Means of Grace

Dear Friends,

A psalm of one of the sons of Korah begins with an exclamation that reads: *How lovely are Thy dwelling places, O Lord of hosts!* (Ps. 84:1). It then goes on to declare how the psalmist's heart yearned for the courts of the lord, and how he, with his entire being, sang for joy to the living God (Ps. 84:2). There is something essentially lovely about those places and ordinances through which the Lord reveals Himself to us. But the loveliness is only apprehended by and inspires joy in the hearts of those who have been redeemed by the saving grace of the Lord. The unbeliever regards the ordinances of God with either ridicule, determined opposition, critical amusement, or distracted indifference (Ps. 2:1-3).

How could we, who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit of God, who have had the eyes of our hearts opened to see the demonstration of the saving love of God in Christ, fail to perceive loveliness in the ordinances of the Lord? Yet, we do not always regard the ordinances of our Lord's saving and sanctifying grace as we should. The failure is in our focus, not in the faithful provision of our God.

The psalmist was captivated by the loveliness of the dwelling places of God. This implies that he perceived supremely intelligent design in the created world, and apprehended infallible wisdom, holy love, and omnipotent power in the ordering of his circumstances. This was so because he rightly saw the Lord dwelling and reigning over the universe of His creation. He also perceived loveliness in the heavenly courts of the Lord that were opened to him by the revelation of Scripture that declared God to be the possessor of heaven and earth (Gen. 14:19). Supremely, however, he beheld loveliness in the temple of the Lord where He was pleased to manifest His glorious presence (2 Chron. 6:10). Even more clearly should we apprehend the lovely grace and glory of the Lord amidst the assembly of believers, who are the living stones that compose the household of the living God (Eph. 2:19-22).

We should anticipate with expectation our perceiving the loveliness of the Lord in the assemblies of His redeemed people. We should find our joy in the knowledge that we are joining our beloved and loving brethren in Christ, in whom dwells the Holy Spirit of God. We should relish the privilege we have to worship our saving God, to sing His praises, to offer Him thanks, to call upon Him to supply our needs, to feed upon His Word that transforms our minds and nourishes our souls. We should, with profound gratitude, welcome the opportunity we have to partake of His sacraments and to cast our burdens upon Him, knowing that He cares for us. In sum, we should with amazed gratitude and joy unspeakable know when we come to the assembly of the redeemed on the Lord's day to worship our God that we come into holy and loving communion with the living God who promises to be—and to manifest Himself to be—in our midst.

The house of the Lord should be considered lovely by us when we have tasted the mercies of the Lord; when we, by His grace, have triumphed over temptation and sin.

We should then long to go to the house of the Lord to pour out our thanksgiving. The house of the Lord should be considered lovely by us when we are burdened or suffering affliction, for there we come to the One who gives us rest, comfort, and healing. The house of the Lord should be considered lovely by us when we are perplexed, for there is where the Lord manifests the light and power of His truth and wisdom through His Word. The house of the Lord should be considered by us to be lovely when we have fallen into sin and temptation, for there is the place of mercy and forgiveness. Finally, the house of the Lord should be considered by us to be lovely when we are bereaved and grieving, for there is where we are in the presence of the Lamb of God, who was dead and is now triumphantly alive forever more.

There is no circumstance or condition of the soul that can mar the beauty of the house of the Lord. It is only the weakness of our faith that can cloud our perception of such loveliness and dampen our holy joy. Let us, therefore, determine to use that precious gift of faith so that by faith's instrumentality we may rise above the obscuring mists and clouds of the world, flesh, and devil, to behold the beauty of the Lord in and through His blessed and blessing ordinances.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell