

October to December 2023

Teenz RPG Series on

Serving God

Am I Serving the Lord?

Do pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance before you begin your devotional time, for unless the Spirit reveals the meaning, we cannot understand scripture (1 Corinthians 2:10). Then you must read the scripture text; please don't be tempted to read the devotional alone without reading the Bible. Memorising the scripture text will help you meditate upon it (Psalm 1:2), even long after you have finished your devotional time. After reading the devotional, always end with self-reflection: compare yourself against the standard of God's Word, and humbly yield to the Holy Spirit to direct you towards that standard (James 1:23-25). Be ye doers of the Word, not hearers only!

At the end of this series, may you be able to say as David said,

"O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."

(Psalm 63:1)

May all glory be God's alone!

Dn Milton Ang

On behalf of the Teenz RPG committee

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SERVE GOD?

We have studied throughout this year how to become a child of God, how to seek after God, and how to obey God. This quarter, we will be focusing on another important aspect of a Christian's life – service.

What does it mean to serve God? In today's reading, Paul commended the Christians in Thessalonica for their excellent testimony in how they *“turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”* (v. 9). In the past, they used to be engaged in idolatrous, heathen worship. After their conversion, though, they gave themselves over wholly to serve God. Because they now know the truth, their lives were committed to the service of the true and living God – the Creator of the whole universe! Their lives were completely changed. The idols that they used to serve now mean nothing to them, for God alone has become the central focus of their lives. All that they now do - their motives, goals, thoughts and actions are all carried out as unto the Lord, and not to self.

We often tend to compartmentalise our lives and think of service as just one aspect of it. For example, someone might say, “I serve God by singing in the choir”, or “I serve God by helping out in Sunday School”. While these are all good ways in which we serve God, this does not mean that all other areas of our lives can then be considered to be separate from service, or *‘non-spiritual’* in nature. Rather, think of service as something that our entire lives are committed to. When we were born again, we completely abandoned our old way of life, for we turned from our life of sin to serve God! For you, dear teen, do you realise that every single aspect of your life ought to be rendered as service to God? For example, you can serve God through your studies if you truly study hard for His glory and keep up a good testimony among your classmates. Similarly, your home life can be an area of service to God when you honour and obey your parents and treat your siblings with love and kindness.

Dear teen, may you consider today how you have been serving God through your life, and strive to give your whole life over to the service of the living and true God!

Thought: How can I serve God in every area of my life?

Prayer: Lord, teach me what it means to serve Thee!

IN WHAT SENSE AM I A SLAVE TO GOD?

When we think about slavery, it tends to have a negative connotation, and is often associated with ideas such as cruelty and wickedness. In Old Testament times however, provision was made by the law for slaves to be treated gently and mildly. The law stated that slaves would be free to go after 6 years of service. However, a slave, out of love for his master, could also choose to voluntarily remain in his master's service forever.

It is in this context, therefore, that we consider what it means to be a slave to God. We must remember that God has purchased us with the precious blood of Christ. Christians are often referred to as servants, or literally, slaves, of God. To be a slave means that we give up all our liberties and freedoms, and do only what we are commanded by our Master to do. But this is by no means a sorrowful and miserable state, for *"his commandments are not grievous"* (1 John 5:3). Furthermore, the liberties that we gave up were the liberties to sin and to live in a state of ungodliness. Praise God that we have been delivered from such a state! Now as believers, we have a new liberty – that is the freedom to not sin, and to serve God!

Let us remember also that it is not a cruel and wicked Master that we serve, but a loving, kind and compassionate Master who loved us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to earth, to die on the cross for our sins. Hence, just as a slave in Israel who loved his master could volunteer to remain in his service forever, likewise we who have so much more reason to love our Master must surely be willing to be found in His service forever. Dear teen, the question is, are you glad to be a slave to God?

Thought: To be a slave to God is to be free from sin.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for purchasing me with the blood of Christ!

WHAT WAS I ENSLAVED TO IN THE PAST?

Think back on what you were like before you were saved. How did you behave? What were your motivations? What did you spend your time on? What sort of friends did you enjoy spending time with? What things filled your thoughts? Do not be surprised if you find the answers to these questions embarrassing to share with another person.

In today's reading, Paul states in no uncertain terms that all of us used to be the “*servants of sin*” (v. 20). This literally means that we were slaves to sin, totally devoted to sinful things. We were in a state of total depravity, utterly incapable of any good or righteousness. Even when we seemed to be doing good deeds, we were still motivated by sinful desires and thoughts. We were under the complete control of sin. Verse 21 goes on to tell us that the things that we used to do should now bring us much shame. These were things that were completely unfruitful, for nothing we ever did was for God. We did things only to please ourselves and satisfy our selfish, sinful desires. Such a way of life would only lead us to one end: death. What a terrifying thought indeed, and what a terrible state to be in!

And yet, what a blessed thought it is, to know that we are no longer in such a state. This is possible only because of the precious salvation that Christ has worked for us. Truly how great and wonderful a salvation! Dear teen, may you therefore never forget the depths of sin from which Christ has rescued you, and may you never be tempted to return to such a state of sinfulness!

Thought: Through Christ, I no longer serve sin!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for freeing me from the bondage of sin.

WHY MUST I NOW BE SERVING GOD?

Imagine for a moment that you are in a life-threatening situation. Perhaps you are in the middle of shark-infested waters, too terrified to swim away. Suddenly, a stranger jumps in and pulls you up to safety, thereby saving you from what would have been an almost-certain death. How would you react to this stranger? Surely you would be filled with overwhelming gratitude, and would be willing to do anything and everything to show your gratitude to him.

Now think about what God has done for you. Yesterday we read about how we all used to be servants of sin. This state of total depravity is far worse than any life-threatening situation that you can find yourself in, for it is not our temporal bodies but our eternal souls which are at stake here. Now that we are saved, we no longer need to fear death or hell, for through Christ we have been *“made free from sin”* (v. 22). What a blessed thought! Now we are no longer servants of sin, but instead, we have the privilege of becoming *“servants of God”*. We now have the freedom to be able to serve God in gratitude and in love, for He has saved us from our sin! Surely, this is the only response we can have after all that God has done for us. As believers, the service that we render can be considered useful *“fruit unto holiness”*. They are no longer filthy rags that we are ashamed of, but now worthy fruits that are considered holy to God! Furthermore, the reward that is promised to us is the gift of everlasting life. What a wonderful thing to look forward to! In light of all this, to serve God with our whole lives is the least we can do in response to the wonderful salvation that He has given to us, so freely and graciously!

Dear teen, knowing how much God has done for you, are you not then willing to serve God cheerfully and wholeheartedly? Is it not a great privilege to serve the God who has rescued you from the depths of sin and promised you a place in heaven?

Thought: “To think of His great sacrifice at Calvary, I know my Lord expects the best from me”.

Prayer: Lord, help me to show my gratitude by serving Thee.

HOW DID GOD REDEEM US?

What things do you find precious? Some girls may be attracted by the latest fashions and accessories. Other young people may aspire to own the latest technological gadget on the market or some sports memorabilia. Once you have obtained one of these items that you find precious, it is unlikely that you can be easily persuaded to give it up, at least not until the next latest thing catches your eye!

Now think about what God did for you and me. The blood of Jesus Christ is described in today's reading as being "*precious*". This preciousness is far above and beyond anything that can be bought with silver or gold. It is worth far more than anything that this world can offer, and all our little material possessions that we hold dear pale in comparison to the priceless blood of Christ. It is precious simply because it is the blood of His Perfect Son, Jesus Christ who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So precious is this blood, and yet God did not hesitate to use it to pay the price for our redemption. As the perfect Lamb of God without blemish and spot, Jesus shed his blood and died for our sins. In effect, God used this priceless blood of Christ to pay the ransom of guilty sinners like you and me. How amazing is His love!

Dear teen, what then should be your response? As one who has been redeemed, the love and gratitude which you have towards God should be proportionate to the price which has been paid for your ransom. Knowing therefore how great a price has been paid for your salvation, and how costly it was to God to save you, can you do anything less than to consecrate your life wholly to the service of God?

Thought: The blood of Christ is truly precious to sinners saved by grace.

Prayer: Lord, help me never to take Your sacrifice for granted!

CAN I EVER SERVE GOD ENOUGH?

Although this is not something that I am proud to admit, there are times when I do grow weary of service. The thought sometimes crosses my mind, “Surely I’ve done enough for God. It’s time to take a break and let others do the job!” Perhaps this thought has crossed your mind at some point too.

What does God’s Word teach us, though? 1 Corinthians 15 is a truly amazing chapter which speaks about the work of Christ in conquering death and sin through His death and resurrection, thereby winning for us the victory. In light of this, Paul commands us in verse 58 to “*therefore*” always abound in the work of the Lord. The phrase “*always abounding*” here means that we are to continually and at all times increase and excel in the Lord’s work. To remain in the same state is not enough; to decrease in or to completely cease from service is completely unthinkable! God’s Word is clear – we are to be engaged in the work of the Lord for as long as we live on this earth. As we grow in our faith and spiritual maturity, we must seek to continually increase and abound in our service. This does not necessarily mean that we must keep on involving ourselves in more and more ministries in church. It means that our service for Him in all aspects of our lives must be constantly improving. We would keep seeking for ways and means by which we can be more effective and useful for the Lord. This is only what is reasonable, after all that Christ has done for our sakes. Even if we were to serve God for the next 1000 years, it would still only scrape the surface of what would be enough to repay Him for His great love and mercy towards us. Yet, we continue to strive to do all that we can within our lifetime, to repay a part of the gospel debt we owe.

Dear teen, may you thus never think that you have already done “enough” for God. Instead, think of what God has done for you, and serve Him with much joy and gratitude.

Thought: There is no such thing as serving God “enough”.

Prayer: Lord, help me to serve Thee with all that I am, for as long as I can.

BUT WHAT IF I DON'T LIKE TO SERVE?

A common sight that I often witness in our church fellowship hall is a big group of young people sitting down, eating and chatting together, while only 1 or 2 people would be cleaning the tables or washing the dishes. Of course, given a choice, who would prefer to wipe tables and wash dishes, when he could be sitting down comfortably and enjoying time with friends?

Our Lord Jesus Himself was not unaware of this sort of behaviour. He pointed out in today's reading that "*he that sitteth at meat*" is certainly greater than "*he that serveth*" (v. 27). Yet the amazing thing is that He then went on to say that "I am among you as he that serveth". In fact, we read in John 13:4-17 that He backed up His words by His actions, by girding Himself in a towel as a servant would and then stooping down to wash the disciples' feet. Through His words and actions, Christ has set the supreme example for us to follow. No matter how demeaning and humiliating the task, we are to humble ourselves as servants and serve one another.

Dear teen, can you then still give the excuse that you don't want to serve because you don't like to? It was probably not an enjoyable task at all to wash the smelly, dusty feet of the disciples, yet He did it willingly. And it was definitely not "enjoyable" at all for Christ to go to the cross and die a sinner's death – yet, He did it willingly. Service is not always about whether we "*like*" it or find it "*enjoyable*". Rather, it is about humbly submitting to the Lord's will and doing whatever He commands us to do. Dear teen, may you be willing to serve, whatever the circumstances and however difficult it may be.

Thought: We serve not self, but God.

Prayer: Lord, humble me for Your service.

WHAT IF I DON'T SERVE GOD?

Back in my secondary school days, my social studies teacher often repeat this phrase to us: “If you sit on the fence, you will get impaled”. Of course, she was referring to the necessity of taking a stand on issues, and how it was not good at all to remain neutral.

When it comes to whom we serve, this principle applies too – there is no such thing as remaining neutral. And in the spiritual realm, as today’s reading teaches us, there is a choice between two masters: God or mammon. Mammon refers to treasure or riches, which by extension can also be applied to refer to all that is worldly and sinful. Either we hate God and love mammon, or else we hold to God and despise mammon. In fact, those who are servants of mammon are otherwise known as the servants of Satan, for Satan is known as the “*prince of this world*” (John 12:31). Therefore, if a person does not serve God, there is no such thing as “remaining neutral” – he would then be serving the devil.

What a terrifying thought indeed! To have Satan as your master, to do the things that please him, to be motivated by his glory, is surely a most miserable state to be living in. Yet there are so many people who willingly choose to rebel against God and to serve mammon and the god of this world instead.

Dear teen, what about you? Whom do you serve? What is it that takes up most of your time, and consumes your heart’s desires? Do you have an overwhelming desire to seek after God and to live in a manner that pleases him? Or do you instead find yourself seeking after the things of the world? If that is the case, then you have turned away from serving God, and are serving yourselves and the lusts of the world.

To serve God, or to serve mammon – which will you choose?

Thought: If I don’t serve God, I am a servant of Satan!

Prayer: Lord, I want to serve Thee and not the devil.

ISN'T BEING A SERVANT DEMEANING?

A few years back, I went on a community service trip to Cambodia, and one of the things we did was to help build a road. This involved working under the hot sun for hours, clearing big rocks and stones one by one from the path and digging up heaps of soil from the ground. This was certainly a humbling and somewhat demeaning experience for me, but I was happy to do it because the road would help to improve the lives of the villagers.

But compared to what Christ went through, my experience is nothing at all. Christ who is King and Lord over the whole universe “*took upon him the form of a servant*”, a most lowly and humiliating state. He was also “*made in the likeness of men*” – the God of all Creation was clothed in the rags of human nature and became a creature like us, so weak and poor. From King to servant, from God to man – this reflects the great depth of Christ’s love towards us.

Was it demeaning for Christ to come to this earth as a servant? Yes, of course! And yet He did it, willingly. All too often we forget the great sacrifice that Jesus made for us. We think that serving others is a demeaning job, and shun especially the tasks we deem to be beneath us. Think about it – if Christ had thought the same way as most of us do, we would most certainly be doomed to eternal suffering in hell! How thankful we must be then, that Christ was willing to “make himself of no reputation”, to live a perfect life on this earth as a man and to die on the cross for our sins.

Dear teen, what should your response be? May you no longer think that being a servant is demeaning, but instead rejoice at each and every opportunity you have to serve your Saviour who loves you so.

Thought: After all that Jesus has done for me, can there be anything I will not do for Him?

Prayer: Lord, humble me for Your service.

WON’T I SUFFER AS A RESULT OF SERVING GOD?

In today’s passage, we read of the great boldness and courage of the Apostles. How strange it may seem to us, that they were *“rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name”* (v. 41). Because of what they preached and taught to the people, they had endured a night in prison, threats of death, as well as beatings at the hands of the Sanhedrin council. What a great deal of suffering – and yet they could still rejoice! Certainly it is not because they actually enjoyed the sufferings which they had been through; they rejoiced simply because they had been *“counted worthy”* to suffer for the sake of Christ. They had shown so much zeal and faithfulness through their testimony that the Jewish council went to the extent of punishing them in such an extreme manner.

The Apostles never allowed these sufferings to hinder their evangelistic work. Instead, right after they departed from the presence of the council, they went daily to the temple and to every house, and continued to teach and preach Jesus Christ (v. 42). The reason why they were able to respond in such a positive manner was because they understood what serving the Lord involved. They had heard Christ’s warning in John 15:20 *“Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you”*, and then personally witnessed how Jesus suffered and died on the cross for their sins. They knew that the message of the cross would be offensive to the unbelieving world around them, and yet they persevered in their preaching because they knew how important and valuable this message is. When they were persecuted, instead of shrinking back in fear, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to be fellow partakers of the sufferings of Christ.

Dear teen, how about you? Are you willing to suffer as a result of serving God? And is this something that you would rejoice in? To endure suffering is the mark of one who is living a godly life. Truly, how blessed it is to be counted worthy to suffer for His name’s sake!

Thought: *“...All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution”* (1 Timothy 3:12).

Prayer: Lord, grant me the grace to endure the sufferings that I face for Your name’s sake.

WHAT IS THE REWARD FOR SERVING GOD?

Children, when told to do something by their parents, often choose not to obey. However, if the instruction is coupled with a promise of some sort of reward, the child will more likely choose to obey, because he is attracted by the incentive given.

In fact, it is not just children who are like that – most of us know that we ourselves are like that too. Perhaps this is why, throughout His Word, God has placed in it promises of the reward that awaits those who serve Him faithfully. Though we are undeserving, God in His infinite grace and mercy has promised to reward His servants, and He has placed in His Word multiple references to this, to give us encouragement and hope. In today’s reading, we read that we shall receive from the Lord *“the reward of the inheritance”*. What is this inheritance? It is a most wonderful promise that, as the children and heirs of God, we will one day inherit His kingdom. This does not mean that it is because of our service that we earn our place in the kingdom as our reward. It is not salvation by works! Rather what it speaks of is how God is a loving benevolent father who certainly knows how to give good things to all who are already His children. This promise of reward is not to give an incentive for us to serve harder so we can get more reward, but rather is the loving gifts that a father delights to prepare for His faithful and obedient children. Therefore as we are serving Him faithfully on this earth, we can look forward with much joy and anticipation to the heavenly kingdom that is prepared for all those who are His children.

Of course – and I cannot stress this enough, this does not mean that we serve God in expectation of a reward, or that we obey His commands because we want to receive a reward. We ought to serve God simply because He has commanded us to do so, and because we love Him. We ought not also to expect any reward at all, for we are but unworthy servants! We must always remember the words of Jesus: *“So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do”* (Luke 17:10).

Dear teen, as you continue to labour on this earth for God, may you be motivated by your love for Christ, and look forward to the eternal heavenly reward that awaits you!

Thought: A heavenly inheritance for my earthly labours – how blessed!

Prayer: Lord, thank You for this blessed promise.

HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO SERVE GOD?

Over the years, I have observed a trend among some teens around me. Initially, they would be so fervent and passionate, full of zeal for the Lord’s work. Sadly, though, this passion and fervour die out after a while. Perhaps after a camp or a particular trial, they might have a mini spiritual revival, but soon enough that spark of zeal fizzles out again.

Should this always be the case? Will there come a point in a Christian’s life where it is time to stop serving God? Today’s reading gives us the answers to these questions. Revelation 22:3 allows us a glimpse of what it will be like in heaven. God will be there, reigning on His throne, *“and his servants shall serve him”*. Who are these servants? None other than you and me, and all who have been saved by the blood of the Lamb! We shall be *“before the throne of God”*, where we will *“serve him day and night in his temple”* (Revelation 7:15), through all eternity!

The service that we now do on this earth is hence a good way of preparing for eternity in heaven, where we will serve God forever. If you have already grown tired of service, though, can you say that you are prepared for an eternity of service in heaven?

Dear teen, God willing, you still have a long, long life ahead of you. May your love for service thus grow and not wane, day by day. May your faithfulness in service also be constant, and not be like a rollercoaster that goes up for a while and then down again. If you truly love the Lord, the thought of an eternity of service will bring nothing but joy and gladness to your heart!

Thought: “The longer I serve Him, the sweeter He grows”.

Prayer: Lord, prepare me for an eternity of service to You.

WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE OF OUR SERVICE?

When approached to serve in certain areas, I often hear teens say, “But I’m not good enough at doing this!”, or “I don’t have any talents to serve!” Are these good excuses to prevent us from serving?

Today’s reading takes us to the familiar parable of the talents. It tells of a man who gave his servants different amounts of talents (money) according to their ability, to see how they would use them.

What I would like to focus on, though, is the servant who was given two talents. He was able to use his two talents to earn two more talents. Though this was less than what the servant with five talents had earned, yet he received the same commendation from his lord – *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant”*. His master recognised that he only had two to start with, and so his effort in earning the two more talents was just as commendable as the first servant’s. Ultimately, what his master was looking for was not how much he was able to earn, but whether he had been a faithful servant.

Likewise for us, service is not about whether or not we are able to achieve great and glorious things. Rather, what the Lord requires of us is that we are faithful in our service. For example, if you have been reaching out to a fellow teen for a long time but he is still not attending teens activities, this does not mean that you are a failure, for God still sees your faithfulness. Dear teen, may you thus seek always to be faithful in your service to God.

Thought: A good servant is one who is faithful.

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a faithful servant!

IS THE TERM “THE SERVANT OF THE LORD” SPECIAL?

The phrase *“the servant of the Lord”* can be found more than 20 times in the Bible. In the Old Testament, it was used in relation to specific individuals, namely Moses, Joshua and David. In the New Testament, the Apostles sometimes referred to themselves in their epistles as a *‘servant of Jesus Christ’* (Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1:1) or *‘servant of God’* (Titus 1:1, James 1:1). It is also used in today’s verse, where Paul is instructing Timothy on what sort of conduct a minister or servant of the Lord ought to have.

Does this phrase therefore have any particular significance? In 2 Timothy 2:24-26, Paul is speaking mainly of the qualifications of the Christian minister. However, this does not mean that only ministers need to be *“gentle unto all men”*, *“apt to teach”* and *“patient”*. Certainly, all Christians should strive to possess these traits too! Hence, the term *“the servant of the Lord”* is equally applicable to all Christians who desire to serve the Lord!

Dear teen, this includes you too! So long as you have been born again, you are a servant of our heavenly King. But the more important question is, can you live up to this title? The great men who have gone before us, Moses, Joshua and David, were given the greatest honour of having their names forever immortalised in the Word of God as being the servants of the Lord. Today, you and I can likewise call ourselves as such. Dear teen, will you be a servant who brings glory to your Master? Or will you be one that only brings shame to the name of Christ?

Thought: Am I worthy to be called a servant of the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a worthy servant of Yours.

“we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.”

MUST I SERVE THE LORD FULL TIME?

As a child, I used to think that being a missionary meant that one needed to travel far away to exotic countries, preaching the gospel in places that were both exciting and dangerous. It was only when I learnt the song “A Little Missionary” in which a line goes, “I can work for Jesus in my homeland”, did I understand that every one of us can be a missionary in wherever God has placed us, sharing the gospel with those whom God has placed in our lives.

Similarly, serving the Lord doesn't mean that one needs to go into the ministry and serve Him full time! While it is certainly a great honour to serve the Lord full time, this is not something that every Christian is called to do. We learn from today's reading that, just as the body is made up of many different parts where each has its own purpose and use, likewise the body of Christ is made up of many different believers who each have their own function and work. Hence, each Christian will have his own calling from God to serve in whatever area God has called Him to, and this calling is not necessarily (in fact, it very rarely is!) a calling to serve Him full time. Think about it – if all were pastors, who would make up the congregation, and who would go out into the schools and workplaces to witness and testify for the Lord?

Hence, do not be misled into thinking that the only way we can serve the Lord is to serve Him full time. There are countless other ways in which a teen like you can serve Him. If you are not currently serving in any area, why not speak to a church leader today and find out how you can play your part as part of the body of Christ?

Thought: How can I serve the Lord where He has placed me?

Prayer: Lord, show me how I can best serve You.

WHAT DOES THE GREAT COMMISSION ENTAIL?

The Great Commission is the term given to today's passage. It was the command given to the disciples before the Lord's ascension into heaven. This command is also directed at all believers and not only to pastors and preachers. Of course pastors and preachers will be greatly involved in carrying out this Great Commission but all believers have a role to play too.

First, the Great Commission is evangelistic. God commands us to go forth to bring the gospel to all. The key word to note is the word "go". It is a word that commands. But while we are commanded to go, Jesus assures us in Matt 28:20 that His almighty power accompanies us wherever we go.

Second, the gospel must be brought far and wide to all nations. Like light, the gospel must be sent out wherever men may be. The salvation by Christ should be offered to all, and none excluded. And, just as disciples are to go everywhere, to the uttermost parts of the earth, they are also to "teach" all nations.

The third part of the commission is to "baptise" believers in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Thus those who believe must be baptised in obedience to this command and undergo the sacrament of holy baptism by water. It is an outward sign of an inward faith. It is the public confession of this inward belief, thus identifying the new believer with Christ.

Have you invited someone to church? Have you given someone a tract? Have you ever witnessed to a friend about the way of salvation? All these are ways which a believer can use to reach out to the lost. As we mature in Christ, we will be able to go further and even become a Sunday school teacher, or have opportunities to join mission trips and bring the gospel to people in other countries who have never heard of Christ. Though we may not baptise, we can explain and encourage our loved ones and friends who have been saved to seek baptism in obedience to the Lord's command.

Thought: Untold millions are still untold.

Prayer: Lord, remind me always of the part I must play to bring the gospel to the untold millions who are still outside Thy fold.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

Paul emphatically prefaces his explanation of the gospel by saying that it was received from God and was not of his own device.

The first thing to note is that the gospel is about how Jesus Christ died for our sins. He died on account of our sins, not because of any sin of His own. He was *"the just"* dying for us the unjust. We caused His death and for us He shed His blood, to wash away our sins. His death is thus an atoning sacrifice, a vicarious offering.

Paul then referred to the Scriptures so that all may know that the writings of the Old Testament had prophesied of the Messiah who would die for the sins of the world. Christ came in fulfilment of the Scriptures, which foretold of Him and His death.

After Christ died, He was buried and He rose again the third day. Thus the gospel we share should not only mention the death of Christ but also the fact that He was physically buried. It was a real death; Jesus did not merely faint. It should not stop there but continue to mention that Christ triumphed when He rose from the dead. Again, this was according to the prophecy of Scriptures. One example is Psalm 16:10 which tells us, *"For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."*

Dear teens, when you witness, the gospel you present should always include the death, the burial and the resurrection of Christ. A complete gospel presentation should include all these three elements. They show the love of Christ in dying for our sins and taking our place for we have sinned. It should also include the fact that Jesus' body lay in a tomb and He was buried. But after three days, He rose from the dead, thus conquering death and the grave. Anyone who repents and believes by faith will be saved. That is the good news that we should faithfully present.

Thought: What a privilege to present the glorious gospel which is the power of God unto salvation.

Prayer: Lord, teach me and grant me opportunities to bring the gospel to friends and loved ones who are still outside Thy kingdom.

WHY SHOULD I EVANGELISE?

The Great Commission commands and encourages us to evangelise. We are to share the message of God's infinite love for mankind – the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mankind is lost in sin. Without the gospel, we perish. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can rescue us from certain death. How are the unsaved to hear the gospel? Someone must tell it to them. That someone is you and I. You were saved by the gospel and surely you would want to reach out in compassion to the lost and perishing.

Paul saw the necessity of preaching the gospel. He was called into the ministry of God's Word. He had a direct commission from heaven. He had an irresistible call which left no room for hesitation. His zeal in preaching the gospel was such that he would be miserable and wretched if he did not preach, for he cried *'woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!'*

Paul had been called to a full time ministry of the preaching of the Word and the gospel. We might not have been called in the same way as Paul but to all believers is given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). As ambassadors for Christ, we are to bear the message of the good news of salvation to others. God did not commit such a vital mission and responsibility to angels. Angels have greater power than us and yet God did not use them. Yes, it is to the saints that God has committed this task of evangelising to the lost. What everlasting joy it would be if we can bring some souls to Him.

Dear teen, the gospel is powerful! The saving power is not in us. It is in the message entrusted to us. Don't be afraid to give the gospel to your friends. Don't be ashamed of the gospel message for God will do a work of faith to those who will hear the gospel and believe. Your duty and joy is to proclaim it faithfully, in its entirety. Sow abundantly. Do not be discouraged when no one seems to have received God's Word. Just go forth, allowing God's Word to take root in His own good time.

Thought: *"And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not"* (Galatians 6:9).

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, may I be a faithful witness, leading the lost to Thee.

IF IT IS GOD WHO SAVES, WHY EVANGELISE?

It is undeniably true that it is God who saves. 1 Corinthians 3:6 tells us clearly that you and I might have planted and watered but it is God who gives the increase. But how can sinners be saved, except there be some who are sent to preach the good news of salvation to them? All of us are sent to be witnesses by the call of the Great Commission. The pastors are those who are specially called to preach God’s Word but all believers also have a part to play, in witnessing to our own personal circle of family and friends.

The importance and necessity of evangelising is underlined in Romans 10:15 which describes the ‘*beautiful feet*’ of those who not only preach the gospel of peace but also bring “*glad tidings of good things*”. The image is that of a messenger running through distant hills and valleys to bring glad tidings to those who are in captivity. The feet are emblematic of his coming. The messenger’s coming would be beautiful to the recipients because of the message that he brings.

The world of lost souls needs us. Without us, they will die in their sin and spend eternity in hell. Who has the gospel of salvation to tell? Who has been saved to evangelise? How can we not evangelise when God has given us this glorious message of the gospel to bring peace and joy to those who are in darkness? Our coming to proclaim it is joyful to the world. It will fill the anxious sinner with peace; and he will experience joy at the same time if he comes to believe. Therefore, to evangelise is an honoured and blessed work.

Dear teen, do not hesitate to evangelise any longer. Pray for opportunities to evangelise and thank God if such opportunities are given to you. Do not be discouraged if you are rebuffed or unsuccessful. When the gospel is rejected, the blessings will return to you. Soon you will experience the joy of seeing a sinner come to Christ as you witness and God gives the increase.

Thought: We are ambassadors for Christ, bringing the news of reconciliation with God through the gospel.

Prayer: Lord, may I sow abundantly for Thee.

WHY IS IT DIFFICULT FOR OTHERS TO BELIEVE?

Paul, in this passage, gives the reason why it is difficult for some to believe in the saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. He explains that it has nothing to do with the gospel itself. If the gospel seemed “hid” and unclear to some, it is not because God had purposely concealed its meaning or from any lack of clearness in itself. It is to be traced to other causes.

It is “hid” to those who are lost or those who deserve to perish. This class of people will not see the truth which condemns their sins. They are like the blind who cannot see the sun. It is not the fault of the sun when people shut their eyes and will not see it. However, this spiritual blindness that they are afflicted with comes about because they have allowed themselves to be deceived by the Devil.

Tragically, the “lost” condemn themselves for they wilfully reject the Saviour who died to take away their sins. Because they persist in their rejection of Christ, they have lost all hope of being saved from hell. Instead, they have sought after the “god of this world” which is Satan and all that he stands for. He rules in the hearts and lives of these lost people. They obey him and submit to his will in executing fraud, even murder, and immorality. As the god of this world, Satan reigns over all who are not in Christ. He blinds the minds of these people and they are unable to see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Dear teen, continue to pray for these groups of people who have rejected Christ. They may be your loved ones or friends. Though Satan has blinded them for now, in God’s good time they might still come to the Lord. Do not give up on them. As long as God gives them life, there are opportunities for them to accept the Lord. One day, the Lord may see fit to open their eyes and to remove the scales that seemed to have prevented them from seeing the glorious gospel. We often hear of believers who pray for decades before their loved ones come to the Lord.

Thought: We have an enemy who opposes the gospel.

Prayer: Gracious loving heavenly Father, have mercy on those still outside Your kingdom and grant that I may have opportunities to share the gospel with them.

DOESN'T THIS WORLD NEED PEACE, NOT RELIGION?

There is a huge difference between Christianity and other religions. Christianity teaches us what God did to bring us salvation. In all other religions, the focus is on what man needs to do in order to bring salvation upon himself. In other words, the religions of this world like Buddhism and Hinduism emphasise works, or what man must do to be saved, while Christianity emphasises what God did to save us.

The world does not need religions that teach us how to be good or to obtain peace, because by ourselves we can never achieve that. What the world needs is the Prince of Peace for He alone can bring peace to this world. But this peace is not merely a situation where there is no war and everyone agrees to a ceasefire. When Jesus came as the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), He came to make peace between God and man. He reconciled the world to God. The world is at war with God; sinners are at enmity against their Creator and against each other. But Jesus came to make peace. He brings sinners to a state of peace with his Maker so that they submit their lives to God, thus experiencing the peace that passes all understanding.

We give all glory to God for this great work of mercy when Jesus came to cleanse us from our sins and paid the price that the holiness and justice of God demands for breaking His commandments. In and through this great work of the Lord Jesus Christ, all sinners – now cleansed and indwelt by the Holy Spirit are able to manifest goodwill to people. Only when the gospel of Jesus universally prevails, will there be true peace on earth.

Dearest teen, as you seek to understand the glory of God in His great love for us, do you value your faith even more? Do you see how great and good God is as He seeks to bring peace on earth, even as He sent His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for our sins? What is your response? Surely, if God so loved us “first”, we ought also to love Him and increase in our love for Him. Meditate and ponder over the infinite greatness of His love.

Thought: Jesus, the Prince of Peace will rule with perfect peace one day on earth.

Prayer: Increase my love for Thee, heavenly Father, as I daily learn of Your glorious work of salvation.

BUT I FEEL INADEQUATE TO EVANGELISE

In fulfilling God’s call for him to preach the gospel, Paul had gone through unimaginable hardships. The Jews had cast him off and regarded him as an apostate. They together with the Gentiles persecuted him, and he was often driven from place to place, from town to town. Like many Christians who suffered thus, he was regarded as *“the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things”* (1 Corinthians 4:13). But Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. He was so firmly convicted of its value and its truth that he soldiered on and continued to evangelise with unwavering and undiminishing zeal.

It is right for us to feel ashamed of our foolishness and wrongdoings. We ought to feel ashamed if we commit a crime or sin against God. But the gospel of God? It is the precious good news that assure us that sin will be pardoned, and the soul saved. Paul saw it as such and he firmly believed that they who believed on Christ should not be ashamed of the gospel. He regarded this gospel of Christ to be the eternally good news of hope. He was ready to preach this glorious hope to Rome, the rich and powerful capital of the world at that time.

Where did Paul’s confidence in preaching the gospel come from? Was it because of his own courage, or his own abilities? Certainly not. He shared that he had the boldness to be *‘not ashamed’* of the gospel of Christ, because he knew that it was the power of God unto salvation. It was God who would work in the heart of the listeners, and it had nothing to do with his own eloquence or ability.

Dear teen, the saving power is not in us. It is in the message entrusted to us. Our role is to proclaim it faithfully. Its power will then work on the hearers, to the conversion of sinners and salvation of souls. Hearers who mock the gospel message are foolish. Hearers who take heed, humble themselves and believe the gospel message will experience the power of God unto salvation. Witness and evangelise with every confidence, knowing that the power of God will work in the lives of your hearers!

Thought: The gospel of Jesus Christ can turn a sinner into a saint!

Prayer: Lord, grant me a love for souls that I may pray and witness faithfully for Thee.

“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

WHO SHOULD I EVANGELISE TO?

There are many verses in the Bible, of which Mark 16:15 is one, which tells us that we need to evangelise far and wide, to as many as possible (Other verses are Acts 1:8 and Matthew 28:18-20). Collectively, the Church is to evangelise to all the world, as far as men are found. Surely, this is the desiderative will of God. The gospel is not only for the people of the West but is for those of the East. It is not only for the rich but also for the poor. It is to be preached to people of all races, nationalities, to all cultures and societies. Why? Because for Jesus died for all mankind.

When the Church of the New Testament began at Pentecost, many of those who were saved returned home to their various countries (Acts 2:9-11). The Apostles also heeded the Lord's command before His ascension that they were to preach the gospel not only in Jerusalem but *“in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth”* (Acts 1:8). They understood that it was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles. In obedience, as they were led by the Holy Spirit, they went and preached to all these places. God also used persecution to spread the gospel (Acts 8:1). Since that day, this commandment of the Lord has been obeyed and carried out. As believers are added to the church in various places, they constitute a church which will in turn carry out the preaching and teaching of God's Word.

Dear teen, do you realise what a gracious and just God we worship? He commands His servants to offer the salvation to *“all men”*. We have no right to limit this offer to any class of men. If any should reject the gospel, it is at their peril. God is not to be blamed if they reject God's gift of salvation. His mercy and grace is boundless in offering life to all. Judge not, therefore, as you witness. Sometimes, the person whom you think is likely to accept the Lord, does not. Whereas the person whom you do not think is likely to accept, actually does! Salvation is of the Lord, we are but mouthpieces for Him.

Thought: Go and in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Prayer: Lord, may I know the joy of witnessing and winning souls for thee. (Proverbs 11:30b)

WHAT DO I NEED IN EVANGELISM?

When Paul preached the gospel to the people of Thessalonica, he was thankful to God that they received the truth of God’s Word. They believed that it was the Word of God, and not of men.

That should be the way we receive God’s Word. It is divine revelation. If we receive it because we are persuaded by human reasoning or out of great respect for others, it will not abide. True, genuine faith is when the gospel is received as a revelation from God, and from the love of the truth. Therefore, when we evangelise, that is how the gospel has to be received as well. It is not the words of man that we preach, but the very words of God! We desire that the truth of God’s Word alone will work effectually in our hearers’ hearts that they might have true and enduring faith.

Yes, the unadulterated gospel, when preached faithfully, has power to save. Moreover, the Holy Spirit also works in those whom God elects to be His own. What you need is to pray daily, not only for your own spiritual growth but also for the Lord to use you to evangelise effectively. You also need to know your Bible. *“Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15). Have a good command of biblical text on salvation to help you in your witnessing. These very words of God will convict sinners to repent unto life.

Dear teen, keep up the good work of knowing your Bible, praying daily and keeping your Quiet Time. In this way, you will grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord. Along the way, keep salvation verses close to your heart. They not only constantly remind you of your salvation but you can use them to witness and even to assure others of their salvation. Memorise them, knowing that you will be using them regularly. Make a start. Speak to someone simply about Christ. Tell that person how Jesus saved you, what He has done for you. Be friendly and sincere. Use gospel tracts prayerfully with courage and sensitivity.

Thought: It is through God’s Word and not man’s words that a person is saved.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, teach me to be a faithful witness to Thy saving grace and use me to win some souls for Your glory. (Proverbs 11:30b)

“tell... what things ye have seen and heard; how that the blind see, the lame walk,...”

DOES LUKE 7:22 MEAN WE FOCUS ON THE POOR?

The general focus of Luke 7:22 is Jesus replying to two disciples of John the Baptist who wanted to know whether Jesus was truly the prophesied Messiah that was to come. Jesus answered their question by telling them of His miracles of healing – the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead raised and lastly the fact that the gospel is preached to the poor. These were clear fulfillments of what the prophets had foretold in verses like Isaiah 61:1. Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would come in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring freedom to those oppressed by sin and evil.

The preaching of the gospel to the poor is the climax of His work. However, the word “poor” should not be narrowly interpreted as those with little or no money. It actually speaks of the lowly and meek in heart, as was prophesied in Isaiah 61:1. This word used by Luke, who was looking back to Isaiah 61:1, encompasses not just the material underclass of society who are suffering and helpless, but also those who have the humble and meek spirit that are seeking after God. God is favourably disposed toward those who are lowly and contrite in spirit.

And so we understand that the gospel is definitely for all – not only for the poor but also for the rich. Yet for many rich people, what the Bible says still holds true. *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God”* (Mark 10:25). However, difficult does not mean impossible as two verses down Jesus continued with these words, *“With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible”* (v.27).

Dear teen, some of us have the mistaken notion that the gospel is for the pitiful poor and not for the snobbish rich. The Bible makes it clear that the gospel is for all for Jesus died for all. The rich need Jesus as much as the poor. All souls are precious to the Lord. Therefore, as the Holy Spirit leads and guides us, let us witness to one and all.

Thought: Christ’s love for the lowly strikes a chord above the miracles.

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I witness to both the lowly and to the wealthy and to all who will hear Thee.

WHY IS MY TESTIMONY IMPORTANT?

Your testimony is a true personal account of how the Lord has saved you and the life of holiness and sanctification that you live. That is important. Together with many other testimonies around the world and through the ages, it is living proof that what the Bible says is true. You have experienced your sins forgiven and are now living a new life in Christ.

Paul's testimony to the Corinthians is that as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, they have been living sacrificially without receiving any support from them. Although it is a rule that those who have received spiritual things should show their appreciation in some way or other, yet, Paul and his team had never asked for any monetary support. They had chosen to forgo their rights. To avoid "*hindering the Gospel of Christ*", they "*suffered all things*" by subjecting themselves to poverty, want, hunger and thirst. (1 Corinthians 9:12).

To deny self, for Christ to increase, and we to decrease, is especially needful for all in full-time service. They must walk circumspectly. They must not succumb to the temptation of seeking more and more financial support, for in doing so they would appear materialistic. Their testimony would be ruined. Both Christians and unbelievers would be stumbled. Paul sets us a fine example of how he treasured a good testimony so that the gospel of Christ would not be hindered.

So you see, dear teen, how important our testimony is to those around us. They may not look very interested in the things we do and say but they are definitely watching. They will be ever ready to point out our faults and failings. Therefore, our walk must match our talk. We need to be long suffering and live a life of self-denial like Paul. Thus, we glorify the Lord when we are made channels of blessings to others as we endure hardness for Him. (2 Timothy 2:3)

Thought: Shine for Jesus by being strong in the Lord.

Prayer: Our Father in heaven, enable me to be a good testimony for Thee wherever I go.

DOES MY TESTIMONY JUST INVOLVE BEING GOOD?

“*Being good*” is perhaps rather vague a term to describe the conduct of a vibrant Christian with a good testimony. Non-believers can be said to be good too when they obey their parents, or perform altruistic acts. For believers, our ‘goodness’ is marked by godliness and Christ-centredness in our life. The Apostle Paul has given us some pointers in 1 Corinthians 9: 12 when he tells us that he is willing to suffer all things that he might not hinder the gospel of Christ.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul further elaborates on how we should conduct ourselves throughout our earthly sojourn here. The word “conversation” refers to one’s conduct, not merely as citizens of the country we are in, but also, as members of the body of Christ, the church, and in all other relations. In our speech, our plans for the future, our dealings with others, our conduct and walk in the church and out of it, all should be done as ones who are worthy children of God.

To clarify, our testimony encompasses the way we speak, the language we use, the way we dress, our style of living, how we spend our leisure and how we make decisions in life. There is a manner of living that gives a good testimony for our Lord and such as the gospel requires. The only way that we can know how, is by studying and obeying God’s Word. If we do so, our manner of living ought to distinguish us from the people of the world, from the godless sinners around us, who seek only to please self, and pursue fame, prestige and wealth as their supreme goal in life.

Dear teen, how is your conduct when no one is watching? Away from the public eye, from our parents, do we still obey them? The mark of a God-fearing and honourable person is when no one is looking, he is still faithfully doing that which is right in God’s sight. Be a person of truth and uprightness. Cultivate the fear of God in our hearts constantly – in the way you talk, in the way you relate to others and the way you live. Shine forth for Jesus!

Thought: We are to be salt and light in this world.

Prayer: O Father, grant me Your abundant grace and unfailing strength that I may constantly persevere to obey You and thus shine forth for You.

CAN'T I EVANGELISE WITHOUT A GOOD TESTIMONY?

Have you heard of the phrase “Actions speak louder than words”? A good testimony is critical if one wants to be effective in preaching the gospel. The way that we live and the way that we conduct ourselves must match the message that we preach. Dear teen, by God’s sustaining Grace, we must walk the talk consistently.

Paul the Apostle, in speaking to the Thessalonians, told them that the gospel that he preached was not only in word but also in power of the Holy Spirit. This accounts for their deep conviction of their sins and their glorious salvation. This was further confirmed by the way Paul and his team conducted themselves in their midst.

Indeed the Thessalonians were witnesses of their good conduct and character. Paul and his missionary team were exemplary in their love, lives of self-denial and godliness (read 1 Thessalonians 2 to know more about Paul’s conduct amongst them) such that the Thessalonians were convinced that the truths they taught were real and true. If this was not so, Paul and his team would be exposed as hypocrites, for indeed how can we preach the forgiveness of sin, if we ourselves are still unrepentantly indulging in sin? The holy life of a Christian affirms the truths of the glorious Gospel shared. Otherwise, our bad or weak testimonies can be real stumbling blocks to others!

Dear teen, we are constantly exhorted to be doers and not hearers only. It is very sad if we hear good preaching and teaching, only to let it go right out the other ear. Take time to think, ponder and meditate on the Word of God deeply and you will glean precious truths and gems from the Scriptures to lead and guide us, as pilgrims, here on earth. Let it transform us into a more Christ-like person that God can use mightily to share the gospel with the people around us.

Thought: He, who meditatively reads the Scriptures, turns words into deeds with God’s enabling.

Prayer: O Father in heaven, help me not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of my mind to live to Thy praise and glory.

DOESN'T MY TESTIMONY GLORIFY MYSELF?

A Christian's testimony gives glory to God. It is God, who in His tender mercy and grace, has effected salvation for him or her, thus it is edifying that the fruit of this salvation brings glory to God. Ephesians 2:8-9 puts it this way, *“For by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”*

A Christian, who has received forgiveness from God, by trusting in the atoning work of Christ, will surely be burdened to share the Gospel and the goodness of God in his or her life. He will probably include how God's miraculous intervention worked in his life through specific events. When giving this testimony, a sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ is always a necessity. Though we can include specific information about how we came to accept Christ as Saviour, those details should not be the focus of the testimony. The focus should be about the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

As we have been studying, a Christian's testimony is not just a verbal account of what has happened, but it must continue to be played out in the life that he lives. When he lives a godly life that reflects Christ, he will be like a bright light shining amidst the darkness of this sin-filled world. He must not hide this light, but boldly proclaims and shows to the people around him that he obeys God in all that he does. He does so not to show how good he is, or to receive the praise of men, but only because he knows that brings pleasure to the God whom he loves. When that happens, he will shine forth brightly for Christ and glorify His Father which is in heaven.

Dear teen, knowing that there is nothing good in ourselves that merits salvation and that it is all God's grace and mercy that has saved us, let us live lives that are pleasing and acceptable in His sight. Let us endeavour to be a God-pleaser, and not men-pleasers. Let us always go forth valiantly to do good works daily to shine forth the glory of our God.

Thought: No sincere and humble Christian lives in vain.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to always be doing good for Thee and so let my light shine forth to glorify Thee.

AREN'T I TOO YOUNG TO THINK OF MY TESTIMONY?

To know Christ and to be saved at a young age is a great privilege. This means that we have our whole lives ahead of us to serve the Lord. The Bible has many wonderful exhortations to young people, for God says, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD" (Psalm 34:11), "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1), and "Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding" (Proverbs 4:1).

In every age God has called youths to do a special work for Him. The Bible is replete with examples of men of faith who started serving the Lord from a very young age. For example God assured young Jeremiah, "Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee" (Jeremiah 1:7-8). We also remember godly men, in their younger years, like Joseph, Daniel, Samuel and King Josiah who served the Lord faithfully, and were able to maintain godly testimonies.

Another example is Timothy, who felt inadequate to be a pastor, at a young age. Paul encouraged him that he was not to be deterred, or allow anyone to look down upon him just because he was young. Instead, he was to do his best to be an example of the believers in every aspect of his life. Church brethren observed that Timothy was spiritually mature though he was relatively young in terms of age.

Dear young teenager, you too can be an example of the believers. It is never too young to start! The moment we are saved, we can start being a good testimony for the Lord. As the Spirit of the Lord fills you and you diligently study His Word, you too can be a godly example to others, ie, in your love for the Lord and those around you, in your forgiving disposition and in the purity of your thoughts.

Thought: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13)

Prayer: Father in heaven, may I not lean to my own understanding but trust Thee with all my heart to use me for Thine glory.

ISN'T ALL THIS TOO LABORIOUS FOR A TEEN?

There have been not a few prophets whom God called at an early age to do a prophet's work. One of them was young Samuel, the first prophet of Israel who God called to bring a message to Eli. Though yet a child, God wanted him to tell Eli that God was going to make an end of his house. Bravely, young Samuel was able to perform the task that God had given him.

As we read yesterday, young Jeremiah was also called to be a prophet to the nations. His objection that he was young was not accepted by the Lord. Jeremiah's youth was not an obstacle in doing what God commanded. Thus, though you are young and well aware of your own weaknesses and inadequacies, such limitations should not hinder you from doing God's will and work. God was angry with Moses even for his modest excuses (Exodus 4:14). When God sends, God will enable. God can make children prophets, and ordain strength out of the mouth of babes and sucklings.

Dear teen, when you compare the work of witnessing for the Lord to the work of the young prophets of old, yours is a simple responsibility. The prophets like Samuel and Jeremiah had to go before the authorities and even kings to speak strong words of condemnation. Their lives would be on the line. Jeremiah was imprisoned by the king who was angry with him. Go then in the confidence that the Lord will be with you.

The world needs to hear the gospel. We have the gospel. We are commanded under the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 to proclaim this good news to those around us. It is not laborious. It is a glorious opportunity and a privilege. Dear teen, do not consider yourself worthless or useless. No matter how weak or slow of speech/inadequate you may think yourself to be, God can use you for His glory.

Thought: God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

Prayer: Our gracious heavenly Father, let me bring the gospel to those outside Your Kingdom faithfully, urgently and happily.

HOW DOES SERVICE DIFFER FROM WORSHIP?

Service and worship are both vital aspects of the life of a Christian. To worship God is to give Him the due acknowledgement of His identity as Creator, Sustainer, Saviour, and Judge, by adoring and exalting Him through certain spiritual activities. This includes worship services in church and dedicating our time for honouring and praising Him through prayer. As evidenced within the phrase itself, worship is actually a form of service to God.

To serve the Lord is to dedicate our time, energy and resources to doing His work for Him. While service to the Lord includes worship, there are many activities which qualify as service to the Lord but cannot be described as worship. For example, welcoming worshippers just before worship service starts, selling lunch coupons, handing out tracts, teaching, or doing kitchen duties. These activities are important as they have spiritual as well as practical value to the church. Done with pure hands and clean hearts (Psalm 24:4), serving the Lord is pleasing and honouring to Him.

God is honoured when we serve and perform tasks which have practical value. In worship, there is less emphasis on the physical and practical aspects but rather, it is more a spiritual exercise whereby the believer sets his heart, mind and soul on the adoration of God alone to the exclusion of everything else.

The focus of worship is on giving God the praise and honour that are rightfully His. That is what we seek to do when we say our prayers and attend worship services. The focus of service is on labouring for Him because we love Him and are grateful to Him. Indeed, it is a privilege to be given the opportunity to repay our Gospel debt to Him in some small way. We do so when we offer our time, money and energy to the various ministries and activities in church.

Therefore, we see that both service and worship are important in the life of a believer. In all that we do, we must be very sure that we will worship the Lord our God, and serve only Him!

Thought: Can I worship God in spirit and in truth if I am not willing to serve Him?

Prayer: Help me, O Lord, to both worship and serve Thee while giving me the wisdom to know the difference between the two.

ISN'T SERVICE MORE IMPORTANT THAN WORSHIP?

The world cannot understand why Christians would spend time, even the best part of their week (Sundays) in church week after week. To them, this is a great sacrifice on the part of worshippers in terms of time, money and energy.

In 1 Samuel 15:22, a question is asked; *“Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD?”* The prophet Samuel was asking a rhetorical question (a question with an obvious answer) to King Saul as a rebuke to Saul's disobedience to God. Saul had disobeyed God's direct command, and had kept some spoils from the conquest of the Amalekites whom he had just defeated. His argument was that these animals which he saved could be used to offer sacrifices to God. Samuel had to correct his wrong thinking, and reminded him that God is far more interested in a person's obedience. It is no use to defy a commandment of God and claim to be doing so in order to worship God.

While there is truth in the unbeliever's observation that worship involves sacrifice on our part, genuine believers who truly love the Lord should know that both to serve and to worship God are great privileges and honours. Christians cannot do without both, and cannot do one without the other! A lack of desire to serve makes our worship hollow and even hypocritical, while a lack of desire to worship the One we serve would mean that we have lost sight of the purpose of our service, and that is to please the God we so love. That was Saul's problem – he tried to worship God on his own terms, and even disobeyed God to achieve it, and that was why he was rejected.

Neither one of worship nor service is more important than the other. In fact, worship is service. We serve God in our worship. Both are equally important because the desire to worship and serve the One true God should exist in the heart of every Christian. God is delighted by the Christian who obeys him, and worships Him in the reverential manner.

Thought: To obey is better than to sacrifice, but joyful, genuine and sincere sacrifice is a sign of obedience.

Prayer: O Lord, give me the wisdom to always do Thy will with proper understanding.

CAN WE EVER SERVE TOO MUCH?

A man labours day and night to support his family, but in so doing he forgets about his wedding anniversary, his daughter’s school concert which he promised to attend and his son’s graduation ceremony. When confronted by his wife, he simply offered two words - *“too busy”*.

Clearly, it is important for fathers to labour to support their families, but the *“job description”* of a father is much more than just to be a provider of material things. He must, among other things, also make a conscious effort to spend time with his loved ones.

This is the same for Christians. We are sometimes so caught up with simply *“doing”* that we are in danger of forgetting whom we are serving. God desires our labouring for Him, but He also desires that we set apart some time dedicated to Him and to spend in communion with Him. This is why Jesus explained to Martha, who was cumbered about much serving that she neglected the best part of Jesus’ visit, which is to spend time with Him and learning His Word (Luke 10:40-42).

It is certainly a privilege and joy to labour and toil for the Lord. When God blesses our service in various ministries with growth and success, it lifts our spirits and encourages us to serve Him with even greater zeal and fervency. However, God desires more than just our service; He desires our time and undivided attention. This means that we should not compromise on time spent with the Lord, be it attending worship services or meditating on His Word during quiet time and prayer. When we find that time spent with the Lord becomes short and hurried because we are distracted by *“unfinished business”* for the Lord, it is time to re-think about our attitude towards serving Him.

Thought: The Christian’s *“job description”* is not to merely labour for the Lord but to also honour Him and commune with Him during his quiet time.

Prayer: O Lord, may You help us never to neglect spending time with You, the one true and living God whom we serve.

WHAT IS VAIN WORSHIP?

Certain religions advocate their followers to have a vegetarian or vegan diet. This is seen as a virtuous practice as it means not indulging in the pleasures of consuming meat, the production of which involves the killing of animals. Some of these vegetarians however, instead of eating meat, substitute the meat in their diet with certain food products that are made to look, feel and taste like meat. While this is consistent with their position of not contributing to the death of animals from a practical standpoint, from a spiritual standpoint it demonstrates that they continue to cling on to their love for meat.

In Mark 7, Jesus rebuked the hypocritical Pharisees who *"pledged"* their wealth to God so that they would have an excuse not to support their parents while still appearing (in the eyes of men) to obey God's 5th commandment. For them, the appearance of holiness was more important than the actual love and possession of it. Likewise, not all who come before the Lord in worship and prayer do so with the right intent. Some do so to sooth their guilty consciences for having committed sin. Others do so because a person *"in their position"* must be seen at the right place and the right time, saying and doing the right things just to appear more *"spiritual"*. Jesus describes this as honouring Him with one's lips and not one's heart.

Our worship is superficial and meaningless if it is not done out of a sincere heart, just like a vegetarian who appears to abstain from meat and yet indulges in mock meat: the change is merely external. The time we spend worshipping God must be a result of having a love for communion with the Lord. To do so for appearance's sake (or just to "clock time") would constitute vain worship. While it is impossible to tell from the external, which believer is worshipping in spirit and in truth, nothing is hidden from our omniscient God, who knows the innermost recesses of men's hearts.

Thought: If I am more concerned about appearing godly than being pious, am I really honouring God or myself?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, give us a heart that truly desires holiness, that our worship may be pleasing in Thy sight.

DO YOU LOVE TO WORSHIP?

The “*Reunion Dinner*” is a very important aspect of the Lunar New Year. Each year on the eve of Lunar New Year, the Chinese make it a point to return to their parents’ homes for a family gathering to share a meal, catch up with each other on what has happened in their lives in the previous year and simply enjoy each other’s company. So significant is this event for the Chinese that returning to see their parents for reunion dinner constitutes the greatest mass movement of people in the world, and they do so out of a deep yearning for communion with their loved ones whom they love and miss very much.

Christians all around the world are given the tremendous privilege of having close communion with the God who saved them from an eternity in hell and gave them a future in heaven to look forward to. They do not need to save up and queue for hours for travel tickets just to have a reunion with the Heavenly Father because Christ Jesus removed the barrier between sinful man and their Creator through His death on the cross. How wonderful it would be if people around the world could reunite with their parents at the blink of an eye! But this is exactly what worship means for believers - to be able to spend time with God, to honour and to behold the beauty and wonder of God in awe through worship and prayer at any time wherever we may be. That was the consistent cry of David in many of the Psalms that he wrote, for he was a man after God’s own heart, and continually desired to just dwell in the house of the Lord and worship Him forever.

Romans 8:15 tells us of the intimate relationship that all Christians have with God, whereby they can call Him “*Abba*” or Father. If even mere cultural tradition can motivate a certain race of people to reunite with their families once a year out of love and respect for their parents, then how much more should Christians seek out their loving and merciful Father and dwell in His house not just once a year but many times each day through worship and prayer?

Thought: To dwell in the house of the Lord is to have communion with Him through worship and prayer.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, teach us how we ought to worship Thee, and help us to always look to Thee with love and reverence.

CAN WORSHIP EVER BE WRONG?

The words of the passage taken from Amos 5:21-23 shows clearly that God, who is holy, expects to be worshipped in a reverential way that is honouring and pleasing to Him. He deplores false worship. It is all too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that whatever we do in worship would be acceptable to God if it is done out of love and sincerity. Likewise, it is foolish to assume that God is pleased with us approaching Him irreverently just because what we are doing seems acceptable according to our modern cultural norms.

Sincerity can be wrong and love misplaced if not guided by biblical principles. In fact, our God is a consuming fire and instead of pleasing Him, we can expect to incur His disapproval or even wrath if we are not careful with the way we approach Him. This is something which two of Aaron's sons named Nadab and Abihu sadly found out to their own destruction. In Numbers 3:4, they offered "*strange fire*" before the Lord and died as a result. This is because the fire that they offered was deemed to be unholy. They had displeased the Lord through their failure to strictly follow God's instructions pertaining to worship. This shows that not only is worship important to God, the manner in which we worship God is just as important to Him.

We sometimes think of God as someone who is just like our best friend. We think we can be casual about the way we treat Him because He loves us and will disregard the few little liberties we take in the manner with which we come to Him in worship and prayer. While it is not wrong to regard Jesus as a friend whom we can always trust, He is far more than that. He is also our Creator and not a mere creature. He is Lord and not just a leader. He is our Saviour and not just someone who did us a favour. We must understand that He is infinitely different from all the other creatures under His charge and the only way we should approach Him, is the way He has shown us according to His Word.

Thought: Do I allow the things of the world to occupy and dominate my mind when I am spending time with God?

Prayer: O God, teach us to fear Thee, not with the fear of heathens, but with reverential fear as Thy blood-bought children.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BLESS THE LORD?

As born again believers, we are the most blessed people in the world because our sins have been forgiven and we are promised eternal life in heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Here we can see that salvation is the greatest blessing that anyone can have, and the blessing of salvation can be likened to a gift which is of infinite value yet freely available to all who earnestly seek and accept it.

God not only blesses His people abundantly with all things great and small, He also showers blessings on the saved and unsaved, makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust alike through His common grace (Matthew 5:45). However, the word blessing in today's reading refers not to bestowing favour or gifts graciously but to give praise, seeing that we cannot give to God anything that does not already belong to Him. Rather, we render due praise to God, the Giver of all good gifts and blessings.

The original Hebrew word for 'bless' has the root idea of kneeling. That is the posture that we would adopt before Him as we bow before Him in humble adoration. When we 'bless' God, we are not actually imparting anything to Him. Rather, we are expressing our adoration and praise to God for all that He has done for us.

To praise is not just to speak well of but also to exalt. We bless the Lord by exalting Him to others whenever the opportunity arises. We bless His holy name during worship and prayer. We exalt Him in our testimony to others not just verbally but also by the way we live our lives. We praise God for being the loving and merciful yet righteous God that He is, and in so doing, we are blessing the Lord and His holy name.

Thought: We remember (are grateful to) the Lord by blessing Him who blesses us freely and abundantly.

Prayer: O Lord, I bless Thee from the depths of my soul because Thou has crowned me with lovingkindness and tender mercies.

SHOULD I WORSHIP ONLY IN SECRET?

It is important to spend time alone with God through prayer and worship in a conducive environment so that our relationship with God can be strengthened. Indeed Matthew 6:6 tells us to pray to the Father in secret, therefore we know that there is a biblical injunction to worship God in private. However, does this mean that we only need to worship by ourselves and not with other believers?

Definitely not! Hebrews 10:24-25 says, *“And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”* This means that believers must not forsake fellowship with each other and should seize every opportunity to gather together as people of a common faith. When believers come together, they should participate in spiritual activities together, and this includes corporate worship. In so doing, they are able to encourage each other and strengthen each other in the faith. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus encouraged the disciples to spend private moments to pray and worship the Lord, but this is certainly not to be then construed as an instruction to only worship in secret and thus forsake corporate worship. In short, we must do both.

Time spent alone with the Lord is sweet and precious, but so is time spent with other people of the same faith. Being spiritually alive in a sinful world filled with people who are spiritually dead, should cause us to look forward to gathering with others who are also spiritually alive. It is indeed a privilege and pleasure to be able to meet other Christians and encourage each other in the faith, to labour together with them for the Lord and to help one another in practical ways as members of the same family should. However, all these activities should be centred on the Living God who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light. What better way to honour Him, than to worship Him as one body in Christ.

Thought: It pleases God that I devote my time to Him individually as His child, and with other believers as part of His eternal family.

Prayer: O Lord, may Thy Spirit draw all thy people unto thee that we may worship thee as one body in Christ.

WHY MUST THERE BE UNITY IN WORSHIP?

Paul says in Romans 12:5 that, *“So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another”*. This was to emphasise the fact that there must be unity in diversity within God’s family. This means to say that God meant for Christians from different backgrounds with different gifts and abilities to labour together for the Lord.

However, one of the problems faced by the members of the church in Corinth was that so much importance was placed on certain spiritual gifts such as the speaking of tongues (real languages) that everyone wanted to be able to do so. The Apostle Paul had to correct them. He taught them that the inappropriate use of spiritual gifts was the cause of disunity and chaos in church. Referring to the speaking of tongues in particular, he cautioned the use of this gift firstly because without interpretation only the speaker himself understood what was said when nobody else did (hence edifying only the speaker), and secondly, because it was used by the speaker to make himself appear spiritually superior. Finally, this was done for the tongue-speaker’s profit rather than for the edification of others. In 1 Corinthians 14:16, he asked how others could possibly be built up spiritually if only the speaker alone understood the prayers.

When spiritual activities are done out of pride or for selfish reasons, the consequences would be no different from that of the inappropriate use of spiritual gifts in the church of Corinth in Paul’s day - the spiritual well-being of the church suffers. Therefore, every believer must be aware that in serving the Lord, no particular gift is more important than another. Every believer has something different to offer in his labour for the Lord, but every believer must work in unity with others as part of a team much like the way different parts of the body work together. Only then can there be unity in worship which God is pleased with, and will result in healthy spiritual growth for the church.

Thought: God made us unique so that we can put our different abilities to good use together for His glory.

Prayer: O Lord, remind us daily that our gifts and talents come from You alone, that we may not fall into the sin of pride.

HOW IMPORTANT IS HOLINESS IN SERVICE?

The Bible says that we are the temple of God, and His Spirit dwells within us (1 Corinthians 3:16). This being the case, how could God possibly be pleased with us and our service in His name if we defile ourselves with sinful thoughts or acts? In the early days of the New Testament Church, two characters by the names of Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead by the Holy Spirit for lying. God did so in order to show the church how serious sin is, and that it must not be tolerated. In giving such a strong punishment in this incident, the church would be quick to realise the importance of holiness in serving the Lord.

This is not restricted to the New Testament as we also see God’s holy standards in passages such as Psalm 51. This was a psalm written by David in repentance for his sin of adultery and murder, but it also teaches that personal sanctification (holiness) is extremely important if we are to serve the Lord effectively. He wrote, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me”* (Psalms 51:10) followed by *“Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee”* (Psalms 51:13) because he realised that he could not be a good witness for God if he himself had unconfessed sins and wilfully persisted in his unrepentant ways. Likewise, the high priest would be struck dead instantly if he would regard any iniquity in his heart while performing his duties in the Holy of Holies in Old Testament times. He had to first confess his sins and offer a sin offering to God before he could perform his Levitical duties.

Spiritual work acceptable to God requires that the believer performing it first be holy and pure inwardly before the actual act of doing it. Hence, we must not only repent of all known sins in preparation for service, we must also live lives which are patterned after our Lord Jesus Christ in holiness every day in order to become clean vessels, fit for the Master’s use.

Thought: We are serving a God who sees and knows everything and nothing can be hidden from Him.

Prayer: If thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? (Psalm 130:3) Thank You for being a merciful God.

WHAT IF I'M NOT AS GOOD AS OTHERS IN SERVING?

In our competitive society it is easy to become influenced by the world's values so much so that we bring some of it into our spiritual life as well. Because we have to strive to be “better” than others in school and at our workplaces to satisfy our teachers and bosses, we think that we can please God the same way. This is perhaps the reason we sometimes wonder if we are not as “good” compared with others in our service for the Lord.

When God instructed Samuel to select a successor for Saul from among the sons of a man named Jesse, Samuel wrongly assumed that Eliab was God's choice because of his outward appearance. However we see in 1 Samuel 16:7 that God sees things very differently. Indeed, “*the LORD looketh on the heart.*” God does not size up people the same way the world does. Though externals are not unimportant, God's measure of a man's quality of service lies more in the faithfulness with which a believer performs certain tasks rather than the magnitude, complexity, or even the results of the tasks.

Because no man can see a person's inward level of faithfulness, asking the question stated as today's title can be dangerous as we are ill-equipped to decide whether what we are doing is better or not as good compared with others. Rather, Romans 12 reminds us that every one in the body of Christ will have differing gifts. These are abilities and talents that God gives to man, and it is not for man to then use it to show off or to look down on others who do not have the same ability as him. Instead, every Christian must exercise their gifts to the best of their ability, knowing that everyone has their own unique role to play in the body of Christ. What is important is not how ‘good’ we are compared to others, but how good you are in the sight of God. If we sincerely present our lives to God as a living sacrifice, holy and separate from the world, God will certainly accept our cheerful service.

Thought: Even the widow could please Jesus by giving God her two mite's worth, but whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Prayer: O Lord help us to understand that true wisdom is seeing things not from man's perspective but from Yours.

HOW DO I KNOW WHICH AREA TO SERVE IN?

We certainly cannot approach the issue of which area to serve in with a heart and mind clouded by sin and distracted by the noise of the world outside. God desires for us to *"tune in"* to the still small voice of His Spirit. This is where praying and meditating on His Word and His will for our lives will provide us with guidance. Just as importantly, we are to honestly ask ourselves what spiritual gifts the Lord has given us (every believer has at least one) and what our strengths and weaknesses are as this will exert a great influence in deciding our area of service. If, for example, a person has good language skills and has the gift of being able to teach God's Word simply and clearly then he should consider serving in a teaching ministry instead of ministries involving music, audio-visuals or information technology for which he has no special applicable skills. Likewise, a musically inclined person gifted with a wonderful voice but poor mathematical abilities would do better in the church choir instead of handling accounts.

Sometimes, it may not even be a particular ministry that God can use us in but rather in the way we interact with others. Barnabas, for example, was great at encouraging others. Perhaps there are those who are good at comforting others, counselling them or just simply lending a listening ear for others to confide in. Passages like Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 provide a useful list of some of the spiritual gifts that God may give to believers for the edification of the church. Some of them, like the gift of tongues or healing and miracle workings have already ceased (1 Corinthians 13:8), while others continue to be important and present in the church today.

As a young believer, the myriad of options for service may appear daunting. However what is important is that we have a willing heart and desire to learn. We can begin by availing ourselves to small areas of service, and certainly as you seek the Lord, He will show you where you are best suited to serve Him.

Thought: Jesus said that He came to give us an abundant life. Undoubtedly this includes the privilege and blessing of godly service.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, still our hearts that we will know that You are God and know where we can best serve You.

WHAT ATTITUDES MUST I HAVE IN SERVICE?

As fellow servants of the Lord, as fellow soldiers in the army of Christ, it would seem logical to assume that everyone gets along well with one another. After all, we are serving the same master, fighting against the same enemy, and striving towards a common goal, right? Sadly this is not always the case. There are people who claim to be serving the Lord, but yet they do so with ulterior motives, seeking to advance only their personal agendas. When they do so, they disrupt the unity of the fellowship, and are serving self and not God.

Romans 12:9-11 gives us a very helpful guideline as to what sort of attitudes we must have when we serve together with others. Verse 9 speaks of the sacrificial agape love for God that we must exhibit. It must be in sincerity and truth, and without any dissimulation or hypocrisy. This is the foundational motivation that guides all our service. Our desires must be righteous, always be for things which are morally excellent and good, and we must be quick to reject and hate anything that is evil. The love in verse 10 speaks more of the brotherly (phileo) love that we must have, in terms of our affection and relationship one with another. We must care for the people that we are serving together with, and learn to respect them as fellow Christians. Verse 11 then speaks of our attitude to the work itself, that we must never be slothful, but be fervent in our spirit, knowing that we are serving the Lord. Just like the Apostle Paul, we should focus on labouring for God's glory as the singular objective of our service rather than for personal recognition or prestige.

If we are able to have all these attitudes in our service, surely we will be a great encouragement to the people around us, and our service will definitely edify and not stumble. We will contribute to the unity of peace and not detract from it. May we all pray that as we serve, the Lord will teach us to love Him, love others, and love the work that is set before us.

Thought: Do I rejoice that others are partaking in the same joy and privilege of serving God as I am?

Prayer: Father of Lights, teach me to appreciate my co-labourers in Christ for the harvest is truly great but labourers few.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONFLICTS WITH BRETHREN?

In any group or organisation in society, as long as there is more than one person involved, there will be conflict. Why do conflicts arise? They have their origins in a sinful heart. Before the fall of Man, Adam and Eve lived in harmony with each other. Immediately after they fell into sin, they turned against each other, with Adam pointing an accusing finger at Eve to blame her for his sin. Blaming others for your sin, selfishness that only demands one's own way, pride that refuses to listen to the opinion of others', lack of love towards others and other sinful behaviour are just some of the causes of conflict. Sadly, the church is not immune from such conflict. As long as we are in this fleshly body, the motions of sin will threaten to cause us to fall when we are not careful.

This is not what God desires of His people. In 1 Corinthians 12:25, Paul notes that there really should not be any *“schism in the body”*, referring to division or disunion within the church. How can we let our flesh tear down that which had been bought by so great a price, even the blood of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ? Paul goes on to say that God wants us to *“have the same care one for another”*, showing love to one another and not discriminating against the seemingly *“weaker”* people in the church. He gives more honour to *“that part which lacked”* (1 Corinthians 12:24), showing us that we should treat all church members similarly and not discriminate against those we judge to be weaker.

So what if you have conflicts with brethren? First of all, you need to examine your heart and decipher the true instigating factor for the conflict. As seen above, most conflicts arise from a sinful heart. Has your pride or lack of love led to the conflict between you and your brethren? If it has, repent and be the first to seek forgiveness from the other party. Conflict between church members is one tool that Satan can use to disrupt and distract the church from fulfilling her goal of propagating the Gospel. We should not give any chance to the enemy to do so. If on the other hand, you realise that the conflict is due to doctrinal issues, it will be wise to involve your church leaders for guidance and advice.

Thought: Can I ever say that I am entirely faultless in any conflict that I am involved in?

Prayer: Help me to flee conflicts with my fellow church members, Lord, and instead learn to love them as You do.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE OF ONE ACCORD?

After the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the New Testament church was filled with fervency for the Lord and His work. They were of *“one accord”*, meaning to be of one mind, having one united desire to glorify God. First of all, they shared the same experience of the transforming power of the Gospel in their lives and they all witnessed the works of the Holy Spirit, such as the speaking of tongues at Pentecost and *“many wonders and signs”* done by the Apostles (Acts 2:43). Secondly, they were of one mind in terms of their beliefs and doctrines (Acts 2:44) as they had the privilege of receiving direct instruction and teaching from the Apostles.

They also shared all their worldly goods (Acts 2:45) such that material possessions could not serve as a dividing factor. They shared their days together as well, *“continuing daily with one accord in the temple”*, enjoying one another’s company and fellowship. They were full of Christian joy and possessed *“singleness of heart”* without hypocrisy towards one another. Lastly, they were like-minded in their goals. They wanted to praise God daily in the temple and worked hard to evangelise to unbelievers. Unbelievers could see Christlikeness in their lives as Acts 2:47 attests that they had *“favour with all the people”*. They also preached the gospel to unbelievers, resulting in the addition of new members to the church on a daily basis.

Because of man’s sin, the church today has splintered into different denominations with different beliefs, whereby believers are no longer of *“one accord”*. Neo-evangelism thinks that by tolerating the wrong doctrines of other believers and accepting false teachings for the sake of love and a false unity, the church can become one again. However, from the example of the New Testament church in Acts, we know that this cannot be true. If we are not of the same mind in our beliefs, how can we truly be of *“one accord”*? This will only lead us to compromise and have a weak stand for Christ. We should unite with like-minded Christians and spur one another on in our Christian walk, looking forward to the day when the true Church of Christ is revealed at the end of the world.

Thought: How do you reconcile biblical separation and Christian unity?

Prayer: O Lord, preserve Thy church so that we will be of *“one accord”*.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CHRISTIAN UNITY?

John 17 records Christ's prayer and shows us how Christ is indeed our intercessor while He was on earth and now in Heaven, as He mediates for us at the throne of God our Father. He prays for the believers, that they *“all may be one”* (verse 21). The unity He wants His believers to achieve is of the purest kind. He wants them to be united in the same manner as He and His Heavenly Father are united. Two distinct Persons yet united as One and True God, singular in the aim to glorify the Godhead, singular in drawing all those who are His to Himself.

Christ says that if His followers are united as one, they will be united to Him as well, all being partakers of His grace and following His teachings. This unity will then show the rest of the world that Christ is indeed the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. In this we see the importance of Christian unity. Through our oneness, we exhibit to the world the one unified message of the gospel that all who see and hear may glorify God and believe in Jesus as our Saviour.

Christian disunity is definitely one of the factors why unbelievers find it difficult to accept the gospel. We claim to believe in the same God but have different denominations and practices. We preach love but have infightings and quarrels. This type of misrepresentation of Christianity does not show forth the agape love of God and does not set us apart as God's children. We should seek to fellowship with like-minded brethren who hold fast to the same doctrines, and this can include Christians of different denominations. Yet this does not mean that we compromise on doctrines for the sake of unity. If we do have to separate from another church because of false teachings, we should explain patiently the reasons of doing so to our unbelieving friends, and not allow the differences in doctrine to result in ugly contentious arguments. We should focus on what the Bible says and not attack the character of the people in the church involved, and above all, exhibit the love of God in all that we do.

Thought: Have you encountered unbelieving friends who have been turned off by the lack of unity in Christian churches? What did you say to them?

Prayer: Dear Lord, may Your people truly be as one as the Father and Son are one.

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP?

If Christians sit down for a meal or play a ball game together, is that fellowship? Some people think that as long as Christians spend time together, no matter how they spend that time, they are having fellowship. However, that would make us no different from secular groups who also spend time together, sometimes even carrying out the same activities. John shows us in his epistle that Christian fellowship should be so much more.

John and the apostles had spent time with Jesus and John attests to this in verse 1-2: *“we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; for the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness”*. They had spent time with Jesus intimately, learning and witnessing firsthand from Him the Gospel. They heard His teachings on holy living and promises of eternal life and spiritual rewards. They had the privilege of experiencing true Christian fellowship with the Son of God Himself while He was physically here on earth. Now they wanted to share what they experienced and learnt with the rest of the believers. Through the preaching of the gospel, new converts would be able to experience that same close fellowship with the apostles, with each other, and most importantly, with God.

True Christian fellowship is, above all, spiritual in nature. It is founded upon the common gospel that we believe in, and it continues on through mutual spiritual encouragement. The result of it has to be that believers are drawn closer to one another and to God through the bonds of Christ. So let us seek to show love and concern to our fellow believers when we meet up with them. This include asking them about their lives and prayer needs, speaking an encouraging word or offering a Bible verse to comfort and reminding one another to hold fast to our faith and to look forward to Christ’s imminent return. Just as John did, let our fellowship with God motivate us to desire greater fellowship with our brethren. Conversely, through our fellowship, let us aim to spur one another on to greater fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thought: Have you been participating in true Christian fellowship? Do not wait for others to show care towards you. Make the first move.

Prayer: Lord, help me to grow in fellowship with Thee and with my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

HOW CLOSE CAN CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP BE?

The New Testament church grew in number and fervency after Pentecost. They practically lived together as a church, continuing “*stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.*” They listened to God’s Word together from the apostles. They broke bread, meaning they partook of Holy Communion, together. They prayed together. They were very close, spending their waking hours growing together in the Lord.

They were like a big family, coming together with the common purpose of living out their Christian faith. That is how we should view our fellow believers. Christ taught how those who believed in Him were part of His family. In Matthew 12:50, Christ said, “*For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.*” Hebrews 2:11 also affirms this, “*For both He that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause He is not ashamed to call them brethren*”.

Christian fellowship should be close, like that of a family as we are all bought by the same blood of Christ. Once we accept Christ, we are no longer part of the world but are now called “*children of light*” (John 12:36). We will never find true fellowship with those who are still in darkness. They will not understand our beliefs and goals. Although we still befriend them and evangelise to them, the depth of friendship will never be as deep as that between two fellow believers. Therefore, seek Christian fellowship. It is more profitable to pursue friendships with fellow believers than with others who are still outside God’s kingdom. Of course, we still need to evangelise to our non-believing friends but it is definitely more enriching to spend time with our Christian brothers and sisters than to engage in worldly activities with our non-Christian friends. In fact, your best friends should be your fellow believers. Are they?

Thought: How can we be good brothers and sisters in Christ to our fellow believers?

Prayer: Lord, help me to desire good Christian fellowship and grant me discernment in choosing who I spend time with.

IS WORSHIP MORE IMPORTANT THAN FELLOWSHIP?

Some Christians just come to church for Sunday morning service and then quickly disappear after that without speaking to anyone. They feel that there is no need to go out of their way to have fellowship with the other church members. They think that only their relationship with God is important, and that worship is far more important than fellowship. As a result, they are rather alienated from the rest of the people in church. They may be in that same church for 5, 10 or even 20 years, and yet they do not know more than a handful of people there.

Hebrews 13:16 tells a different story. It starts off with verse 15 which speaks of worshipping God with the *"sacrifice of praise"* which we would offer during our services on the Lord's Day. However, it does not stop there. It goes on to say that praising God is only but one way to worship Him. God also desires us to *"do good and to communicate"*, meaning to remember to do good works and to fellowship with other believers. These acts are also forms of worship to God as God views them as sacrifices to Him as well. God is pleased when His children fellowship with one another, for in so doing they edify one another, and are mutually built up in the faith. It glorifies Him as our Saviour who purchased us with His blood. It also honours Him as our Heavenly Father who looks after His children.

Therefore, we should not view worship and fellowship as separate and place one above the other in priority. We should view fellowship as worship to God as well as it honours and pleases Him. We should not shy away from having fellowship with other fellow believers and give the excuse that God only wants us to serve Him. Fellowship is a vital component of the Christian life and will be enjoyed not only on earth but in Heaven where we will all worship God together.

Thought: What would happen to the church if everyone has the attitude of the Christians mentioned in the first paragraph?

Prayer: Lord, help me to see how fellowship is an act of worship to Thee as well.

HOW IMPORTANT IS CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP?

Once you accept Christ as your Saviour, you become a child of God, a child of light (Ephesians 5:8). Suddenly, you realise that you are at odds with the world. You are no longer interested in the old activities that you used to enjoy like partying, gaming or listening to rock music. Your life goals have changed such that you no longer want to pursue a career just for money but seek to find out God’s will for your life. You also start to realise that you are enjoying less and less the company of your non-Christian friends. Indeed, *“what communion hath light with darkness?”* (2 Corinthians 6:14). You want to find people who you can talk to about God and your Christian walk.

Paul, the faithful Apostle and man of God, also felt this very basic need for Christian fellowship. He wrote earnestly to the Romans how he prayed earnestly that the will of God would be for him to go to them, for he longed to see them. This was by no means just a social visit, but it was so that he could *“impart unto [them] some spiritual gift”* to establish and build them up in their faith (Romans 1:11). We see in the next verse that this edification was not one-sided. Paul was also eager to be comforted and encouraged by the Romans as well, and this was because of the *“mutual faith”* they shared. Indeed this is a beautiful picture of what fellowship really ought to be about.

Every Christian needs fellowship, from the newly born again believer to the mature church leader. The testimony of a young Christian can remind more mature Christians of the marvellous grace and love of our Saviour who died for us. A recounting of God’s deliverance from a trial whether big or small encourages other suffering believers to persevere amidst their afflictions. A pastor’s prayer for believers in need exhorts and lifts their faith. In this world, we can only find true kinship in our fellow believers. We should seek to mutually build one another up each time we meet. Always try to share with other believers about something God has taught you or helped you with in the past week.

Thought: Do you actively try to edify and encourage fellow believers?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for the fellowship I can share with Your children. Help me to learn how precious it is and to truly treasure it.

WHAT IF I PREFER NOT TO FELLOWSHIP?

Solomon says in Ecclesiastes, *“Woe to him that is alone”* and that is particularly true for a Christian. However, some Christians may prefer not to fellowship. Perhaps they prefer to be alone or because of pride, feel that they do not need any help from other believers. They may not see the importance of fellowship and therefore, fail to see the need to fellowship with other Christians.

Solomon writes of how important it is to have a companion or friend beside you. He says that *“two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour”*. This *“labour”* is service to each other, doing good deeds toward each other and showing concern for each other. It is definitely *“more blessed to give than to receive”* (Acts 20:35) and they are rewarded with the joy of helping another and the gratitude of their friend who will likewise return the kindness. In contrast, someone who is alone does not have anyone to show concern for and does not benefit from giving and serving.

Solomon goes on to explain that two people can help each other when one of them is weak. If one of them falls, the other will *“lift up his fellow”*. Solomon also speaks of companionship in verse 11 and how two people can keep each other warm. Two are also stronger than one when withstanding any enemies.

The narrow way is a difficult path to tread and God does not mean for us to travel it alone. If we have companions as we walk the narrow way, we can help lift one another up if we fall. For example, if a Christian falls into sin, his Christian friends can rebuke him with God’s Word and pray for him, bringing him to repentance and back to God. Christians also keep one another *“warm”* with love and concern for one another. If an enemy attacks, whether it is from Satan or false teachers, Christians can support one another through God’s Word and prayer to withstand the attacks. Imagine if the believer is alone. No matter how strong he may be, he will fall and be overcome more easily than if he had the support of fellow believers.

Thought: Can you think of any experiences you have which affirm Solomon’s statement that *“two are better than one”*?

Prayer: Lord, help me to be a good companion to my Christian friends.

WHO AM I ALLOWED TO FELLOWSHIP WITH?

Many prominent Christian leaders who once held fast to fundamentalism have fallen away and turned around to support neo-evangelism and ecumenism. Examples would be Billy Graham and Jack Van Impe who said, “Till I die I will proclaim nothing but love for all my brothers and sisters in Christ, my Catholic brothers and sisters, Protestant brothers and sisters... I don’t care what label you are.” They push for Christian unity at any cost, trivialising doctrine and truth, whilst claiming that Jesus prayed for such unity in John 17. They go so far as to reject Christ as the only way to Heaven (John 14:6) and claim that their “*brethren*” of other religions will be saved too because of their faith in their gods. They conveniently leave out that in John 17, Christ prayed that although the world hates His people as they are “*not of the world*”, He does not ask for them to be removed from the world but that the Father “*sanctify them through [His] truth*”.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul calls on the Corinthian believers to not be “*unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?*” Believers in Jesus Christ are poles apart from non-believers. They are two ends of the spectrum. They can never have true fellowship with one another.

Therefore, we must reject the ecumenical movement. If Christians think they can worship together with other religions, then every basic fundamental of their faith must be brushed under the carpet and ignored. We are Christians, followers of Christ and we believe that He is the only Way to salvation. Embracing other faiths is to reject this truth. Yes, we still have non-Christian friends and we hope to lead them to Christ but to fellowship with them on a deeper, spiritual level or to think that we can have any ecclesiastical relationship with them, would mean denying our very faith and in effect, denying Christ Himself.

Thought: What happens when a believer becomes unequally yoked with unbelievers?

Prayer: Lord, help me to seek true fellowship with Thy people. Help me never to compromise or deny my faith in Thee by being unequally yoked.

HOW IS GIVING PART OF SERVING GOD?

Chapter 12 opens with a plea from the Apostle Paul to present all of our selves as a living sacrifice to God which is our reasonable service. Part of being a living sacrifice is to use our gifts, talents and resources for the Lord, rather than keeping them for ourselves.

Paul writes in verse 8 of different gifts and how they should be exercised in the ministry, the distribution of money being one of them. In the early church, in Acts, one of the responsibilities of the deacons was to distribute alms to the poor and needy in the church. Here, they were commanded to do so with honesty and fairness.

God has promised to take care of our daily needs, and through the act of giving and distribution, we show our love for God and to fellow believers. In turn, the recipients glorify God for His provision by means of those who give; and are also encouraged by the love shown toward them by fellow believers. God is glorified in your life and theirs. This is Christianity in action. Indeed this is what service is all about.

Perhaps whatever you have, be it an allowance from your parents or earnings from a part-time job, may not seem much. You may think that your talents and gifts seem few. Yet consider the widow and her two mites and her commendation from Christ. She had so little yet she gave her all. Consider the young boy with 5 loaves and 2 small fishes. What if he had kept what little he had to himself? Service is what we, as servants of our heavenly Master can do for Him. Christ has made the ultimate sacrifice for you. Returning a portion of your resources, time and talents for His work and to His glory are not unreasonable. Or do you expect your Heavenly Master to take care of you, provide for your every need and even prosper you, but you will do nothing in return?

Thought: What does it mean to be a living sacrifice?

Prayer: O Lord, may all that I am and all that I have be used in Your service for Your glory and Yours alone.

WHY DO WE GIVE ANONYMOUSLY?

Christ warns against giving in order to be seen by others. There will be no heavenly reward for such giving. The scribes and Pharisees had all the outward forms of religion but their hearts were not right with God. They were hypocrites. When they gave, they loved to sound a trumpet and have great fanfare to proclaim how great their works were. Their reward was just the fleeting praise of men, which in Christ's estimation and eternity in view – was no reward at all.

Whilst it is easy for us to criticise and judge them, we realise that we are not too different at all. So much of our self-worth is based on people's opinion of us, be it friends, family, people in church, teachers and the world at large. Who does not want to look good and be well regarded? We are like the scribes and Pharisees. We are just as prone to do things in order to cultivate a certain image and gain the praise of others. This may even be unconscious. While one might not seek after the praise of others, nevertheless, it is all too easy for praise and flattery to puff us up. Sin can very easily creep into a heart with the right motive. Service can become a source of pride, exercised for self-glory or due to the fear of men. Such service is hypocritical and displeasing to God, and will not be rewarded by Him.

We live in an ever increasingly image conscious society, where self-branding and promotion are the norm and encouraged. All Christians need to be vigilant against such vanity in our service of God. If we truly desire to do good from a pure motive, it does not matter at all whether anyone sees it or not. Giving anonymously helps keep our hearts pure and sincere such that our sole concern is and remains that God is glorified. We give our alms (tithes and offerings) in secret so that there is no opportunity for us to receive any glory or be tempted to show off. Our service and faith must be genuine, and such faith has no place for self.

Thought: Are there areas of your service that are hypocritical? Why do you choose to serve in some areas and not others?

Prayer: Christ must increase, I must decrease.

HOW ARE TITHES DIFFERENT FROM OFFERINGS?

TITHES are the tenth of any of our increase, set apart for the Lord and thus must be returned to Him. In the Old Testament, tithes were for the Levites and priests who had no inheritance, unlike the other tribes (Numbers 18:23-24). In Nehemiah, when the Levites were not given their portion, they had no choice but to abandon God's work and find work in the field to earn a living (Nehemiah 13:10). Similarly, today, tithes are for a local church's general fund, to provide for full-time staff and God's work in the local church and beyond.

OFFERINGS are anything in addition to our tithes, and are not mandatory. These can be thank offerings that believers give to specific ministries and individuals both within and without the local church.

Does it matter how much we tithe or where we tithe to? Would you rob God? (Malachi 3:8) Tithes should go to the local church a believer worships in. This is the church wherein the believer is ministered to and is blessed. If worshippers, even in a wealthy church do not tithe to the general fund, choosing instead missions or specific ministries in the church, God's labourers and certain ministries would be neglected. God is sovereign and has appointed leaders in the church such as the pastors, elders and deacons. Therefore, we should trust and submit to them. There are regular congregational meetings and elections where leaders are called to account as to how they have used God's funds.

If we have been blessed by, or have a burden for a particular ministry or individual within or without the local church, we can express our thanksgiving and supply their need or encourage them in the form of an offering.

We serve a precise and Holy God and should worship Him with knowledge and understanding, and not in ignorance.

Thought: To obey is better than sacrifice.

Prayer: LORD, may my tithes and offerings be according to Your Word and acceptable and pleasing unto You.

HOW WILLING ARE YOU TO GIVE TO OTHERS?

An example of *"distributing to the necessity of saints"* was the church in Jerusalem who voluntarily sold their possessions and goods for distribution to the needy (Acts 2:44-45). As Christ said, there will always be the poor amongst us (Mark 14:7). This is the case, even in an affluent society and church. There are and will be saints who are in need.

Hospitality is the act of hosting both friends and strangers with kindness and generosity, expecting nothing in return. Further, to be *"given"* to hospitality goes beyond being ready to be hospitable, but involves, pursuing after it – seeking out opportunities to exercise it.

At the heart of such giving is charity and great love because believers share a common and precious bond in the Lord. We are one family in Him, and thus so are our possessions. It is hence inconceivable not to give part of what we have to supply the needs of another because the immeasurable love of God constrains us.

Your willingness to give speaks of how much brotherly love you have for fellow believers, and testifies of the love of Christ in you. How you view all that you have will also affect how willing you are to give to the needs of others. Are you just a steward, or an owner with rights and entitlements? Do you hold them in an open palm – to be freely given and used for believers in need and for the glory of God? Or hold on to them in a tight-fisted manner, hidden away?

Giving does not begin and end with monetary offerings. It includes our time, talents, home, possessions for which we should be equally generous and quick to offer to any believer in need. We should also be on the lookout for newcomers – strangers in our church, to exercise hospitality and making them feel welcome and cared for.

Thought: Do you think, "I have given enough", or "how can I give or do more?"

Prayer: Lord, let me seek out opportunities to do good to all, with all that I have been entrusted with.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I GIVE BACK TO GOD?

God has bought us with the life of His only begotten Son – Jesus Christ. Thus, to glorify God in your body and your spirit is to be ever ready to give. We should give as often as we can. It reminds us that we belong to God and it glorifies Him.

As the purpose of tithes is to provide for the local church, giving of our tithes should be regular, planned and not haphazard. Whilst it may be more convenient to give once a month or fortnightly, setting aside a portion weekly reminds us to be thankful to our Heavenly Father, and that we do not come to worship Him on Sunday empty-handed. That was the pattern set for us in the early church, as Paul gave instruction to the church at Corinth to make a collection on the first day of the week – the Lord’s Day. They were to make such a regular collection in accordance to how God had prospered them. They were to do so cheerfully, and not grudgingly out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). This was part of their worship and service to God, for in so giving they were helping the needy Christians in Jerusalem, and encouraged them through their generosity.

Regular tithing takes discipline and preparation. Sometimes, you may realise that you do not have enough at the last minute. You may casually think to yourself ‘Oh well, I’ll make it up next week’. However, this shows a lack of reverence for God. We do not seem to care that we have forgotten to prepare a gift for God, and yet, we impatiently expect God to provide for our every need and want. When you start working, can you imagine if your employer sometimes forgets to pay you or is late in payment?

However, this does not mean offerings cannot be spontaneous when a need or opportunity arises. The basic idea is that we must regularly give to God, and to give cheerfully when required as an expression of our praise and thanksgiving to Him.

Thought: Do you include tithing as part of your budget?

Prayer: Lord, may I be faithful and regular with my tithes and offerings.

IS GIVING ONLY CONFINED TO MY CHURCH BRETHREN?

Apostle Paul speaks here to the wealthy Corinthian church about the churches in Macedonia who had raised funds for the church in Jerusalem which was in great need. The Macedonian churches were a blessed example to the wealthy Corinthian church, as Paul exhorted them to give likewise, and to give generously. Their example was impressive and commended because the Macedonian churches were themselves in distress and poverty, yet they gave exceedingly. Furthermore, they pleaded with Paul to receive the gift, and to give it on their behalf so that they, though separated by land and sea from the Jewish church in Jerusalem, could have the privilege to be part of this Christian ministry.

Giving of our offerings is certainly not limited to our local church. It is a wonderful privilege for anyone, rich or poor, to give to brethren and ministries that they may never meet nor know. To know that one's offerings may be a blessing to Christians half-way around the world and furthering God's work; that someone, who in turn, is praising the Lord for your giving is a wonderful spiritual blessing. It is something intangible that the world cannot understand. It is part of living a righteous life. Geography, race and culture are no barrier to experiencing fellowship and ministering to other believers. It may make giving and your prayers more meaningful if you have visited the mission station and know the missionaries. If you have the opportunity, do take it but do not let the absence of opportunity limit your giving. God may not call you to be a missionary to distant lands nor may you know the recipient of your gift personally, but giving is one means of furthering His work beyond your local church whether near or far.

Thought: The example of Macedonian churches prove that material poverty is not a barrier to giving and receiving great spiritual riches.

Prayer: *“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith”* (Galatians 6:10).

WHAT IF I DON'T HAVE ENOUGH TO GIVE?

As the Apostle Paul writes, a willing mind is the first and foremost prerequisite in giving. God does not require you to give what you do not have. Having a willing mind, give according to what you do have. Being worried and unduly burdened will not make you more spiritual. Suffering for suffering's sake is not the purpose of giving. However, if you have an abundance now, give to supply others who are presently in need, as was the case of the Corinthian church to the churches in Jerusalem.

Our problem, more often than not, is not that we have nothing to give. Rather, it is that we have an unwilling mind to give. We survey all we have and then concludes: No, I do not have extra. I do not have every single thing my heart desires, the latest fashion, clothes, books, phone, computer etc. I do not have enough savings stored away for tomorrow, and the day after and so on. We rationalise that only when we have every "need" and "sufficient" savings stored away, then will we be able to give. With such a mindset, we will never think that we have enough, and we will never have a willing mind to give.

The Macedonian churches gave, so that they may have spiritual blessings today and eternal reward in Heaven. Their concern was not about their immediate material needs here in this world. They saw the need of their brethren in Jerusalem, and selflessly gave, with little regard for their own luxuries and comforts.

I once asked a Christian sister who was of humble and modest means whether she worried about her finances and her future. Her reply, in essence: "I worry when I have too much in my bank account, and so I need to spend it for God's work!" What a rebuke it was to me of little faith in God and love for Him!

Thought: What happened to the Israelites' attempts to store away manna for another day? If you hoard your abundance today, do you think God should supply your needs through others in your time of need?

Prayer: May I have a willing mind.

HOW CAN I BE CHEERFUL IN GIVING?

Today, we conclude the devotion on giving, and again we focus on the heart of a believer. Whilst Paul exhorts the Corinthians in the preceding verse to give more so that they may reap more, it has to be out of a cheerful heart, and not one that does so because it is an obligation.

The Greek word for 'cheerful' here is *hilaron*, where the English word "hilarious" is derived. God loves a cheerful giver who gives out of love, and not compulsion. God does not need our money, He wants us to worship Him in body and spirit. Would you rather receive a thoughtful simple gift given with love or an expensive impersonal one given begrudgingly?

Search your heart if you struggle with being a cheerful giver. Perhaps it reveals a lack of love? Giving is a chore because the things of this world occupy your affections more so than heavenly ones. You are greedy for the things and pleasures of this world. The less you give to God, the more you keep for yourself. Or perhaps it reveals a lack of faith? You are fearful that He will not provide for your every need, and are encumbered by the cares of the world. Or maybe it is both?

As we give, always remember that God loves a cheerful giver. Conversely, it also means that God is not pleased with a giver who does not do so out of a cheerful heart. Thus even if we give all of our wealth and possessions, but do so with a heavy heart, or with some ulterior motives, God is not pleased. If we keep God's pleasure in mind as we give, we would naturally be able to do so cheerfully, for we know that our cheerful giving brings glory and honour to God.

Thought: When was the last time you were excited to give to the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, may I grow to love and trust You more each day and thus be a cheerful giver.

WHAT ARE THE ROLES OF THE FELLOWSHIP GROUPS?

Typically, a local church will see her congregation members grow old and in time to come, the younger more able-bodied members will take over the helm. Our reading today portrays a beautiful picture of the possible relationship between the older and the younger generations of a faithful church. The older men ought to be sober, serious minded, in control of his emotions, not easily angered, strong in faith, loving and patient towards others. The older women will be holy, not gossipers, not worldly and indulgent, and teachers of good things. The young women will also be sober, serious, not foolish, they will love their husbands and their children with godly and selfless love, they will be wise in their words, pure, keepers at home, obedient to their husbands. Young men are likewise to be sober minded. If all are as described above, then the fellowship in church will be truly very blessed.

There is, however, one important note to be mentioned in our discourse and it is found in verse 4; teaching. This is a responsibility laid upon the older, that they will teach the younger. This is the role that belongs to the older. However, we have to also note that the older must himself or herself be mature in the faith, apt to teach the Word of God and fruitful in the things of the Spirit before he can be the teacher. Likewise, the younger must himself be humble and teachable before he can learn from the older.

In many ways, this is what fellowship groups of the local church are meant to achieve. Such groups are organised to help believers grow in the faith through mutual encouragement and the learning of God's Word. Instruction is designed to cater to issues that the particular age group of believers experience in life. The objective is to help young men and women to grow to be more holy, more temperate, more sober and faithful to God and those under their care. May the Lord continue to provide us with godly fellowship groups.

Thought: Does your fellowship group aspire towards the things mentioned?

Prayer: Father, please continue to provide us with godly leaders and godly fellowship groups.

WHAT IS THE MOST CRITICAL TASK OF SUCH GROUPS?

As we study biblical characters like Moses and Elijah, we notice that there were episodes in their lives where they were made to spend time alone with God. It was not a time for fellowship with other saints. Instead, God intended for them to experience the special building up of their faith during these times of solitude. Solitude with God is certainly a necessary part of every Christian's life. However, God never meant for the Christian to be always alone. Instead, He has made us creatures that require fellowship as part of our growth in the faith. In His wisdom, He created man to enjoy blessings that can only be found when two or more gather together. One such important blessing that comes from fellowship is found in our passage for today. Sin is described as deceitful; meaning, if one is not careful and watchful, one can easily fall into sin. Sin is often very subtle. Furthermore, our passage tells us that with the deceitfulness of sin, one can also become hardened; meaning, being in a state where one is no longer willing to repent or no longer feel the burden of sin. This is a sad and fearful state to be in and is described as the dog returning to its vomit (2 Peter 2:22). If the person is a true believer, chastisement from the Lord will surely come his way. But we can avoid this state. The remedy that is given to us here is the mutual exhortation of saints on a daily or regular basis. Because of the nature of sin and of our hearts, we need others to observe the falling away in us and to point them out. We often ignore or lose sight of our spiritual state and others who know us well, can point out our slipping spiritual states.

Fellowship groups are meant to fulfil this task. It is an organised group where believers can come together to help one another. Of course, fellowship is not only about pointing out the sin of others, as it also allows for opportunities to show your love and care as you encourage and build one another up in the faith. When one is down, the other is there to pull him or her up. When both are happy, then both can sing praises to the Lord together. God is pleased when believers come together in humility and mutual care and concern for one another. May you discover the joy of fellowship as the Lord has meant it to be.

Thought: Is your best friend a Christian?

Prayer: Lord, please give me godly friends and help me to be one too.

WHAT DOES FELLOWSHIP PROVOKE?

The friendships and fellowship among Christians sometimes fall short of what God expects from believers. Often, fellow believers end up in disagreement and quarrel. Why is this so? This is due simply to sin. Pride and selfishness are often the main causes for disunity and unhappiness among saints. We often provoke one another to anger instead of love by our sinful ways. That should not be. This is not what God requires of believers. Our passage today appears to be a simple verse but yet it is not easy to achieve. We are commanded to provoke one another, not into anger, but instead into *“love and to good works”*. That means, we are to cause others to become more loving and to be motivated to do good. Instead of pride and sin, we are to help one another to love more and do good for one another. This applies mutually, which means, both the giver and receiver are to influence one another positively. You provoke me and I provoke you to love more and to be drawn to do good works as an expression of God’s love. Our love for Christ should be why we seek to do this. Our motivation to help one another should be first that Christ has done greatly for us unworthy sinners. If Christ can love us, why do we then not love others? A friendship that seeks to help one another to be more loving and more desirous to do good for Christ would be truly wonderful and precious. There will be humility and a desire for the good of the other. There will be true peace and joy.

If practiced, godly fellowship will form a unique aspect of the growth of a Christian. Such aids to faith are only found between a personal relationship of two or more saints. It cannot be replaced by the preacher over the pulpit. While preaching and teaching form a very important part of a Christian’s life, it cannot replace the benefits of mutual fellowship between saints. Fellowship is unique and special and cannot be replaced.

Thought: What is a Christian like without friends?

Prayer: Father, help to understand the need for me to fellowship with saints and help me to see the beauty of it too.

WHAT IF I FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE REBUKING OTHERS?

It is never nice to have to tell someone that he or she is in the wrong. Often, the person reacts unpleasantly and the one who does the rebuking is hurt in the process. Few possess the humility to accept a rebuke in a godly manner. Furthermore, the person who rebukes can sometimes lack love and meekness thus making the situation worse than it should be. It is not infrequent to hear of friendships severed as a result. Nonetheless, as we can see from today’s passage, correcting the fault of a brother is instructed in Scripture. Although many of us find it something that is difficult to do, God does require us to continue to persevere at it. James explains that the act will benefit the person greatly even to the extent of rescuing his soul from death. Without your act of correction, that person may continue to commit a multitude of sins. Your act of correction can be used by God to turn him around and is actually a blessing to him. Proverbs 27:6 tells us that faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful. A true friend will tell us when we are in error even when it hurts.

However, before we go about to rebuke others, we must bear in mind some principles taught in God’s Word. Christ teaches in Matthew 18:15 that the rebuke should be done privately. This will save the person embarrassment. Galatians 6:1 tells us that we must correct in meekness. Our own hearts should be filled with humility. And as we do so, we must be reminded that we are just as vulnerable to falling ourselves and therefore we should be compassionate and always be humble. Romans 15:1 exhort us who are stronger to bear those who are weaker. We must possess the attitude of care and love for those who are weaker and who offend. Proverbs 15:1 teaches us to be careful of the word spoken in anger. It is better to refrain from rebuking while in anger. Instead, do so only when you are calmer and less emotional. In addition, we must be careful not to judge. It is easy to do so given our wicked hearts and we easily forget that we are weak ourselves and that judgement belongs to God (Matthew 7:3-5 and Romans 12:19). Finally, remember to pray and ask God for strength and wisdom to rebuke correctly.

Thought: Are we rebuking out of anger or love?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to rebuke in love.

WHY MUST I PRAY FOR OTHERS?

There are times in our lives when we are found in a state of weakness where for some reason, we may find it hard to pray for ourselves. It may be that we are in a state of deep despondency or sadness so much so that we actually turn away from God and blame Him for our difficult situations. Sometimes, we are found in severe sickness and affliction and can hardly stay out of bed or even stay awake for too long. Or, it may be sin in our lives, where we find it hard to repent and abandon our state of disobedience. It is during such times, that we need others to intercede for us before God's throne of grace. When we are weak, knowing that others are praying for us can be a huge encouragement. God is pleased when His children run to Him in times of distress. As our Almighty Father, God certainly wants to help us. With God, all things are possible. The sick can be healed. The sinner's heart can be changed and he can repent and turn to God. Those undergoing trials can receive strength and faith to overcome trials triumphantly.

Indeed, Scripture reaffirms this aspect of Christian fellowship of interceding for one another (Colossians 1:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:25, Hebrews 13:18). Praying for others is not just encouraged but also commanded. This should be an activity that is done frequently, hence the place for weekly prayer meetings at the church. At prayer meeting, the needs of church members, family members and friends are collated and prayed over together. By doing so, we bring before God the needs of others. This is what we can do as an expression of love and concern. However, praying for others need not be confined to prayer meetings only. Just being with our friends, we can know what are their needs. We can then bring these needs before God for their sakes. Many great men and women of God have professed how God met their greatest hour of need rather mysteriously. Looking back, they realised that there had been people praying for them all along. Thank God for moving others to pray for us!

Thought: How often do you pray for others?

Prayer: Father, help me to care for others and to pray for them.

HOW CAN I HELP OTHERS WHEN I CAN'T HELP MYSELF?

Few of us can say we live life free of troubles. In fact, most of us have many trials and difficulties every day. Just getting through a typical school day is trying. Schoolwork is demanding, friends are not always kind, teachers not always fair. It is not easy. On top of the daily grind, some may even be confronted with especially difficult trials like a family member down with a severe illness, a father losing his job, or a calamity happening to someone close. Just as Job observed in Job 5:7; *"...man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward"*. This is what this life holds for all while there is sin in the world. However, for the Christian, it is different. Yes, we continue to face difficulties; however, we are not without help or hope. There is God's Almighty hand that continues to ensure that all things that occur to His children, happen for our ultimate good and will never be beyond our ability to cope (1 Corinthians 10:13). This is a promise He has given to us. It is with this in mind that we consider today's passage. We are asked to bear one another's burdens. However, when we are in need of help ourselves, it is hard to imagine helping others. But yet, this commandment does not come to us knowing that we cannot achieve it. We can still do it despite whatever difficulties befall us. The second part of Galatians 6:2 tells us that by doing so, we fulfill the Law of Christ. The Law of Christ is fulfilled when we love our neighbour as ourselves (John 15:17), and care enough to care for our fellow brethren.

We may be experiencing pain at the moment, but we are encouraged to still look upon others and consider their plight and how they suffer too and see how we can help them. This calls for us to sympathise with others and to do what we are able to do to alleviate the suffering they experience. It can be in deeds of kindness, or simply words of encouragement and comfort, or it can be by prayer. We, for that moment, forget our own problems, and think of others before ourselves. This takes love and faith, knowing that God will never forsake us and in time deliver us too. In love, we seek to do what we can for others, trusting that God will take care of us.

Thought: Are you really not able to help others?

Prayer: Father, help me to love others as myself.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE UP MY CROSS?

In New Testament times, the cross had a dreadful meaning and purpose. It was a crude tool of punishment and was meant to inflict the worst kind of physical torture possible on a human being before finally killing him. The cross was meant for the worst of criminals. To be sentenced to crucifixion on the cross one had to commit a terrible crime. Punishment on the cross was not simple death, but a process of shame, mockery and degradation while the victim slowly dies, sometimes over a period of a few days. The cross was a great shame to the victim as well as his family and all who are related to him. If you were related to someone crucified, you would be mocked as well. When Jesus spoke to the disciples about the cross, it must have brought a shudder of fear in their hearts. They must have wondered why Christ would want them to bear this shame and torture instead of glory and honour. Why are they called to bear something so despicable? Is not He the promised Messiah, the Son of God? Why does He speak about His followers bearing shame and even be prepared to be put to death for His sake? However, this is exactly what Christ requires of believers. We are to deny our wants and desires, our comforts and things we hold dearly and even be ready for the ultimate sacrifice of our lives if the need arises. We are to be ready to lose everything for the sake of Christ and Christ spoke of being ready to bear this daily. We have to deny ourselves daily. This is not a one-off resolution, but a consistent and constant effort to be renewed every day.

What do you hold on dearly to and refuse to surrender before Christ? What is it that you cling on to even though it dishonours our Lord? Is it your treasured past-time? Is it laziness? Is it the way you dress? Is it your desire for a new electronic gadget? Is it your foul language? Is it your pride and ego? If bearing the cross means denying yourself of all things that dishonour Christ for His sake, will you do it? Most of our problems are hardly “bearing the cross”. They are mild in comparison. Yet, we are ready to disobey Christ for the sake of our little wants and desires. We have much to learn.

Thought: What is your strongest desire? Will you give it up if Christ asked you to?

Prayer: God, please help me to love You more.

DOES GOD LOOK AT HOW MANY SOULS I SAVE?

Faithfulness of a Christian involves living one's life in full accordance to God's revealed will in His Word. There are various things that we are commanded to do according to God's Word. Preaching the gospel to an unsaved person is one of them. So, does God measure us as Christians by how many souls we save? We know from scripture that salvation is not for us to give because it belongs only to the Lord (Jonah 2:9). We are commanded to bring God's saving Word to everyone who is unsaved, faithfully and accurately. However, we do not have the power to convert the heart. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence, God does not measure us by how many souls we save. That being said, Christians are, nonetheless, still measured. 1 Corinthians 3:12 tell us our works as Christians will be considered when we appear before Christ. They can be *“gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble”*. We are also told that our works will be judged by fire where not unexpectedly, wood, hay and stubble will be consumed. Only works of gold and silver and precious stones will last. What then are works that will last?

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 speaks about taking heed to where we lay our foundations. If we lay the wrong foundation, whatever we build on top of this foundation will not last. The foundation refers to our motives. Verse 11 tells us the only correct foundation is Christ, which means that the only motive that is considered pure is one where we serve Christ and Christ alone. Hence, all that we do, what we build on top of this foundation must be to serve Christ alone and not other men or ourselves. Ultimately, we are measured by whether our works are based on the correct motive and if they were done for Christ. Another point to note is found in Mark 9:41. Christ said that even by providing a simple cup of water in Christ's name, meaning done to serve Christ, will be rewarded. Hence, works are not measured by their size or number, but by their faithfulness. What does this mean to you? You should now seek to examine your motives for everything that you do, whether they are for Christ or not. You are *“measured”* by your faithfulness in everything that God has called you to do, whether it be your studies, your service in Church or even as a child to a parent. Be faithful!

Thought: Why should I study hard?

Prayer: Search my heart Lord, and show me Thy truth.

IS SERVICE MORE IMPORTANT THAN DOCTRINE?

The story of Cain and Abel as told in Genesis 4 is well known. Both Cain and Abel presented an offering to the Lord. Both were earnest and sincere. Both did so presumably as a service to the Lord and wanted to please Him. However, Cain's offering was rejected by God, while the offering of Abel was accepted. And we know that that made Cain very angry where he ultimately murdered Abel. Why was the offering of Cain rejected while that of Abel's accepted? 1 John 3:12 tells us that Cain's work was evil while that of Abel's was righteous. Hebrews 11:4 tells us that Abel's offering was done in faith while that of Cain was not. We know that true faith, which is accepted by God, can only be so if it is founded on truth. Faith that is not founded on God's truths cannot be true faith. In other words, Abel's offering was done in true faith. Abel had the correct understanding of what God required in an offering and ensured that the offering was done correctly. Abel knew God's will and obeyed it. On the other hand, Cain did not please God. No matter how sincere Cain might have been, his offering was not what God wanted, his offering was not done correctly, it was not according to God's will.

In a very similar way, we can err like Cain. Cain chose to serve God in the way that he thought was best, not what God required. He would have known of God's requirement and chose to ignore it. He tried to come to God on his own terms, and expected God to just accept it. God rejected his work. In the same way, if we choose to serve God in the way we think is best and not according to how God has instructed us to, our service can similarly be rejected. Likewise, unless we know God's will, we cannot serve God correctly. No amount of service, no matter how sincere and selflessly wrought will make a difference before God. We must not be deceived to think otherwise. If we are to serve God, we must serve Him the way He desires and the correct way to serve Him is told to us in His Word. The better we know His Word, the more likely we can serve Him correctly.

Thought: Why does one serve God in his own way and not God's way?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be humble and to serve You in a manner that pleases You.

BUT I REALLY DO NOT HAVE TIME TO SERVE GOD?

Serving the Lord is never meant to be a bed of roses. Christ said in Luke 9:58 even the foxes and birds are better off than Christ Himself when it comes to finding rest and comfort in this world. The Master Himself suffered, what more His servants? Christ was not giving His disciples, and us today, any delusions about the nature of serving God. It will not be easy and often times require sacrifice. Christ makes no apologies, and in fact, he admonishes and warns us against entering into service lightly. The question then beckons, why does one want to serve God in the first place? The role of the servant was exemplified by Christ Himself (Philippians 2:7-8). This was something Christ chose willingly so that the price of sin could be paid (Matthew 20:28). Paul called himself a servant of Christ at the start of many of his epistles. 2 Corinthians 4:5 even speaks of Paul being willing to be the servant of man for Christ's sake. There is no doubt that we are saved to serve.

God calls Christians to be servants and Christ was the best example of this. So, yes, this is commanded of God. Does it mean that we are to serve God because we have no choice? Are we so ungrateful as to ask such a question? Knowing we owe Christ everything good that we have in this world and much more in the world to come, can our reply be “I have no time”? If God calls you to help in the YF, or to usher new comers, or serve in the kitchen, will you say “no”? Are our hearts so cold that we have forgotten to be grateful? Have we forgotten that we were once bound for eternal hell but Christ gave up heaven's glories to bare the cross in pain and agony so that we can be saved? Because of Him, we have hope in eternal glory alongside with Him as the sons of God. If we remember what Christ has done for us, serving Him will be our joy. If we understand the work of Christ, sacrificing all of ourselves is only a reasonable service (Romans 12:1). God considers us worthy to serve Him because of Christ and it would be nothing short of a privilege and honour on its own. It is because of this that Christ says the servant who is unwilling to serve, is not fit for the kingdom of heaven. The true Christian, will be grateful to serve.

Thought: Have you forgotten what Christ has done for you?

Prayer: Father, help me never to forget what great a salvation You have wrought for me.

HOW IS ATTENDING SUNDAY SCHOOL SERVING GOD?

Have you ever wondered why God wants us to serve Him? Does He need our help? Why doesn't He just simply do all things by Himself? Why does He call us to be the bearers of the Gospel? Why doesn't He just appear in miraculous fashion before unbelievers and speak the gospel Himself? Actually, Christ did just that, but many remain faithless. Well, the fact is, God does not need an iota of our help. He, who created and rules the universe by His very word and command, does not need us to help Him in anyway. Then why does He call us to serve Him? The answer is simply because it is for our own sanctification and growth in the faith. There is nothing we can do that will help God in anyway. He does not need our help. By His wisdom and mercies, He determined for us to be involved in His work. As we serve Him, we grow in our relationship with Him, and learn to rely on Him as we experience the various trials and hardships in serving Him. By the redeeming work of the Lord Jesus Christ, God counts us worthy to be instruments of the Most High God. And by answering the call to serve Him in obedience, we are the ones to benefit as our faith grows.

How is attending Sunday school serving God then? Our passage today exhorts children to learn the fear of the Lord. What is the fear of the Lord? It is reverential fear and knowledge that God is all powerful and requires holiness in us. The same God takes account of any sin in our lives and does not take any of it lightly. If we learn the fear of the Lord, we learn true wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). A correct understanding of the fear of the Lord comes through regular and systematic study of His Word. To know God better, we have to know His Word better. Sunday school or any other ways where God's Word is taught faithfully is a good place to start. By attending Sunday school or Bible Study, it is in obedience to God and in that sense, we are serving Him. May your faith continue to grow and abound as you diligently seek after His Word.

Thought: Many came to believe in the Lord through Sunday School.

Prayer: Father, help me always to love your Word and to do whatever is necessary to learn and keep it.

“...that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.”

HOW IS ATTENDING PRAYER MEETING SERVING GOD?

We have considered the need to gather together as Christians and the need for mutual encouragement in earlier readings. In addition, we have also learnt the necessity of praying for one another. Prayer meeting is a special time set aside so that many can gather together to pray for those in the church who are in need. By being part of this, you are showing Christian love and concern for others. Let us also consider why we should pray. Firstly, it is commanded. Isaiah 55:6 commands that we seek the Lord while He may be found. Hebrews 11:6 exhorts us not only to seek Him but to do so “*diligently*”. Psalm 105:4 tells us that we may find strength from Him if we seek Him in prayer. He gives to us strength that our weary bodies and souls often cannot do without. But beyond simply being commanded or a necessity, prayer is a blessing in itself. Psalm 119:2 tells us of blessings to those who keep His testimonies and seek Him with the whole heart. God promises blessings when we pray and do so correctly according to His will. The Psalmist also speaks of joy that comes from seeking after the Lord. Prayer will lead to joy and peace so profound that it passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). In our passage for today, we know that God’s house is called the house of prayer which shows how important and central prayer is in the sight of God.

Often prayer is neglected in our lives. We pray so little when God’s Word says to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). We hardly pray for one another and hardly come to pray together at prayer meeting. Do we have such a low view of prayer? To that, there is a warning. God will not always be ready to hear our prayers. Proverbs 1:28 says in that instance that God refused to hear the prayers of His people. We must not think that cannot happen to us if we persist in our rebellious ways. May you seek the Lord while He may be found.

Thought: What if God shuts His ears from you?

Prayer: Lord, may it be never so that I be found so steeped in sin that Thou will not hear me anymore.

HOW CAN I HAVE JOY IN SERVICE?

The walk of the believer should be characterised by joy. Psalm 100 describes the joyful manner in which we are to come before the Lord and serve Him with gladness. This joy is one that overwhelms us, such that we cannot help but to burst forth with shouts of praise and songs of thanksgiving, for we know all that He has done for us, and are thankful that we can render something to Him in return. This is true joy and it is able to endure good or bad times. However, this joy can be lost, even for the Christian. How so? Joy can be lost when we are in sin (Psalm 38:3). But how is this also true in the area of service? We can lose joy in service when we serve amiss, when we do not serve God the way that He has required of us to do. Do note that sincerity alone does not make our service acceptable to God. When we serve Him, we are to serve Him in the manner that He has taught us from His Word. Being familiar with God’s Word allows us to not only know what God requires but also to understand who God is. That helps us know how to serve God correctly.

There are many possible causes for serving amiss. It happens when we serve man instead of God. Note, however, that it is also possible that the “man” mentioned here could be ourselves. Your ideas on how to serve Christ may take precedence over what God requires. You end up doing things by your own wisdom and not according to God’s Word. Also, you may be guilty of putting more weight in your own ideas than those of others when God’s Word tells us to be humble and to esteem others better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). The consequences of serving God amiss can be quite serious. Romans 14:23 tells us that anything that is “*not of faith is sin*”. If we serve God without faith, which includes our obedience, we actually sin against Him. The consequences of serving Him amiss will be more than just a loss of personal joy, but many around us will be hurt especially when one is called into a position of leadership. Hence, we must be very careful with our motives when we serve God. If we lack joy, we must reflect and study our hearts for it is most likely due to serving God amiss.

Thought: When was the last time I searched my heart for wrong motives?
Prayer: Father, show me where I have sinned against Thee.

DO YOU FEEL DISCOURAGED IN SERVING GOD?

Serving God can be trying. It can be difficult at times when we have to labour to ensure various ministries under our care run smoothly. Other times, it can be a real trial when we encounter difficult people and there are also moments when our faith is tested to its limits where we wonder if God cares when we suffer for His name's sake. Christ warned His followers in Matthew 8:20 about how serving Him will not be a bed of roses. The person who decides to serve the King of kings, must count the cost and be willing to suffer loss. Yet, we find many passages of Scripture telling us that following after God is really not as bad as it seems. Yes, there will be trials and difficulties, but along with it there will also be great blessings.

In Psalm 84:11 it is promised that God will withhold no good thing from those who walk uprightly. 1 Peter 5:10 adds a great encouragement when it says that after we have suffered a while, God plans to *"make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you"*. Ephesians 2:7 speaks of the riches of God's grace and kindness for His people as being *"exceeding"*. Even as we step forward to serve Him, 2 Corinthians 9:8 promises us that God will not only give us the grace, but will give it in abundance such that we will not be lacking in any way and be able to accomplish each duty to its best. Galatians 6:9 further exhorts us not be weary of well doing because at the right time by God's appointment, we will see the fruits of our labour. Although our passage for today starts with an exclamation of discouragement in service, blessed are those who continue to read on, because in the subsequent verses, we read of the greatest of encouragements to those who serve faithfully. Our names will be written into *"the book of remembrance"* and we will be counted as *"jewels"* in the sight of God. Yes, the rewards will be eternity with God and we will be very dear in the sight of God.

We must not be overly despondent when we suffer in our service. Instead, we must remember the many precious promises God has made to the faithful and know that God has a special place in His heart for those who faithfully serve Him.

Thought: Do you know of any faithful servant of Christ who died in regret?

Prayer: Father, encourage my weary heart.

DO YOU GIVE YOUR BEST IN SERVING GOD?

In our passage today, God taught Moses the manner in which the people of Israel were to bring their sacrifices to God. Their sacrifices were meant to seek God's forgiveness of sins committed and God required them to be prepared in a very specific way. The particular detail that was required in our reading today is that *"there must be no blemish"* found in the animals. This means that the animals must not have any scars or be born with some kind of deformity or imperfection. In that sense, it has to be perfect. That was what God required. There are some reasons for this. Firstly, the sacrifice was meant to be a "type" of Christ; meaning, it was meant to represent Christ. As God required a perfect sacrifice for our sins, in the same way, Christ was perfect and completely free of sin and hence His death was sufficient to take away our sins forever. Another meaning that can be drawn from this requirement is the fact that the person who brings the sacrifice would need to bring the best from his fold. Of all the animals he had, he had to choose the best. This would mean sacrifice on his part as such an offering would be costly. The sacrifice can also be understood as our service to the Lord.

Often times, we bring God our leftovers. We serve the Lord only during our free time, we treat serving God as a recreation or leisure activity to be replaced when something *"important"* crops up. Our main pre-occupations, our studies take first place. Our friends, hobbies and favourite leisure activities are more important than what God calls us to do. This should not be the way to serve God. God requires the best from us. Just as He required sacrifices without blemish, He expects that we give Him our best efforts. We should serve Him with the best of our efforts and resources. We should do as well, if not better, as what we do in other areas of our lives. We often forget that serving God is actually the highest order of work we can do. We should feel privileged that God even finds us worthy to be His servants. May we understand the significance of the high calling of serving the King.

Thought: Why does God bother to call us to serve Him?

Prayer: Father, help me to see the privilege of serving You.

“...unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?

God gave various leaders to the church *“For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”*. We are the *“saints”*! And the leaders are there to equip us to serve God, so that everybody (every member of the church, not only leaders!) can play a part in *“building up”* the church!

One commentator explains it very well!

“What model of the church, then, should we keep in our minds? The traditional model is that of the pyramid, with the pastor perched precariously on its pinnacle, like a little pope in his own church, while the laity are arrayed beneath him in serried ranks of inferiority. It is a totally unbiblical image, because the New Testament envisages not a single pastor with a docile flock but both a plural oversight and an every-member ministry. Not much better is the model of the bus, in which the pastor does all the driving while the congregation are the passengers slumbering in peaceful security behind him. Quite different from either the pyramid or the bus is the biblical model of the body. The church is the body of Christ, every member of which has a distinctive function.”

Therefore we see the church as a body that Christ has established here on earth, where all His saints can gather together for mutual edification and encouragement. Whilst it is true that the pastors and the leaders of the church are the ones who ought to be the most spiritual and have the oversight of the church, every member has their part to play as well. It is only when everyone is involved, that there can be the perfecting of all the saints in the church. As they grow and mature in the faith, they would then be able to be more involved in the work of the ministry. Through all their labours, there would be the edifying (building up) of the whole body of Christ. This is how an ideal church ought to function. Are you involved in such a church?

Thought: We all have our part to play in the body of Christ – the church. Are you doing your part for the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, help me to see my role in Your church, and help me to do the best I can for the church.

IS THE CHURCH A PHYSICAL BUILDING?

The word “church” can mean two things: 1. a church building 2. a gathering of Christians. In our daily lives, we usually use the word to refer to the church building (“I’m going to church!”)

However, in the New Testament, the word “church” usually refers to a local congregation (never a church building), and sometimes to the “universal church” (i.e. all the Christians all over the world, throughout the ages!)

In the verse today, we read, “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”

So, we are all stones that build up the house of God. We are lively (i.e. living, not dead) stones, because we are spiritually alive (and so we are a “spiritual house”) and this life comes from our Lord Jesus! “House” here refers to the temple of God – so Christians are a new temple of God guided by the Holy Spirit.

We see therefore that the emphasis is on the people and persons, and not the building at all! Without a building, the church still can function, meeting at rented premises or at someone’s home. However, without the people, the building itself is useless. Sadly, some churches today emphasise the physical building far more than the spiritual house that we ought to be. We are a church not because of how grand or beautiful our building is, but because of the people whom God has called out of this world. We are instructed to gather together for our mutual edification, and also so that we can be a witness to the rest of the world. Is this what you do when you go to church?

Thought: We may think of our service to God as sacrifice, but think again – whatever we have comes from God, and what we give Him is only our giving back to Him what belongs to Him. Is this sacrifice?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to have “the mind of Christ”, so that I will see things from the right perspective, so that I will love You so much that I no longer consider a sacrifice as sacrifice, but as something that I will joyfully offer back to You – because You have given us the greatest gift of all – our Lord Jesus Christ!

DO I HAVE TO BEHAVE MYSELF IN CHURCH THEN?

1 Timothy is a letter from Paul to Timothy. Paul calls him “*my own son in the faith*”. Don’t you think it’s so wonderful – the Bible is not a dry book of doctrine, but we can feel the love of God through its pages. Here, we can feel the love that Paul has for Timothy – the battle-scarred, aged apostle for the young pastor.

He wrote the letter to teach Timothy how to be a good pastor! He wrote the letter because he could not be with Timothy. So, by the providence of God, we have this letter which teaches us so many precious truths. I am sure Paul wanted every pastor to study this epistle diligently, and learn the importance of right doctrine, how to conduct public worship, how to select deacons and elders etc!

Apart from all these “*official*” issues, Paul also taught Timothy how to “*behave*” (or conduct) himself in the church. The word ‘behave’ describes one’s conduct, life and behaviour. As a pastor, there was definitely a certain decorum that was expected of Timothy. The reason was because he was a servant in the house of God, which is not just any house, but the very church of the living God, and the place from which truth ought to emanate. As the leader of the church, his life must certainly reflect the truth that he preaches.

So, if the pastor has to learn how to “*behave*” himself in the church, do you have to do the same? Is it right to hold our pastor to a high standard of conduct, but then think that we can ‘relax’ these standards for ourselves? When you “*misbehave*” – remember where you are – in the “*house of God... the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth*”. How can it be, that the very place where we come to learn of God’s truth, is the very place where you disobey God’s Word?

Thought: How can we “*behave*” ourselves well in church? This comes from knowing “the whole counsel of God”!

Prayer: Lord, help me always to be conscious of the great responsibility that I have as a child of God, and behave myself appropriately – to the praise and glory of Thy Name – always!

WHO IS THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH?

Many churches today are known by their influential and famous pastors. Because of their magnetic personalities, charismatic flair and talent for speaking, they draw thousands to their churches. The congregation flock to hear the pastor preach, and the church is made famous because of the pastor. When that happens, the tendency is to logically then assume that this famous pastor is the head of the church. In fact, many of these ‘celebrity’ pastors do actually encourage this image, using their fame to attract the crowds, and act more like the CEO of a company than the pastor of a church.

However the Bible in Ephesians 5 is clear as to whom the real head of the church is – that is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not man who founded the church, and neither is it man that dictates the purpose, direction or success of the church. Christ alone is the one who is in charge, for He is the one who died to save the church, and describes her as His perfect bride. What this means is that as a member of the church universal, our utmost allegiance, respect and honour must be to Christ, for we are all subject to Him (Ephesians 5:24). As we do so, we rest secure in the assurance that Christ as our head is not a wicked or cruel taskmaster, but rather is like a benevolent, loving and caring husband who loves his wife (Ephesians 5:25).

Sadly, many churches today have forgotten this, and whilst they claim to worship Jesus, they only pay him lip service whilst idolising their leaders. Churches are run more like companies and businesses, where their success is attributed to their worldly techniques and charismatic leaders. Christ is all but forgotten amidst their commercialism. All Christians must remember who they are actually coming together to worship and who they ought to live for every day of their lives.

Thought: If Christ is the head of the church, am I a useful part of His body?

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember always to focus on You, and not idolise any human leaders.

HOW PRECIOUS IS THE CHURCH TO GOD?

Christ’s love for the church is described to us in terms that is easy for us to understand. It is likened to a husband-wife relationship, where Christ loves the church in the same manner as how a husband ought to love his wife. However, the love that Christ has for the church is one that far exceeds what any human husband is capable of, and is the benchmark and goal to which all human husbands must aspire towards.

In this description of Christ’s relationship to the church, we can see the great extent of His care and concern for us, and it really shows how precious we are to Him. Primarily, we see that Christ gave his life for the church. He sacrificed himself by suffering through the excruciating and humiliating torment on the cross, in order that we may receive the gift of everlasting life. As Peter describes in 1 Peter 1:18-19: *“Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot”*. We were so precious to Christ, that He was willing to sacrifice his blood, which is of infinite value, to pay the penalty of our sins.

But it does not end there. After shedding His precious blood to justify us, Christ’s desire is for our continued sanctification. He continually guides and teaches the church through His word, that he may sanctify and cleanse the church. He is like a loving husband preparing His bride for the glorious wedding that awaits, where we can all stand before Him, perfect and holy without any blemish of sin, ready to spend a blissful eternity with Him. Such is the extent of His love for us, for we are like his own flesh and body (Ephesians 5:29-30), and He would do all things to ensure our complete purity and perfection. Dear teen, as we have learnt how precious we are to Christ, does it make Christ more precious to you?

Thought: Our lives should be a daily hymn of thanks to God. The motivation for all we do should be love and gratitude.

Prayer: Saviour, Thy dying love Thou gavest me. Nor should I aught withhold, dear Lord, from Thee. In love my soul would bow, my heart fulfill its vow, Some offering bring Thee now, something for Thee.

“For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.”

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH ELDERS?

One of the most touching passages in the Bible comes from Acts 20, which relates the farewell message of Paul to the Ephesian elders. Paul realised that this was probably the last time he would see them, as he told them *“And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more”* (Acts 20:25).

Why was Paul so concerned about the church in Ephesus? Read what Paul said, *“For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them”* (Acts 20:29-30).

So what was Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders? *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood”* (Acts 20:28).

The Ephesian pastors must first keep watch over themselves, and only then over the flock, which the Holy Spirit has made them responsible. For they cannot care adequately for others if they neglect the care and culture of their own souls. They are to be ‘shepherds’ of God’s church. The word *“feed”* translates the Greek word *“poimano”* which means to ‘tend’ a flock and in particular ‘to lead a flock to pasture, and so to feed it’.

What does a shepherd do? If you want to know, read Psalm 23 – memorise the 6 verses, understand them, and *“hide”* them in your heart. Then you’d know what a wonderful God (the chief Shepherd) we have, and how the elders (the under-shepherds) should look after the church like how the Good Shepherd looks after His sheep!

Knowing what a good elder/pastor should be, we should love, respect and pray for them.

Thought: Should all church members strive to have the qualities expected of the elders?

Prayer: I thank God for faithful elders and pastors who boldly and faithfully teach us the truth, so we can learn to know and love You more and more each day!

HOW DO I RELATE TO THE ELDERS?

Today's passage comes from Paul's letter to young Timothy: *"Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."* What does this verse teach us about "how to I relate to the elders in service"?

First, we should be discerning and see whether our elder *"rule well"*! We pray that we have godly, responsible elders in our church who *"rule well"*. Some members may take election lightly, and put a tick on every election slip! Some do it because they don't know their elders, and so have no idea whether they *"rule well"*! Some members take things "personally", and vote for those whom they know well personally, "as a favour to them". But the church is the *"body of Christ"* which He *"purchased with his own blood"*! It is not a clubhouse. We should do God's business God's way!

Secondly, while we ought to respect each other (*"Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves"* Philippians 2:3), we should also especially honour and respect our elders.

How does it work out in practice?

When you come to church on Sunday, don't run away from the elders! Many young people try to avoid eye contact with the adults, especially the elders! It can be very discouraging to them. Go up to them and say a *"good morning"*! When they are teaching, pay attention and listen! It's a way of honouring God!

Be a faithful Christian yourself. A godly elder aims to glorify God everyday (*"the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever"*), and he will have great joy to see our teens glorify God in their daily lives!

Thought: Do we have elders who *"rule well"* in our church? Do we honour them?

Prayer: Lord, thank You for godly elders, who serve You faithfully and teach us the Word of truth with love.

HOW SHOULD I RELATE TO OTHER LEADERS IN CHURCH?

In this verse, Paul used three expressions to describe the church leaders.

Firstly, these leaders *“labour among you”*. *“Labour”* in this verse means work hard. This hard work is not only physical (spending their free time in serving the church, instead of on pleasures and hobbies) but also spiritual (studying God’s word diligently, knowing the church members, and praying for them).

Secondly, they are *“over you”*. Christian leaders are those who are over you in the Lord. True, the very first thing which needs to be said about Christian ministers of all kinds is that they are *“under”* people (as their servants) rather than *“over”* them (as their leaders, let alone their lords). The chief characteristic of Christian leaders is humility not authority, and gentleness not power. Nevertheless, authentic servant-leadership still carries an element of authority”.

Thirdly, *“admonish you”*. This of course refers to church discipline.

So – how should I relate to the leaders?

Firstly, *“know”* them. The bible refers to the church as the *“household of God”*. This is a lovely picture! A church should not be a place where you just slip in on Sunday morning, and slip out again after service, without knowing or talking to anybody else! We should regard other members as part of the family, and we can do so only if we *“know them”*.

Secondly, verse 13 says we should *“esteem”* them i.e. respect them.

Many of us are too shy to get to know people. But for the sake of our Lord, we should *“know”* and *“esteem”* our church leaders.

Thought: Do our leaders *“labour”* (work hard) for the church? Do they admonish us when we go wrong? (Or are they trying to be too nice?)

Prayer: Lord, I pray that our leaders would be godly and labour with love for Your church, and that I would play my part in encouraging them.

WHAT IF I FIND IT DIFFICULT TO SUBMIT TO LEADERS?

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Hebrew 13:17).

What goes through your mind when you read this verse? Would you ask yourself, “It’s OK to ask us to obey our leaders, but what if our leaders teach us and ask us to do the wrong things? Should we still obey, should we still submit?”

That was my thought! Is it wrong? No – what we must realise that we should never interpret the Bible in isolation – we must read it in context, and with the knowledge of the Bible as a whole.

In this case, there are other passages in the Bible that teach us to be discerning, and not be led blindly.

“The clear recognition of authoritative leadership is essential for the harmony and effective administration of any group. Just as the New Testament does not encourage undiscerning obedience, neither does it teach unintelligent submission.... The Scripture does not teach, encourage, or exemplify submission of this sort. It is bad for the one who practises it in that it discourages personal accountability to the Lord God, a mark of true Christian maturity.” (Raymond Brown)

We thank God for godly faithful pastors and leaders in our church, who *“watch over our souls”*, and we should give them joy (rather than grief them with our disobedience and disrespect) e.g. by coming for worship services punctually, and living lives that glorify God).

Pray that our church leaders are faithful to God. Then it’s our joy to obey and submit to them.

Thought: The Christian is answerable to God alone. His obedience and submission to leadership is in obedience to God – it’s a discerning and wise obedience.

Prayer: Lord, teach us to be discerning and submissive, as we submit to Thy authority in all that we do.

WHAT AUTHORITY DOES THE CHURCH HAVE OVER ME?

Matthew 18:15-20 is a passage that teaches us how to deal with church members who *“trespass against thee”*. Remember, many mistakes and many enemies are made unnecessarily just because Christians do things *“their own way”*, and not follow the instructions in the Bible (we must learn to have the *“mind of Christ”*) – and we will only *“grief”* the Holy Spirit.

So what should you do with somebody in church who *“trespass against thee”*? First, *“go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone”* (we don’t want to create unnecessary commotions!). If that doesn’t work, then *“take with thee one or two more”* (witnesses) for multiple testimony. And if that still doesn’t work, then the whole thing becomes public: *“tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”* i.e. excommunicated.

Then we come to today’s key verse: *“Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* *“Binding”* and *“loosing”* means *“allowing”* and *“disallowing”*. This is the responsibility that church leaders have over the spiritual matters of the church members. This does not mean that these leaders have the supreme authority to decide who can go to heaven or not, as the Catholics have wrongly assumed. What this verse refers to is the authority that the leaders have within the church. Having been entrusted with the spiritual oversight of the flock, they have the authority to discipline and censure the members when necessary. This is not a power to be abused, but rather carefully and reverentially applied, always for the spiritual benefit of the members. These various levels of church discipline (admonishment, rebuke, suspension and excommunication) are administered in order that an erring brethren might be brought back to the right relationship with God. Dear teen, will you willingly submit yourselves to the loving leadership of the pastors and elders of your church?

Thought: Is it really love if the leaders do nothing when church members are living in sin?

Prayer: Lord, we pray for the leaders of our church that You will grant them the love for us that they would teach us the truth, and also to be discerning and practise *“tough love”* when it’s in Thy will.

MUST PASTORS “ATTACK” THOSE WHO PERVERT GOD’S WORD?

Paul’s epistle to Titus is one of the “*pastoral letters*” (the others are 1 and 2 Timothy), written to give instructions to young pastors. You can imagine it must have been difficult for Titus and Timothy to be “*strict*” and teach God’s word faithfully, when many of the church members were much older than them – remember, in the society at that time, age and seniority was very important!

So Paul had to encourage them not only to “*hold fast*” the word of God, and teach “*sound doctrine*” – but also to be firm against those who pervert the word of God (“*teaching things which they ought not*”) for their own benefit. The sort of description that Paul gave concerning these false teachers were indeed strong and direct. He certainly did not mince his words, as he described them as ‘gainsayers’ (those who speak against) who are ‘*unruly*’ (disobedient, cannot be disciplined), ‘vain talkers’ (one who speaks nothing but idle chatter) and ‘deceivers’ (one who misleads and seduces). He called them out directly, as one who subverts houses and teaches things for their own greedy gain. His assertion was that these people must be stopped and sharply rebuked. If they were to carry on their wicked ways, more people would be misled from the truth, and Titus’ church would turn away from God. Thus in this we see that it is definitely important to ‘*attack*’ these false teachers. It would be irresponsible for Titus to just remain silent and allow his congregation to fall prey to such dangerous teachings.

We sometimes hear people from other churches who complain that our pastors “keep attacking others”! But now, you see – our pastors are just doing what Paul has taught Titus to do – to be faithful “*watchmen*” for the house of God! We should be faithful watchmen too! Do we know God’s word well enough that we can be the watchmen for our friends?

Thought: What would you answer when your friends say they will never come to our church, as our pastors are too “*fierce*” and keep on attacking others?

Prayer: Lord, give us the discernment to know when to defend Thy Word, and the right spirit to do it with love.

WHAT DOES THE LORD DEMAND FROM HIS CHURCH?

Read this verse from Deuteronomy, and you might feel “*peculiar/weird*”! How can we be the “*weird*” people of God? It is important to trace the etymology of this word, and understand the meaning that the translators had intended when they used the English word ‘*peculiar*’.

“*Peculiar*” means 1. strange or odd, 2. (peculiar to) belonging exclusively to. It stems from the word “*pecu*” in Latin which means cattle, from which is derived the word “*peculium*” (which means property). This then is borrowed into English to describe a treasured possession. So you can see that we, the children of God (who have believed in Jesus as our Saviour) are His treasured possession, specially chosen by God to be holy unto Him – what a wonderful thought!

But, with privilege comes responsibility! So the answer to the question today (“what does the Lord demand from His church”) is that we should be holy, that we should be different from non-believers, that we should be “*the light of the world*” that testifies for the Lord through our good works (Matthew 5:14). The expectation that God has for His people, is that they seek after holiness through their obedience to His Word. That is the gist of this section of Deuteronomy, as Moses reminds the people of the various laws. They were to remember their special status before God, and realise their need to be separate from the nations around them. Through their unique dietary laws, they would not be able to have any alliances or make any covenants with the surrounding nations, and thus maintain their purity before God. In all things, they were to trust in God, and have their faith and allegiance with Him alone.

Likewise for the church, we must remember that we are the ones who have been called out from the world, and God expects us to maintain a witness for Him by being separate from the sins of the world. Are you in a church that fulfils this desire of God?

Thought: “*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven*” (Matthew 5:16).

Prayer: Lord, teach me to live a holy life so that I can be a good witness of Your love to those around me.

HOW CLOSE ARE THE TIES WITH CHURCH BRETHREN?

As Jesus was talking to his followers, his mother and brothers sought to speak to Him. However, instead of directly answering their calls, he turned to the people with him, gestured at them, and declared, “Behold my mother and my brethren!” (Matthew 12:49). At first reading, this might seem like a rather strange response. However, what Jesus was doing was using the situation as an opportunity to teach his disciples the relationship that believers can have with one another. When we are converted, it is not only we ourselves who are changed (“new creature”), but our relationships with others have also changed thoroughly. Effectively what happens when we are in Christ, is that we gain a whole new family. All the believers in the world can now be described as our brothers, sisters, parents, children, for we are now all one in Christ!

Initially, we might find this concept difficult to understand. After all, how can a complete stranger suddenly become my relative? Jesus qualifies his statement in the next verse in Matthew 12:50, he explains, *“For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”* We see therefore that it is a spiritual relationship that we now have. As members of the same family, we all have a common spiritual goal of fulfilling God’s will in our lives. That is the bond that ties us together, for we are all striving to achieve the same spiritual objective.

As you mature as a Christian, you should come to feel closer and more comfortable with your brothers and sisters in Christ, for they alone are the ones who understand your goals and objectives in this life. As Christians, we all share a common purpose to do the will of God – an idea that the world cannot understand. May you grow to cherish this new spiritual family that you have. Get to know your Christian brothers and sisters (and “aunties” and “uncles”) well! Love them as you love your family members and even more!

Thought: *“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”*

(2 Corinthians 5:17)

Prayer: Lord, teach me to know and love fellow Christians as my family.

HOW CAN WE BE CLOSE TO THOSE WE DON'T KNOW?

Yesterday we saw how Jesus considered those who did the will of the Father as His family. However, practically speaking, this is a very difficult thing to achieve. How can I be close to someone whom I barely know, and maybe have never met before? Can I really have such a close relationship with them, such that I consider them as family? How can that be possible?

The passage in Ephesians 2:18-22 grants us further insight into this new life that we have through the finished work of Christ on the cross. The immediate answer to the above question is theological in nature. As believers, we who were once enemies of God and strangers to Him are now made one through the blood of Christ. Because of what Christ has done for us, we have free access to God in the same way a child has to a loving father. We all now have this new relationship with God, and are described as fellow citizens together with the saints, and fellow members of the same household of God. We have all experienced this common salvific work, and are all equal beneficiaries of the manifold blessings that are in store for us. When we consider any other believer, even those whom you have never met before, remember that they are all alike, the children of God, and are not to be considered as strangers or foreigners!

In order for such an understanding to translate into a true sentiment, we must grow in our faith and Christian maturity. We must first strengthen our relationship with Christ, before we can appreciate the relationship that we have with others. It is only when we put on the mind of Christ, and learn to see things from God's perspectives, that we can see the role we play in the building that is fitly framed together as a holy temple of God. We will learn to understand the role that each part of the building plays, and appreciate what other believers are doing in the body of Christ. If our desires and ambitions are still attuned to the things of the world, then we will never be close to the other members of God's holy house. However if we have in our hearts the sincere desire to serve the Lord, then certainly we will be able to love those who are serving alongside together with us!

Thought: Isn't it wonderful that we have our new family in Christ?

Prayer: Lord, teach me to be a good member of this new family!

“that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.”

HOW DO I SHARE WITH THOSE I DON'T KNOW?

Whilst the book of Romans is well known as a book that delves deeply into many difficult doctrines, it is at the same time a very intimate letter. You can see the heart of Paul when you read the book – how he loves the brethren in Rome! Chapter 16 is especially revealing – here you read *“I commend unto you Phebe our sister”* (v. 1), *“Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus, Who have for my life laid down their own necks”* (vv. 3-4), and so on!

Even though he had not been to Rome when he wrote the epistle to the Romans, Paul spoke in such loving terms to the members of the church in Rome. In verse 1:11-12 he explained that the reason why he wanted to go to Rome was so *“I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established... that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me”*. Even though he did not know most of them personally, yet because of the bond in Christ that he shared with them, and the Christian love that he had for them, he was very concerned about their spiritual well-being. He was very keen to “share” with them, and to make the journey all the way there to spend time with them. His concern was never for his own ‘social’ comforts, or what people would think of him. His visit was not for personal enjoyment or just a casual catch up with friends. His concern as always was spiritual in nature, and that was the objective of his sharing with them.

We must learn to have the heart of the Apostle Paul, and try to look past our own personal discomforts, shyness and fear of what people may think of us. We must pray and ask the Lord to help us step out of our comfort zones and begin to have deeper spiritual relationships with our fellow believers – to share of our blessings and also request for prayer for our struggles. Our desire is always for mutual edification of the saints, that through our sharing, others can be blessed, and also strengthen our relationship one with another.

Thought: It is sin that keeps people apart. Christ has redeemed us, so we can share freely, and encourage one another in the knowledge of Him.

Prayer: Lord, help me know and love You better, and to share this love and knowledge with Your other children.

HOW CAN I AID THE LEADERS OF THE CHURCH?

Today's two verses come from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. Can you remember what happened? Read Acts 17 – *"they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures... and some of them believed... But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people"* (vv. 1-5). This is a riot scene!

Paul and Silas managed to escape to Berea, and then Athens, and finally Corinth, where the two letters to the Thessalonians were written. So you can see – Paul had a tough time everywhere he went, because he was bold in his preaching! He told "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" ("*free course*"). No wonder he offended so many people ("*unreasonable and wicked men*"), who wanted to kill him. But thank God there were also many who were touched by the word of God and believed (such that the word of God was "*glorified*").

We may not be missionaries like Paul or experience such heavy persecution in our lifetime. In our own church, we may not see our pastors in danger of being lynched! – but we know that many have vilified them for their strong stand on God's truth (e.g. on separation from those who preach a "watered-down" version of the Gospel).

The very least we can do for our leaders is to pray for them, as was what the Apostle Paul requested of the Thessalonians – that those who oppose them would not have the chance to hinder their ministry of the word of God – that the word of God may be allowed to have its "*free course*" and be glorified (honoured). Pray for our leaders that they will continue to hold on to the true faith, that our Lord may be glorified through their ministry.

Thought: If the great Apostle Paul requested for prayers from the believers, all the more our own leaders need them!

Prayer: Lord, may I always be faithful in constantly having our leaders in my prayers.

Notes

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