

# On Handling Disagreements

Among the works of the flesh are strife, outbursts of anger, dissensions and divisions (Gal 5:20). There seems to be a great deal of this in the world, and that should not surprise us. But there also seems to be much of this among those claiming to follow Christ. As in other matters, Christians have long wrestled with being too influenced by the world and conforming to the attitudes and practices of the age (cf. Rom 12:1-2). Our lights may become dim because we partake of the darkness far more than we ought.

For example, we see this on social media, which is, sadly, a toxic environment if we let ourselves get lost in its enticement. But this is bigger than social media. Disagreements quickly become divisive and anger-inducing, so the insults and derogatory insinuations begin. It's difficult, it seems, to find discussions over disagreements that are filled with grace, giving the benefit of any doubt, or believing the best intentions in others.

I've been guilty. I know it's hard to read something and get the full sense of what someone intends. We read what others say and hear it in our own inner voice, emphasize it as we think, and may well miss the point of what was meant. We don't want to be people who go out of our way to swerve around the point being made and miss it entirely!

We all make judgments about what others mean and how they mean it. We all have those "bad days" where we might quickly snap at others because we take something the wrong way, though they may have intended something different. It is in those times I have to remind myself that "this" is not the best time for me to say anything, for "a fool's anger is known at once" (Prov 12:16). It's hard to let an insult go and not respond in kind — or even respond at all (cf. Prov 26:4-5). Yet that kind of self control is exactly what we need, and it fits the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-24).

The anger known "at once" part should stand out to us. People might spend hours writing and rewriting, studying and working through an issue, carefully wording what they want to say only to be rebuffed in an instant by someone who was immediately triggered — someone who did no study and gave little thought before firing back. Social media platforms, especially, do not distinguish. In a moment we can make our thoughts known, for good or ill, and we must beware that we don't become the fool about whom Proverbs warns.

We need to remember that our words, written or spoken, have power to encourage or discourage.

We can lift up or pull down. We can help or hurt. I know that not everything posted online or said in person is great, and sometimes we need another who can provide a gentle rebuke. May I offer some suggestions when thinking about entering a conversation with potential disagreement?

**1. Give the benefit of the doubt, especially if something is said that can be taken in different ways.** Assume the best first. Assume that the other means well and intends to do something beneficial to others. Be gracious and kind upfront. This alone can ward off misunderstandings and potential divisions.

**2. If you disagree, sometimes (maybe most of the time) it's okay to just move on.** We make judgments about the importance of the disagreement, but we don't need to comment on everything we may disagree with. We'd be most miserable if we did that, and it's not healthy mentally to spend all day arguing and responding instantly to heated fusses. Let us ask whether we are portraying the works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. Let us seek to do what is edifying for others.

**3. If we feel the need to respond in disagreement (making sure this is really necessary), think about going to someone privately first to ask about needed clarifications.** I have been blessed by several who have done this with me, and this allowed me to make changes, clarify, and sometimes delete before it become a mess in the public arena. Think about how Priscilla and Aquila handled the situation with Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 when they took him aside to explain the way of God more accurately.

**4. Watch the words because words are indeed meaningful.** Insults and evil surmising do not fit the child of God. We expect this from the world. It ought not be so among us. We are family, not enemies.

5. The world is watching. They will see how we treat one another whether in person or on social media. They will know whether what we profess is real and meaningful to us. They will see whether we love one another or bicker so much that we despise each other. (See John 13:34-35 and 17:20-21 to see how important this is.)

“Bless and do not curse.” By how we engage others, we can show the works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. This matters eternally.

Doy Moyer

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# A “One Another” Community

Generally, a community is a social group that shares in common a set of values, a cultural heritage, and similar goals and interests. A community can reflect a given locality (the community in which we live) or it can refer to larger groups based on values and goals (a business community, a religious community, etc.).

Christians form a community of believers who share a common faith and salvation (Jude 3). Because of their desire to glorify God and love one another, sometimes the community of believers shared their possessions and had “all things in common” (Acts 2:44-45). This was not a forced socialism or communism, but rather God’s people acting out of love and a desire to care for each other. Christians help care for each other’s needs (Rom 12:13).

The concept of community can easily get lost in a culture that stresses hyper-individualism. Don’t misunderstand. Individuals stand before God in the final Day (2 Cor 5:10). Individuals are responsible for their own behaviors. Yet Christians should not lose sight of the fact that they have also been placed in a community, which requires individuals acting out of love on behalf of others and for the benefit of a group greater than their own personal interests. Paul stated it this way: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). This is the mind of Christ, who sacrificed Himself on behalf of all humanity.

This means that there is a real sense in which we are our “brother’s keeper.” Not in a coerced way. Not in a way that deprives others of their dignity and rights. Yet we are to watch out for one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, forgive one another, love one another, show mercy to one another, and sometimes even snatch one another out of the fire (Jude 22). “One another” is all over the New Testament. Christians know they have greater responsibilities than just acting for self.

So great was the the sense of community under the Old Covenant that they even shared a sense of common guilt for the sins of others. I don’t mean that each individual was personally guilty of a particular sin, but when they belonged to the community, they saw themselves as connected. This is why Daniel, I believe, would include himself in a prayer of repentance: “we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled...” (Dan 9:5). This is why Nehemiah could confess

“the sins of the people of Israel,” and say, “we have sinned against you” (Neh 1:6). They included themselves in the group even if individually they were not engaging in the sins.

Again, the individual is certainly the responsible party, but it is also possible that individuals can share in the guilt of a culture, not necessarily through personally and actively being involved in a specific sin, but rather more passively by helping to foster a soft culture that allows for the sins to occur with few if any repercussions. For example, if we do not speak out as we ought against sin or work to fight against sin properly, we might personally be against something yet have not done enough to stop it. This was Eli’s problem in relation to his own sons (1 Sam 3:13). This is what is frightening to me about sins like, for example, killing the unborn and racism. We might personally be opposed to these things (and a greater list could be given). We might occasionally speak up. But is it possible that we help foster an environment that allows for these things to occur with little else done? That requires some deep introspection—personal, individual reflection on our own hearts.

Herein was the problem at Corinth. A man had his father’s wife, and rather than warning and dealing with it, they proudly tolerated it (1 Cor 5). The group became complicit in the sin as they allowed for it, though the individuals apart from this likely would not have approved of it.

Please think about it. Christians are responsible before God as individuals, but God has also made us a community who share with one another in ways that make us responsible to others. While we are to keep watch for ourselves and bear our individual loads, at the same time, we are to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal 6:1-5). Let us not become so individualistic that we fail in the “one another” part of discipleship, for “one another” is a concept that is written throughout the Scriptures and cannot be avoided by those who share in the common salvation of Jesus Christ. By focusing on one another, we will, individually, be better for it.

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## Unity and the Problem of Sin

There is always a balance that Christians must seek to maintain. On the one hand, we are to

maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 6:1-4). On the other hand, we are to deal plainly with sin, whether personal or congregational, and this has the potential to create tension. The balance can be delicate. Yet two things are clear in Scripture: 1) Christ wants a united body, and 2) We are all guilty of sin (Rom 3:23), and sinners sometimes try to work around what they know they ought to do. Sometimes it is difficult to figure out how to make this work. Please think through this with me.

Christ wants a united body. Jesus prayed for His disciples who would believe through the teaching of the apostles (which includes us), “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21). That is clear enough, so if Christ’s disciples are going to be faithful to Him, then they, too, will be seeking the unity for which the Lord prayed. We call for unity because Christ did. We pray for unity because Jesus did. It’s a matter of being faithful disciples to the expressed will of the Lord and seeking to follow His example.

There is something else to consider. Calls for unity are not calls for keeping silent about sin. We are not to teach unity of the Lord’s body in order to control a particular narrative and keep others from standing for the oppressed, for example (see, for example, Acts 6:1). Rather, Christ’s disciples are to be united together in their opposition to all wrongs. A united body addresses the problems that keep division alive; it does not sweep the problems under the rug then seek to keep others from talking about what is not comfortable or difficult. That actually promotes division and stands in opposition to Christ. Instead, as with Paul, we are to strive to declare “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:17). That’s not always easy, but it is necessary.

While Christians are to walk in love, walk as children of light, and walk carefully (Eph 5:1, 8, 15), they are also told in the same context, “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them...” (Eph 5:11-14). If a particular sin is plaguing God’s people, then we do ourselves no favors by ignoring it. Repentance requires the recognition that Isaiah saw in himself: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips...” (Isa 6:5). I surely have to raise my hand here and join in Isaiah’s cry. Thank God He wants to forgive or there would be no hope for me. Yet by recognizing our sin and the sins of those around us, we are then in a position to receive forgiveness and tell others the good news. “Here am I, send me.”

In other words, the Lord, by wanting us to be united, is not saying never to expose evil for what it is. Sin stands against the unity of God’s people. If we are to stand united, then we must do so together in opposition to what is wrong as well as in support of what is right. If we find that we are complicit in sin, then we must repent and seek forgiveness. We are to do so personally, but we are

also to do so even as congregations. Think Revelation 2 and 3, where the Lord addressed the problems of the congregations while still commending those who were doing right. These are not mutually exclusive.

The devil need not be the topic of discussion for him to be happy. If we ignore the devil and what he stands for, then we will be silent about that which separates us from God, and the devil wins. This we cannot afford. We need to see him as that roaring lion seeking to devour so that we can actively resist him (1 Pet 5:8-9).

The issue here, then, is not about grumbling and complaining, as we are clearly taught not to do (Phil 2:14). Nor is the issue here about pointing fingers and fighting over who is to blame for what problems may exist. The issue is that we must recognize sin for what it is and stand together against it. This takes humility, personal repentance, sometimes congregational repentance, and a desire to build others up so that all may be saved.

Let us stand together for all that is right and against all that is wrong. This starts with personal commitments to sanctifying Christ as Lord in our hearts (1 Pet 3:15).

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## Is the Wound Incurable?

There is a direct correlation between lawlessness and the loss of love. In speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus made the point: "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold" (Matt 24:12).

Paul warns about times of difficulty in which people will be "lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power." (2 Tim 3:2-5)

Look inside the wound. We are living in such times as these. The increase of lawlessness is apparent, and I don't just mean from crowds and unrest. I include in this those who are in positions of power who abuse their position for their own personal gratification, glory, and treacherous ends. This can be politicians, presidents, senators, and governors. It can be police officers, preachers, teachers, counselors, coaches, and doctors. It can even be parents and those we thought were friends. Manipulation, underhanded dealings, cheating, and other abuses seek to take advantage of others for personal gratification and positioning. We want to lord it over others, if for nothing because we can. "My" position and power is more important than your needs and comforts. If oppressing you gets me the power I want, there are no moral lines.

We may abuse the law and order to achieve our own desires. We think that if a rule seems silly to us, we have the right and freedom to break it because we are above it. In many cases, people have "the appearance of godliness," but they deny the power of God; and when God's power is denied, people will seek to seize power at any cost — and the cost is love, mercy, justice, and above all, people. Human dignity, inherent to all because we are made in God's image, has been tossed aside so that we act like brute beasts, gnarling, biting, and devouring. We are consumed. We have become the children of those to whom the prophets prophesied:

"Woe to those who devise wickedness  
and work evil on their beds!  
When the morning dawns, they perform it,  
because it is in the power of their hand.  
They covet fields and seize them,  
and houses, and take them away;  
they oppress a man and his house,  
a man and his inheritance." (Micah 2:1-2)

Love has grown cold. People are abusive, ungrateful, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, and brutal. This is what we have become. This is where our greed and selfishness have led us. This is what pride and putting ourselves above others has done. Even in conversations that are supposed to be loving and brotherly, we often see insults, undercutting, and reckless talk. We've all seen it. We've participated. Brotherly love is a nice ideal, but sometimes it seems it's not for "us." Has our wound become incurable (cf. Micah 1:9)?

The wound need not be incurable, but we need to remember that our time is limited. We need to know the wound is there before we can seek the healing, but the healing is certainly available. It is called the gospel, and our Lord stands ready as the Great Physician to apply the balm of Gilead.

There must a deep-seated sense of remorse, repentance, and resolve. We must see people as God's image-bearers. We must seek to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). We must seek peace and pray so that all may come to the knowledge of truth and be saved (1 Tim 2:1-4). We must break down the walls of division—walls we have erected that separate races, classes, or other artificial barriers of outward appearance that we think makes one superior to another. Instead, we must cultivate the mind of Christ, doing “nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Phil 2:3-4) Treating others with love, as we would want to be treated (Matt 7:12) is not just a pretty platitude. There will be no salvation without it.

Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). He came to provide rest for the weary (Matt 11:28-30). We are tired of sin. Tired of the ugliness of selfishness. Tired of all that the world offers and does. The gospel is here, and it makes all the difference in the world.

Then let us hear Paul's admonition: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.” (Gal 5:13-15)

Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? (cf. Luke 18:8)

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## Seek the Welfare of the City

God's people had been sent into Babylonian exile because of their failure to keep the covenant. While in exile, what should have been the attitude of God's people generally?

Jeremiah sent a letter to the people of God in exile: “to the surviving elders of the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from

Jerusalem to Babylon” (Jer 29:1). In this letter, Jeremiah told them to build houses, plant gardens, get married, and have children. He told not to decrease, but to increase and “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer 29:7).

There are important lessons here. God’s people should always be a blessing to the world in which we live. We should be a blessing to our neighbors, to our community, to our city and nation. We know this world is not home; we seek the heavenly country and our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20-21; Heb 11:13-16). At the same time, we need to seek the welfare of this place of exile in which we live. We can do this by loving our neighbor as ourselves and treating others as we would want to be treated (Matt 7:12; 22:36-40). We can do this through our prayers: “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (1 Tim 2:1-2). We can use whatever freedoms we have to glorify God and serve others. Peter put it this way:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.” (1 Pet 3:13-17)

The freedoms that we have are not to be used for selfish ambitions, but for serving and blessing others. We don’t have to agree with the people of this world to seek their welfare. We don’t have to become enmeshed in political scheming and mudslinging to pray for the leaders, no matter what their views might be. We don’t have to feel at home in this world in order to seek what is best for others. Seeking the welfare of the city transcends worldly concerns.

If God’s people in exile could seek the welfare of Babylon, that city that came to stand for all that is against God, then surely Christians can seek the welfare of this world today. It does not mean condoning sin or compromising God’s truth. It does mean that we show ourselves to be reasonable, gentle, and reflect the longsuffering of God who seeks the salvation of all. It means we recognize our place as lights in a dark world (Matt 5:14-6; Phil 2:12-16).

We see this attitude exemplified by Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar’s second dream was of a large tree whose top reached into the heavens. What appeared to be a tree of life gave false security, and in this dream a holy one came from heaven and proclaimed that the tree be chopped down and

to leave the stump among the beasts of the earth and the grass of the fields. This was to show Nebuchadnezzar who ruled over the kingdoms of men (Dan 4:13-18). When Daniel began interpreting the dream, knowing that this foretold Nebuchadnezzar's downfall, Daniel said, "'My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies!'" (Dan 4:19) Daniel was not personally seeking Nebuchadnezzar's downfall, but spoke in a way that sought his welfare. This did not keep Daniel from telling the truth about the dream, but it showed a heart for seeking the welfare of the city in which he dwelled.

The most important way that we can seek the welfare of the place in which we live is by living and proclaiming the blessing of the Gospel. Remember that God's promise to Abraham was that through Abraham's seed all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1-3). This promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who died and was raised up again "to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness" (Acts 3:26). By living and sharing the blessing of forgiveness and a reconciled relationship with God, we become blessings to others who can also know this forgiveness and fellowship.

Do what is right. Love your neighbors. Seek the welfare of the city where you live and await the final day of the revelation of Jesus Christ.

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## Praise God for Peace and Hope!

Hope has long been expressed in songs. We see a pattern in Scripture of songs being sung when victory is recognized. For example, think of the song of Moses after the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15). Of Israel after this event, Psalm 106:12 says, "Then they believed his words; they sang his praise." Think also of the song of Deborah and Barak after defeating Sisera (Judges 5) and many of Psalms. This is all over Scripture. Singing songs of praise is appropriate when realizing the victory given by God.

Isaiah 26 is a song that is expressed because of the victory of God's people when He defeats their enemies and restores them. This song of triumph and hope contains many great thoughts, but consider these:

## **1. Peace comes through trusting God:**

“Open the gates, that the righteous nation that keeps faith may enter in. You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock.” (vv. 2-4)

Thinking of God as the Rock on which we can rely is powerful. Jesus taught that the wise will build their house on the rock (Matt 7:24-27). God is that rock. He is our refuge, the one in whom we will find peace and hope. Finding this peace is what Paul writes about, also:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:6-7)

Our minds, then, need to “stayed” on God, leaning on God, resting on Him, upheld by Him. This tells us how important it is to think on Him and His will continually. The mind needs to be focused, fixed on Jesus, constantly engaged in His ways. Then, we may have peace beyond comprehension.

## **2. Hope is expressed in resurrection terms:**

“Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise.  
You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy!  
For your dew is a dew of light,  
and the earth will give birth to the dead.” (v. 19)

While the concept of the resurrection is carried forward in the New Testament, God’s people were not unfamiliar with the terms that express it. God would bring His people back to life. Later, Ezekiel had the great vision of the valley of the dry bones. “Can these bones live?” God asked. “O, Lord, God, you know,” responded Ezekiel. Then Ezekiel was told to prophesy to the bones:

“Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.” (Ezek 37:5-6)

The bones came together, flesh came upon the bones, and they lived. This is what God can do for His people. He can defeat death and bring the dead to life. In the New Testament, we know this as resurrection, and it is promised by our Lord (John 5:28-29). This is why, based on the resurrection of Jesus, we have been born again to a living hope (1 Pet 1:3-5).

Earlier in Isaiah 25, there is also language Christians ought to recognize:

“He will swallow up death forever;  
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,  
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.” (Isa 25:8)

In Christ, death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:54-57). The resurrection of Christ shows that God has won the victory, and we, too, can join in this victory over death: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It is not without significance that the next verse tells us to be steadfast (v. 58). Remember, “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”

Further, tears are wiped away, an idea echoed in Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” What a grand thought!

Will we “trust in the Lord forever” knowing that “the Lord God is an everlasting rock”? If so, we, too, have reason to sing. “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” (Jas 5:13). This is, after all, the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:1-2). We have peace and hope, which are inextricably tied together:

“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.” (Rom 5:1-2)

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# Don't Downplay Obedience

*Obedience* (submitting to and keeping God's commandments) is one of those concepts that can get downplayed because of how it sounds. If we "have to" obey, then love and grace are diminished. If we "have to" obey, then our stress is on the wrong idea. Obedience just kind of sounds oppressive to us, especially in a time that would also see terms like *submission* and *authority* as outdated and tyrannical. Obedience is seen as opposite of mercy, and this perception has, I fear, hurt us.

Obedience is not at all contrary to love and grace. In fact, they are intricately tied together in Scripture. For example, read Titus 2:11-14 to see that grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly passions so that we can live soberly, righteously, and godly while we await the coming of our Lord. If we refuse to obey God, we cannot think that we are living according to His grace.

Most who claim to be Christians would likely say that they want to follow Jesus and the example He set. Who could argue with that? What, then, does Jesus have to say about the matter of obedience, particularly as it is tied to love? Listen to Him, from the Gospel of John:

"I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (John 14:31).

Note how Jesus ties these ideas together. The way that the world would know that Jesus loves the Father is that "I do as the Father has commanded me." His ultimate demonstration of this was in going to the cross. The proof of love is found in obedience. If we wish to follow the example set by Jesus, then we need to have the same attitude: we obey what God commands so that we may demonstrate our love for Him. Love and obedience cannot be separated here. This combination is found in multiple places. Keeping the commandments demonstrates love.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

"Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him ... If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words." (John 14:21, 23, 24).

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:10-14)

John also shows the same combination in his epistles. Notice, too, how he argues that knowing God and keeping His commandments are necessary corollaries.

“And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” (1 John 2:3-6)

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith.” (1 John 5:2-4)

Scripture, then, is quite clear on this point (and we’ve barely touched on what Paul wrote here). If we love God, we keep His commandments. If we love the people of God, we keep God’s commandments. If we know God, we keep His commandments.

We need, then, to stop downplaying the role of obedience. I get it. We don’t want to diminish grace and mercy. However, this is not one of those either/or situations, but a both/and, for it is by the grace and mercy of God that He has revealed His will and given us the opportunity to be reconciled to Him. Obedience in itself is not what saves us, as if it is to be divorced from grace and therefore qualify as earning salvation. No! Absolutely not! Grace is paramount because without it, no amount of “keeping” can save us. Keeping God’s commandments, are, however, one of the signal ways in which we show that we love God and love His people. If we remember that we love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), we can keep grace and obedience together in proper perspective.

“And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments...” (2 John 6).

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# Looking to Jesus

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2, ESV).

The Hebrews writer was concerned about these Christians turning their backs on Jesus and returning to their former ways. These Christians were facing persecution because they were following Christ, and the threat of wavering because of that suffering lingered. They needed reminding that what they have with Christ is far greater than what they had before, even with the persecutions and suffering. This was a matter of perspective that they needed to keep in front of them. That perspective was wrapped up in Christ.

How can Christians persevere when things get tough? How can we endure when it seems that life goes beyond endurance? The answer lies in the point made in Hebrews 12: look to Jesus. Other translations say something akin to “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (NASB) or “keeping our eyes on Jesus” (CSB). The idea is not just that we look in the direction of Christ or glance at Him now and then. Rather, the idea is to “direct one’s attention without distraction” (BDAG). We are purposefully turning away from other things that keep us distracted and focusing on Jesus.

Runners know that turning their heads away from the goal leads to distractions, and distractions contribute to losing the race. The Hebrews writer is not talking so much about a sprint, but more of the long distance race which requires putting away the things that are distracting (sin which easily entangles) and running with endurance and patience. In this race, distractions can be most deadly, so they needed to focus on Jesus. Other passages tell us something similar. For example:

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).

“Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the

upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Fixing our eyes on Jesus, setting our minds on things above where Christ is, and pressing on toward the prize are all ways of telling us essentially the same thing. We have a goal, a purpose, a mindset, and a way by which to get there. That way is Jesus. When we look to Jesus, then, what are we seeing? Hebrews tells us that when we see Jesus, we are seeing the One who went to the cross (despising its shame) and endured through the suffering because there was something so desirable about the outcome.

When we look to Jesus, we are looking to the divine Son of God (Hebrews 1). We are also looking to the messianic Son of Man (Hebrews 2). He was manifested in the flesh in order to die for our sins, and this was anything but easy. After quoting from Psalm 8, the writer says, “At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” (Hebrews 2:8-9). Notice the terminology: “we see Him...” When we focus on Jesus, we see Him who died for us, who went through the suffering and death for us. He endured the cross on our behalf; we can endure the trials of this world on His behalf. But we cannot do it alone. We need Jesus, which also means we need to stay focused on Him as the Captain of our salvation.

The whole of the book of Hebrews is about looking to Jesus. The author points time and again to our Lord, showing us that we have in Christ is better than anything else to which we might devote ourselves. The Hebrews might have gone back to the Law, but instead they were encouraged to understand the “better hope” they had in Christ, “through which we draw near to God,” and the “better covenant” for which Jesus died (Hebrews 7:19, 22). When we understand what we are looking at and why we need to maintain our focus, it becomes more likely to stay tough when life gets hard.

Going through difficult times should not be a surprise for the Christian. The Scriptures tell us time and again that this will be the case. How do we get through it? We fix our eyes on Jesus as our great example. We see something far greater, and in the end we know that our labor will not have been in vain (1 Cor 15:58).

Doy Moyer

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# All Things New

The beginning of a new year is traditionally when we rethink our goals and reassess how we have been doing. Are we growing like we ought? Are we learning, reading, praying, and serving like we ought? Of course, questions like these should be asked all year long. We don't need to wait for a new year to start new habits or make new resolutions.

The idea of being "new" is biblical. When we become Christians, we become new creatures: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17-18). Being restored back to God makes us new, and this is refreshing when we consider how tainted our lives can become by sin. We need healing, restoration, and renewal. In Christ we have it.

Yet now we do not experience the total newness as we one day will. We are new creatures in Christ through forgiveness, but God intends to make all things new one day. This coincides with judgment, as Peter says (2 Pet 3:11-13):

"Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."

The "new heavens and new earth" are promised (which is, I believe, heaven and paradise since it is still God's dwelling). When John describes the victory at the end of the ages, we read about this in Revelation 21:1-5:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said,

‘Behold, I am making all things new.’”

God promises to make all things new, complete with a “new heaven and new earth” wherein the dwelling of God is with man. The “former things” will have passed away, tears wiped from the eyes of His people, and the pain gone. All things will be made new.

There ought to be great encouragement in this. We can indeed find encouragement and comfort in the teachings that are associated with the Second Coming of Christ. After speaking of this matter, Paul wrote, “Therefore encourage one another with these words” (1 Thess 4:18). These thoughts also point us to the kinds of lives we should be living for Him while we await His return. Peter wrote, “Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation...” (2 Pet 3:14-15).

Paul also wrote that grace teaches the child of God “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14)

We are to be people of good works, pointing others to Him (1 Pet 2:12), and these are to be done as we wait for the coming of our Lord. Being His people now reflects upon the hope that we have in Him at His coming. This is why the message of repentance is also important as it touches upon the final judgment:

“The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31)

The proof of final judgment (when Christ comes again to make all things new) is that He was raised from the dead. He ever lives to make intercession for His people (Heb 7:25), but we are not yet in the final state. All things will be made new. Because of this hope, we invite all to the feast of our Lord: “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17).

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# Be careful what you say ... again

James warned about the use of the tongue (James 3). Because of the difficulties in controlling the tongue, he warned against many becoming teachers; they will incur a stricter judgment because what they say will have a great impact on many. He followed this up with the contrast between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. Worldly wisdom is manifested in quarrels and fights. Godly wisdom is shown through humility and in drawing near to God.

James then returns to the topic of what people say and how they say it. Here he warns against two particular problems: speaking against other people and speaking against God.

“Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?” (4:11-12)

In this section James deals with speaking against others. This mentality coincides with that wisdom of the world wherein there are quarrels and fights (4:1). When we fail to humble ourselves before God, then we put ourselves in a position of making judgments of others based upon our own selfish standards. This also means that we are not submitting ourselves to God’s law; instead, we are trying to be a judge, rather than a doer, of God’s law.

Anytime we set up our own standards, we are in direct conflict with submission to God’s standards. Yet we are neither the lawgivers nor the judges. There is only One of each of these, and we are not Him. Instead, all judgment should be made through the word of God as the filter through which we consider anything. This enjoins humility upon us once again. Further, by speaking against others and thus against the law, in reality we are speaking against God. By putting ourselves over God’s law and using our own standards of judgment, we are essentially telling God to get behind us. We think we know better than He.

This attitude is further demonstrated in the following verses: “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we

will live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin." (4:13-17)

This passages should be familiar to us. We often use it to show how quickly life really does pass us by. So we better be careful how we use it. That, of course, is true.

Still, we are in the context of speaking in ways we should not. James illustrates through this another manner in which we might actually be speaking against God. By failing to consider His will, we are thereby failing to draw near to Him, humbling ourselves in His presence, and submitting to His standards. The issue is our will versus God's will. As we have seen, James has really been discussing this issue throughout. Whose judgments will be our standard? Whose will shall we bow to? Whose desires shall we follow? Who will we be listening to?

Perhaps it seems a trite thing for some to say, "If the Lord wills..." But one cannot honestly say it and not be humbled by what it implies. Our lives are not our own in the final analysis. We belong to God, and all of our efforts to make our way through this life should reflect the fact that He is our Lord and our wills are always subject to His will. When we start making plans without thinking about God's will, then we are setting ourselves over Him, and this we must never do.

Our lives really are short. But we are here during this vapor-like time in order to glorify God. Let us not be boastful and arrogant, thinking that somehow God's will doesn't really apply to us, or at that it doesn't apply to a particular part of our lives and plans. His will is all-encompassing for us.

Doing what is right is based upon knowing God's will and God's standards. It is grounded in drawing near to Him, listening to His word and being a doer rather than only hearing. If we know the right thing and don't do it, then shame on us. If we don't know the right thing, then shame on us. God help us to know and do both.

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