

Why Both And is Better Than Either Or

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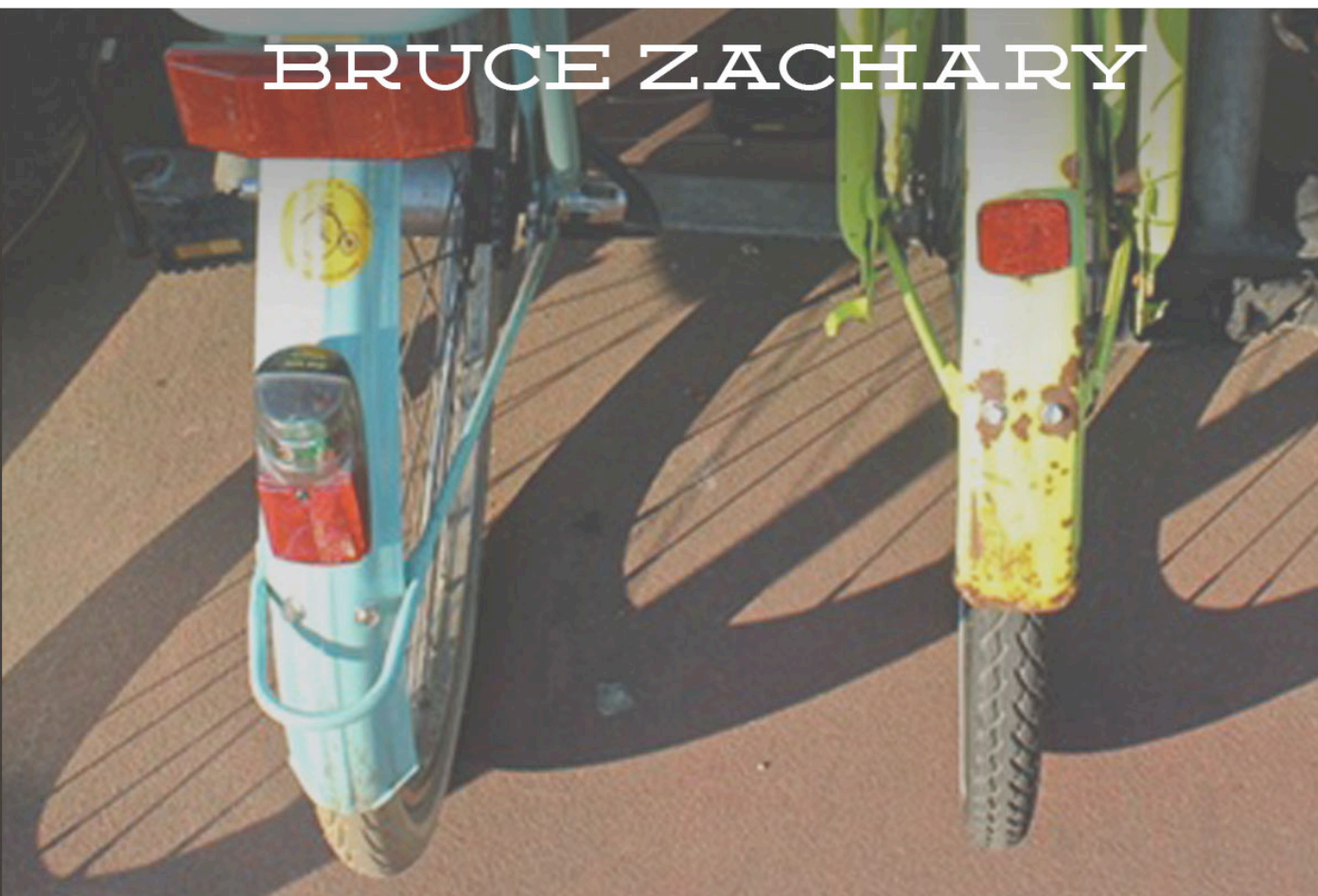


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“Both And is Better than Either Or”

Juxtaposition (noun): an act or instance of placing close together or side by side, especially for comparison or contrast.

The Bible is filled with juxtaposition: the sovereignty of God and man's will, Jesus' deity and humanity, man's labor and God's work, grace and truth, Mary and Martha, the prodigal son and his older brother, to name a few. Sometimes we approach these contrasting tensions as a dichotomy such that the two things are or are represented as being opposed or entirely different. When viewed as a dichotomy, we may tend to choose one and neglect the other. What if the Bible provides juxtaposition for us to learn the benefit of “both and” rather than “either or”? When we carelessly create a false dichotomy, when God did not intend to create a dichotomy, we choose “either or” and lose the benefits of “both and.” Let's discover what's so great about “both and” together.

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I. Spirit-Filled and Intentional

I'm not a huge pastry fan, but I do enjoy a fresh, hot slice of apple pie with a generous scoop of rich vanilla ice cream. The rich creamy ice cream luxuriously melting over the warm, flaky, buttery crust is pretty much irresistible. Pie a la mode was invented about 1885. Fruit pies were common in the Roman Empire as early as the 5th Century B.C., and ice cream was available to the general public by 1660. Yet, the world would wait more than 200 years before ice cream and pie were combined to offer something wonderful – pie a la mode. The moral of the story is that sometimes “both and” is better than “either or.”

What is the “both and” of making disciples? **We need to be filled with the Spirit and intentional to make disciples.** Some might assert that *not* being intentional is organic, and thus led by the Spirit. But that is not necessarily the case. Similarly, one could argue that if a process is intentional (strategic) that it is of man (flesh) and not of the Spirit. But again a review of the Scriptures reveals that the claimed divide between organic and strategic is a false dichotomy. In fact, a review of Paul's ministry at Ephesus demonstrates the “both and” principle [Ac. 19:1-7, Eph. 5:18].

Have you ever met people who claimed to be followers of Jesus, but there just seems to be something missing that makes you wonder if they really are submitted to Him? When Paul returned to Ephesus, he found some disciples and asked the curious question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” On no other occasion do we have a record of Paul making this inquiry. What prompted him to ask? Presumably, there appeared to be something missing in their spiritual lives that prompted the question. Perhaps they did not seem to be submitted to Christ as Lord, or empowered by the Spirit for Christian living, or Paul had some discernment about what was lacking. These disciples at Ephesus confessed their ignorance of the Holy Spirit [2]. Yet, the text indicates they were disciples and implies they were believers. They understood the need for repentance and desired to follow Jesus [4]. **But they were apparently seeking to become mature followers of Christ by the power of self-discipline or man's efforts rather than the power of God's Spirit.** And Paul recognized the problem. Subsequently the Holy Spirit came upon them and was manifest [6].

Jesus declared His followers would receive power to represent Him when the Holy Spirit came upon them [Ac. 1:8]. He likened it to being baptized with the Holy Spirit, or being filled with the Holy Spirit [Ac. 1:5, 2:4]. We believe that the baptism or filling of the Spirit is distinct from salvation, but may occur at the same time or subsequent to being saved. The work of the Holy Spirit empowers Christian living. Jesus affirmed that the Holy Spirit was available to those who sought this gift from God, and were yielded to Him [Lu. 11:9-13].

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, he instructed them, “be filled with the Spirit” [Eph. 5:18]. The Greek reveals that it is a commandment, and the tense can be translated, “being constantly filled with the Spirit.” The terminology of being filled might cause some to assume that we can leak the Holy Spirit like a car engine can leak a quart of oil. Or we might think that the issue is how much of the Holy Spirit a believer

has. Nevertheless, the issue is not how much of the Holy Spirit we have, but how much of us the Holy Spirit has. **Being filled with the Holy Spirit flows from being submitted to Jesus. We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit to be disciples and to make disciples.**

Once the believers at Ephesus were filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul began an intentional process to mentor them to become mature followers of Christ [Ac. 19:8-10]. Paul taught the Scriptures daily to make disciples and develop leaders at Ephesus. The Bible helps us to understand God and know His commandments. Thus Bible learning is critical to being a disciple. For example, it is through the Scriptures generally, and Ephesians specifically, that we learn how being filled with the Spirit is manifest in praise, gratitude, mutual respect, marriage, family, and the workplace [Eph. 5:17-6:9]. **But knowledge apart from the power of the Spirit to apply the lessons is futile. So, making disciples requires us to be filled with the Spirit and intentional (“both and”).**

The filling of the Spirit is so critical to disciple making that Paul issued a sober warning, “And don’t be drunk with wine in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit ...” [Eph. 5:18]. Please pardon the pun about “sober” warning, for the issue is not limited to excessive alcohol consumption. Paul’s exhortation is connected to the earlier cautions to live carefully as wise, redeem the time, and understand and do the will of God [Eph. 5:15-17]. Excessive alcohol consumption is an obstacle to being controlled by God, and is sin. And Paul notes that being drunk is dissipation. Dissipation relates to squandering energy, time, money, or other resources. The only way to way to avoid wasting resources and wasting a life is to be intentional to live as Christ’s disciples who make disciples. And the only way to be a disciple is to be controlled by God or filled with the Spirit. Thus the moral of this story is that sometimes “both and” is better than “either or.”

II. In the Temple and House to House

Some of us like the intimacy of a small community group gathering. Others like the dynamic of a larger gathering associated with weekend worship. Most of us have a preference. If we had to choose the small group experience, or the large group experience, we have an idea which one we would choose. Furthermore, week after week, month after month, and year after year people make preferences known by participating generally in one or the other.

What if God wanted us to experience the benefits of *both* the larger gathering *and the* small group? The early church met **in the temple and house to house** [Ac. 2:46]. This may be more than a mere description of their activity, but may be prescriptive for us. **Here are five reasons why we should gather in the temple and house to house:**

1. The larger assembly of people can magnify and manifest the Presence of God.

The larger assembly (temple experience) can magnify and manifest the Presence of God in a way that is distinct from the smaller group. In both a small and large group, believers assemble and God's presence is manifest. But in a larger assembly the experience and dynamics may be different because of the critical mass. I love the experience of gathering with hundreds and thousands and praising God together. The early church **continued with one accord in the temple** [Ac. 2:46]. The Greek term *homothymadon* refers to being of one mind, with one passion. The word is used only twelve times in the Bible and ten of them occur in the Book of Acts. The word is a compound of two words meaning to "rush along" and "in unison". The image of a larger community of faith displaying common passion for God and one another is beautiful to behold.

2. The larger assembly provides a setting for all to share their talents, and amazing gifts to be leveraged.

Again, the larger assembly provides a setting for all to share their talents, and gifts to be leveraged that is distinct from the smaller group. One aspect relates to the diversity of people and gifts, and the generally much greater opportunity to use them. Another difference relates to the opportunity to receive from very gifted leaders. The people who have special gifts of hospitality, intercession in prayer, ministering to young children, serving youth, teaching the Bible, and leading worship, are available for us to receive from. Together we can be blessed in a united experience that glorifies God as the giver of these gifts.

3. The small group facilitates loving God and living His word.

The New Testament contains more than twenty-five distinct exhortations to "one another." We are to love, serve, and pray for one another to name a few. The small

group (house to house experience) provides an ideal setting to grow in biblical knowledge and develop biblical character, *they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine* [Ac. 2:42]. It is an ideal setting to grow in our love for God. In a small group we can test our love for God by how we treat and relate with one another. Small groups can be messy, because they should compel us to grow by revealing that others are messed up, and we are messed up, and all of us need to grow in Christ. When I think poorly of another person in my smaller community I am often convicted that my attitudes are wrong, my judgment is inappropriate, and that they are a gift from God who is highly valued by Jesus. These experiences help me to discover where I need to submit to Christ and grow in order to actually live His word.

4. The small group helps to develop community and accountability.

The house experience is likely the best place to create intimate community (*koinonia* or fellowship). The sharing of Christ, meals, prayers, praise, doctrine, resources, and life builds bonds of unity [Ac. 2:42-47]. More than twenty-five years ago I was in a home Bible study where I learned to love God and live His word, and where I experienced biblical community. Despite the passage of a quarter century, and moving to a new area over twenty years ago, many of those people are still dear friends. Their love and community, and the accountability to show up and grow up, helped me to mature as a follower of Jesus. Smaller groups tend to create better accountability because they promote relationships where we know one another. In a larger assembly (temple) people may not realize whether you are there or not. But in smaller community (house to house) people know if you are there or not. That accountability can help you to grow.

5. The small group provides a platform to saturate a geographic area with the gospel and to more effectively love neighbors.

The temple can draw a larger group but the temple has a limited geographic focal point. In essence, People have to *come* to the temple. On the other hand, the house approach of smaller groups creates a platform to saturate a community. Instead of saying, "Come and see" we can say, "Go therefore and make disciples." We can love our neighbors as we have been commanded. We can love where we live, work or go to school, and play. If we join with others in geographic proximity to us, and discover God's love, then we should love God, one another, and our neighbors. That love is radically attractive and helps people to desire Christ and respond to His gospel.

When we gather in the temple *and* house to house we are likely to discover the added benefit, *And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved* [Ac. 2:47].

III. Love God and Love Neighbors

People are generally likely to appreciate the connection between loving God *and* loving their neighbors [Matt. 22:37-40]. Yet, most of us would have to agree that we tend to focus on one element to the neglect of the other. Those who appreciate the importance of social justice are likely to emphasize the “love your neighbor” aspect. Those who recognize the importance of sound doctrine tend to lean towards the “love God” command. **In Jesus’ words, everything God had said up to this point (the Prophets) and every command God had ever given (the Law) hung on these two things: love God *and* love your neighbor.**

Here are **four reasons why we are to love God and love our neighbor:**

1. The Great Commandment:

We are to love God supremely, because this is the greatest commandment, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment*” [Matt. 22:37-38, Deut. 6:4]. The critical work that reflects love for God is faith in Christ, “*This is the work of God that you believe in Him whom He sent*” [Jn. 6:29]. We are frequently reminded in the church that our faith in Christ is manifest by an attitude of dependence upon Him, and actions of obedience to Him. Similarly, we are focused on certain behaviors and spiritual disciplines: Bible reading, prayer, worship, serving, tithing, sharing your faith, and being involved in a small group. In essence, the implied message is, “Do these things and you demonstrate that you love God.” *While these are undoubtedly good attitudes and behaviors, they may unintentionally neglect what Jesus pointed to – love your neighbor. Nevertheless, you will not do what He has called you to do unless you love God.*

2. God inspires love:

The idea of loving God solely out of duty (commandment) doesn’t seem to inspire.

Similarly, God’s divine attributes should inspire worship, reverence, and awe. We marvel that God is eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, immutable, and able to create from nothing. But worship, reverence, and awe are distinct from *love*. I would suggest that God’s attributes alone do not inspire *love*. I believe (apparently along with the Apostle John) that our love for Him is inspired by His love for us, *We love Him because He first loved us* [1Jn. 4:19]. **His love is certainly demonstrated in a host of ways, but the most compelling is the cross [Jn. 3:16, Rom. 5:8]. This is the pinnacle of love.** Never before, and never since has such love been displayed. God gave His only Son to experience His wrath on our behalf, even while we were in rebellion to Him, so that we could be reconciled to Him. This completely sacrificial, unconditional, and incomprehensible display sets the bar so amazingly high. It not only assures me that God is worthy of my love, but provides the only true litmus test to

measure what I might describe as love. If I want to know whether an attitude or behavior is “love” then the standard to measure against is revealed by God.

Because God is worthy of my love, and has inspired love, I’m compelled to contemplate, “God how can I love you better today?”

3. Loving my neighbor proves my love for God:

Jesus revealed the second greatest commandment, “*And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’*” [Matt. 22:39, Lev.19:18]. The lawyer asked Jesus, which was the greatest commandment (i.e. singular). Yet, Jesus volunteers the second. Jesus reveals that these two commandments are so united that they cannot be separated. Furthermore, we are to demonstrate agape love to God *and* to our neighbor. It is my love for my neighbor and others that proves that I am His disciple [Jn. 13:35].

The connection between loving God *and* my neighbor is so clear and simple that it is humbling to honestly consider the implications. **I confess that I am often too busy to befriend and build relationships where I live, work (or go to school), and play.** I’m alarmed by the thought that a life filled with activity that is actually seeking to advance God’s kingdom can demonstrate love for God in the absence of love for my neighbors. How humbling it is to consider that we can be so busy doing our religious activity that we have no time to love neighbors.

Because my neighbor is worthy of my love, and loving my neighbor proves my love for God, I’m compelled to contemplate, “How can I love my neighbor better today?”

4. Loving my neighbor reveals God’s love to others:

We should consider loving our neighbors where we live, work (or go to school) or play. Many of us who declare our devotion to Christ would humbly confess how poorly we love our neighbors. We may not even know their names. We are unlikely to know much if anything about their life, marriage, or family. We probably haven’t discovered their challenges or rejoicings. A neighbor is not a project. Certainly we want to see all come to faith in Christ, but when we make that the objective then our neighbor feels exploited by our overtures. They are likely to feel like a cog in our program. Loving your neighbor is not a program, but an attempt to reveal God’s unprecedented love. The display of God’s love through human instruments is often a bridge to revealing Jesus and His gospel. But that work, as inspired by His Spirit, will likely hinge more and more in a post-Christian culture upon loving our neighbors.

Here are some simple ideas to help us love our neighbors better:

1. Simplify church life and life generally to create margin to spend time with neighbors where you live, work (or go to school), and play.
2. Befriend and build relationships with neighbors by asking, “How are you doing?”
3. When your neighbor is struggling ask, “Can I pray with (for) you?”

4. Ask, "How can I help?" If the request is reasonable and you are able then seek to help.

IV. Grace and Truth

I've been a Calvary Chapel pastor for over a quarter century. In the last twenty-five plus years I've personally observed Pastor Chuck embrace the desire to display *grace and truth*. I've seen our movement attempt to firmly lay hold of both pillars of grace and truth. I have received abundant grace and truth. And I have attempted to discover, declare, and display grace and truth in my life and ministry.

Through the years I have observed and gained some wisdom and perspective on both Christ, and man. I have learned that the truly rich theological and philosophical phrase, ***grace and truth***, is incredibly difficult to actually live. In my anecdotal observations, Jesus' followers (and His shepherds), tend to lean towards either ***grace or truth***. Most of us are unaware or unwilling to consider the idea that we have fallen from the tightrope of grace *and* truth and landed unintentionally in either or, rather than both and.

Here are four messy essential realities about grace and truth gleaned from John 1:14-17:

1. It requires dwelling:

The incarnation of Christ manifests grace and truth by dwelling among, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth"* [John 1:14]. Declaring biblical truth among my Christian friends in a small group, or on social media, or even the platform I'm blessed to speak, as a pastor is significantly easier than dwelling among. I am to *dwell with* people in a world that is generally characterized by a misunderstanding of the reality of God and His nature. And I also am to dwell among people that replace moralism and legalism for the gospel.

I was raised in an observant Jewish home. God has uniquely blessed my people: we are a covenant people, custodians of the Scriptures, primary light bearers, and a chosen people to bring forth the Messiah. I speak with and dwell with relatives that I love and they are biblically illiterate, blasphemous, moralistic, hedonistic, pluralistic, and materialistic (not unlike the people all around us). They make an off-hand remark like, "I believe in God, and He or She ..." Then it is real, and then it is messy. My flesh is not full of grace and truth. My theology and philosophy are sure, but how I manifest them in practice when I dwell among is the challenge. I can either bemoan their misunderstanding of God, condemn it, be frustrated by it, or actually be full of grace and truth.

Do you dwell among people with a different worldview? Do you know your neighbors where you live, work, and play? Do you know their worldview? How do you befriend, and build relationships with them? Or have you simply created a perceived Christian enclave with people who generally share your biblical worldview? Dwelling among is messy stuff.

2. It declares Christ:

Declaring Christ may be distinct from declaring a biblical truth, “*John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.’*” [16]. To reflect grace and truth I declare Christ. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus “*as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” [29]. He told his disciples, “*Behold the Lamb ...*” I must reveal Christ. They are to see Jesus. My declaration of truth is not adequate, “*The law was given through Moses*” [17]. **Jesus reveals grace and truth to sinners.** Tax collectors and prostitutes, proud and religious, male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor alike. Jesus comforted and confronted them all.

Do I declare Christ and love people who are separated from Him? Do I treat liars and covetous people differently than homosexuals? Do I declare a scriptural truth, but fail to declare Jesus?

3. It is deep:

Jesus is “*full of grace and truth*” [14]. Through Jesus we have access to “*grace for grace*” [16]. The supply of God’s grace and truth available in Christ is deep. It is deep beyond my imagination, and it reveals how shallow the supply I offer is. Being gracious with people and truthful is in reality incredibly messy. Yet, we tend to appease ourselves that we are full of grace and truth, because we try to forgive, and we seek to live and declare sound doctrine.

There are three great idols that tend to obscure grace and truth, a desire for: control, significance, and comfort. A desire for control rears its ugly head when I utter truth to control behavior. A quest for significance causes me use truth to manipulate or exploit so that my agenda (on God’s behalf) is pursued. A yearning for comfort causes me to disguise my discomfort in confronting sin as being gracious. When these idols are at work, grace and truth are limited. The supply becomes shallow.

Do I have a seemingly unlimited supply of grace *and* truth? Or does one side tend to flow more freely from the springs of my heart?

4. It is deliberate:

Jesus brings both “*grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” [17]. We recognize the reality that He is the source, and that His life and teaching reveal and reflect God’s immeasurable grace and truth. The revelation of grace and truth should stir us to yearn to know him more and display Him more day by day. Without being deliberate and intentional I will lean towards one or the other. I can become a spring that brings forth grace *or* truth rather than *both* grace *and* truth.

Sometimes my tendency to lean toward one side or the other can be revealed by my perception of others. Am I quick to label them as liberal (too gracious) or legalistic (too truthful) when they may in fact be within the boundaries of God’s standard, but simply different than me? Am I willing to be deliberate? Will I consider whether I am

leaning towards one side and possibly minimizing or neglecting the other? Will I strive to submit to Christ, and receive His correction so that His grace and truth flow from me?

V. Martha and Mary

Many of us read the tale of two sisters, Mary and Martha, and tend to identify with one sister more than the other. If you are a Martha type, distracted with much serving, then you likely feel guilty that you are not more Mary (or at least more merry). If you are a Mary type, sitting constantly at the feet of Jesus, you are likely to justify your life because Jesus declared that, *"Mary had chosen that good part, which would not be taken away from her"* [Lu. 10:38-42]. Rather than choosing the Mary or Martha life, perhaps we should pursue them both. **Imagine a third sister, Marsha, who embodied the best of both Mary and Martha? What would Marsha be like?** Here are three keys to be a Marsha in a Mary-or-Martha world:

1. Serve Jesus with healthy boundaries:

Martha loves Jesus and welcomes him into her home, *"Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house"* [Lu. 10:38]. **Martha would sit at Jesus' feet and listen to her Lord.** We sometimes overlook the fact that Martha was a devoted worshiper who sat at Jesus feet, but here it is, *"Martha had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet"* [39]. The fact that Martha's sister Mary *also sat at Jesus feet* means that Martha did too. The problems arose when Martha arose to serve.

When Martha felt that it was time to get to work serving Jesus she failed to create and respect healthy boundaries. The problem is not serving. Jesus does not correct Martha for her desire to serve Him. **Serving Christ is good and noble when there are healthy boundaries.** Here are four healthy boundaries to consider when serving Jesus:

A. Don't let the serving distract you.

"Martha was distracted with much serving" [40]. The Greek term speaks of being over-occupied or pulled apart. In this case, Martha was pulled apart from Jesus and her own spiritual health. I can so relate to the experience and feeling of being pulled apart from Jesus, because I was over-occupied and too busy trying to serve Jesus.

B. Don't question whether He cares.

Martha approached Jesus and said, *"Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone?"* [40]. Sometimes when I am trying too hard to serve the Lord, and I feel that others aren't I can question whether Jesus cares. Of course He cares. He may simply have not called me to do what I'm doing or how I'm doing it. Or perhaps, I'm simply not realizing that my expectations of others may not be God's expectations (no matter how reasonable I might believe they are).

C. Don't tell Him what to do.

Martha continues, *"Therefore tell her to help me"* [40]. Martha was frustrated with her sister, perceived that Mary is lazy and compelled Martha to do all the work. Martha

effectively orders Jesus to tell Mary to help her. Martha's *chutzpah* is remarkable to me, but also convicting. I've undoubtedly done the same in prayer. It is much healthier for me to simply serve the Lord with reasonable boundaries than to presume to tell Him to order others to share in the work I feel called to.

D. Don't be uptight.

"Jesus answered and said to her, 'Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things' [41]. The Greek terms relate to being anxious, troubled with cares, and can relate to seeking to promote one's interests. Whenever I'm uptight in serving God it is an indicator that I've neglected healthy boundaries. It can be manifest by worry, troubled with cares, or promoting my interests (even if they are also arguably God's interests).

2. Worship Jesus with focused attention and abundant adoration:

Mary loves Jesus and *sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word* [40]. She is a role model of devotion and worship. She avoided striving and stayed centered in the Lord's love. Here are three truths about worship:

A. Worship is needed.

Jesus gently corrected Martha and made clear that worship (focused attention and abundant adoration of Him) is what is needed, *"But one thing is needed"* [42]. Serving Jesus is important, but worship is the priority. **We must create healthy boundaries that provide margin** for us to spend quality and quantity time with Jesus.

B. Worship is a choice.

Jesus declared, *"Mary has chosen that good part"* [42]. You must choose to worship. Once you create margin then you have a choice of what to fill that margin with. **You must choose to prioritize and protect the time with Christ.** There are countless things competing for our attention, devotion, and adoration. Choose wisely, because you become like whatever you choose to worship.

C. Worship is worthy of protection by Jesus.

Once you create margin and choose to worship Jesus will honor your choice by helping to protect it. Jesus was quick to honor and protect Mary from her sister, *"which will not be taken away from her"* [42], and later from the disciples [Jn. 12:7].

3. Keep growing in grace, knowledge, and faith in Jesus:

Mary and Martha both loved Jesus, and like us they needed to keep growing. When their brother Lazarus died, Mary fell at Jesus' feet weeping and said, "Lord if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Jesus groaned and

ultimately was moved to tears [Jn. 11:32-35]. Presumably Jesus is not crying about Lazarus for He knows that his life will soon be restored. Perhaps Jesus is moved to tears due to his love for Martha and Mary and seeing their pain. But I suspect that Jesus wept, because He felt that if there was any worshiper who understood that He was the Christ and had all authority over life and death it was Mary. And Mary's response revealed the limits on her understanding about Jesus.

Jesus' miraculous restoration of Lazarus, and simply their continued experiences with Him helped Mary and Martha to keep growing in Christ [Jn. 12:1-7]. Martha served without complaint. Apparently Mary helped prepare the supper. And Mary extravagantly anointed Jesus as an expression of love and worship. **Both Mary and Martha blessed Jesus.** Instead of choosing to be *either* Mary *or* Martha, let's seek to be "both and."

VI. The Labor of God and Man

I have a certain admiration for handy people. The kind of people that rise early on a Saturday to gather building materials, tools, and supplies at their local mega-home improvement store, and then complete a home building project before the sun sets. There is a satisfying allure to the do-it-yourself [DIY] mystique. That message seems to be particularly attractive in a western culture that values individual achievement generally more than communal accomplishment.

I'm not a handy guy, but through the years **I've discovered that God has called all of us to be builders.** We are called to build with God in every realm of life. In considering the relationship between the labor of God and man it can be challenging to discern the proper balance or division of labor generally. Even more challenging is to understand that balance in the context of the various realms of life: personal, marriage, family, career, community, and calling. In an effort to discover the labor of God and man in every realm let's contemplate Ps. 127 – a psalm for builders. **Here are three essential truths about God's building plan, or the FYI on DIY:**

1. God must build:

Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it [Ps. 127:1]. Without God's divine leading and blessing, all of Solomon's wisdom, wealth, workers, and wives were futile for what he was called to build. Man's effort apart from God is vain or useless to produce any eternal or godly good. **Earthly wisdom and resources are inadequate to build the house that God has planned.** We are instructed to look to God and depend on Him for all that we are called to build. **People tend to neglect God in the areas where they are strongest.** *Where I am most gifted by God (talented) I am likely to be lulled into thinking DIY.* Similarly, as a result of experience and gaining a certain comfort level in any endeavor including marriage, parenting, career, or serving in a local church believers can engage in those routines without an awareness of our need for God.

B. Man must build:

It is vanity for man to work to build the house [1], guard the city [1], or work long hours generally [2] apart from God's blessing. Nevertheless, man is to work in the building endeavors that God has called Him to. *Where I struggle to build I am most likely to avoid my work.* I can justify my lack of building effort by pointing to God's sovereignty ["His perfect will is going to happen regardless of what I do or don't do"], or His grace ["It's all about what Jesus has done, so I don't *have to do anything*"]. Accordingly, we can attempt to justify our lack of building, and essentially shift all of our work in some areas to God. **In every realm, the labor of God *and* man is called for.**

C. The house is big:

What does “the house” refer to? Certainly Solomon had experience building the temple and royal palace, and David would have instructed his son about the building of the temple. But the Psalm also refers to family [3-5], and the city [2]. There is clearly more than the temple or royal palace involved. **Let’s consider the need for God and man to build in every realm:**

A. Personal:

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with an exhortation to be wise and *build your house* upon the rock [Matt. 7:24-27]. The wise man hears the teaching of Christ and does them. The greatest foundation for life is found in dependence upon Jesus and obedience to Him. Our labor is to do what Christ commands.

B. Marriage:

God has ordained marriage, created the institution of marriage, and blesses marriages. Yet a good marriage does not happen without effort. Married couples experience a unique reward for their labor, because there is no other human relationship where two become united as one [Eccl. 4:9-12, Gen. 2:24]. A good marriage takes work but a bad marriage takes more work. Thus it is wise to make the effort to bless your marriage along with God.

C. Family:

Ps. 127:3-5 reminds us that children are a heritage and reward from the Lord, *“Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one’s youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them ...”* God has established and blessed the family to pass the Christian faith from one generation to the next [Mal. 2:15]. Parents are responsible to model a healthy Christian life and transmit their faith to their children. Although a local church should support the family, it is primarily the parents’ responsibility and blessing.

D. Career:

Ps. 127:2 warns of the futility of excessive labor that is not required by God, *“It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.”* Working to advance in your career or gain material wealth that jeopardizes personal and relation health with God and others is unwise. God will give us the strength to accomplish all that He has called us to do. And whatever we do should be done to please God. But God has called us to a balanced work life, *“He gives His beloved sleep.”* We are to enjoy the Sabbath, and a healthy measure of sleep each night, as we trust God’s provision.

E. Community:

Ps. 127:1 draws our attention to the community, *“Unless the LORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.”* God is the ultimate source of protection and blessing for a community. And God’s people are called to love their

neighbor's as they love self. It requires effort, sacrifice, and margin to invest in befriending and building relationships where we live, work, study, and play. We are to be the ambassadors of Christ to our communities to transform our neighborhoods with the gospel.

F. Calling:

The house of God is a place where God's people gather to worship. Jesus has assured us that He will build His Church [Matt. 16:18]. Yet each of Christ's followers has received gifts to be used to build up the Body of Christ. The calling realm is where we advance God's kingdom beyond the home and career spheres. Our labor in the calling realm is often connected to a local church or Para-church ministry.

VII. He Must Increase and I Must Decrease

He must increase, but I must decrease. Jn. 3:30

There is something about our flesh that thinks, “While Jesus increases I can increase too.” Have you ever desired your influence to expand while expanding Jesus’ kingdom? Perhaps more people involved in your small group, or any area of ministry in or beyond the local church? Many of us have, and I confess that I have too.

John 3 records when Jesus came to Judea, multitudes received Him and were baptized. John the Baptist’s ministry was established and thriving, but now people were going to Jesus rather than John. John’s disciples were concerned. From their perspective John was “The Guy;” John, however, knew he wasn’t. John’s mission was to proclaim and point to Jesus who is the Christ – The Guy. John realized the ministry success he experienced was the result of God’s blessing and not anything inherent to himself, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven” [27]. John likened himself to the best man at a wedding (in this case the marriage of Jesus and His Church) who understands that the groom is to be blessed, and that the best man’s joy flows from helping to bring the bride to the groom and the groom’s contentment [29].

Then John declared the Kingdom principle, “He must increase, but I must decrease” [30]. The reason for this principle flows from John’s next declaration, “He who comes from above is above all ...” [31]. The reason Christ must be preeminent or exalted is because He is above all or has all authority. This all seems very reasonable to us as church leaders – He *must* increase. The stumbling block is the condition “I *must* decrease.” **For us to be effective leaders, we need to become less visible or prominent. It must be both He must increase and I must decrease.**

The consequences of failing to decrease are truly significant. Here are three reasons why he must increase and I must decrease:

1. First, as a church leader you compromise experiencing the joy John the Baptist discovered. **The formula: He must increase and I can increase too – does not produce lasting joy**, only intermittent glimpses of happiness that are connected to the church leader’s perception of ministry success or prominence.
2. Second, but more important, is the negative Kingdom impact. **Failing to decrease hinders the growth and development of other Kingdom leaders.** The longer we continue to hold onto the illusion that we are “The Guy” or “The Gal,” the longer we keep others from being used by the King for His Kingdom purposes.
3. Third, and most important, **our failure to decrease hinders the contentment of Jesus.** When the best man or friend of the Bridegroom fails to graciously take their rightful place in the background, Jesus’ contentment is impacted for Christ and His glory are obscured.

When we decide to live the principle, *“He must increase, but I must decrease,”* we are declaring our belief that He truly has all authority. That step of faith is likely to be tested. When our local church made the transition to a teaching rotation, some people who had been part of our church for years left for other local churches. Of course, our leadership was concerned, and some expressed that we should leverage my teaching to correct the decline. Nevertheless, we determined to stay true to the conviction that developing Kingdom leaders was what we were called to do. At the end of the first year the average attendance was the same as the preceding year (actually a one person variance). God was gracious indeed as He brought people who were blessed by the vision of a teaching team and the development of Kingdom leaders.

Again, in the second year when the growth of the church appeared stagnant, some urged me to become more prominent in the teaching ministry and leverage the gifts God had given me. I recognized that if I returned to a more prominent role I would not, in fact, decrease, as I believe God called me to do. So we remain committed to a course of developing Kingdom leaders and God has graciously blessed our transition towards being a more Kingdom minded local church.

The transition to Kingdom leader development requires a commitment to live the principle, *“He must increase, but I must decrease,”* that will inevitably be a challenge of faith and a struggle for some, or perhaps many, church leaders. For example, imagine a plan to develop multiple worship leaders and teams. The best worship leader and team are clearly ready for the big room – or Sunday morning gathering, but on the other hand, the other leaders and teams are gifted and anointed but clearly not as capable as the best. Putting the B-team on the platform is likely to be perceived as a potential risk to the local church. You can imagine the concerns: people won’t be attracted to the church, or people will leave. Those concerns tend to put a chilling effect on developing Kingdom leaders because of presumed threats to the “personal kingdom.” Nevertheless, you can’t develop Kingdom leaders without choosing to decrease and trust God.

If it’s all about Christ and not about you, choose to decrease so that He can increase. Come to grips with your own desire to be “The Guy” or “The Gal.” Decide to discover an area where you can decrease, then develop, share, and implement a plan to live the principle.

VIII. Wisdom and Stature, and Favor with God and Man

Jesus is the epitome of balance. I assume that Jesus is the only one who was perfectly balanced. The rest of us are out of balance as a result of sin and are seeking to attain balance in our lives. We are often aware of imbalance but don't make the necessary corrections towards balance. And of course there are instances where we are ignorant of our imbalance. Jesus is the model for how we want to live. Luke records Christ's human development and transition from boyhood to manhood with a summary statement, *"And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man"* [Luke 2:52]. In this brief summary, Luke identifies **four spheres that need to be healthy and balanced in our lives: wisdom, stature, favor with God, and favor with man.**

1. Stature [the body sphere]:

Moses observes that man's length of days is generally seventy years up to eighty years if you have strength [Psalms 90:10]. Not only are you reminded that your physical life is limited but you are also encouraged that by caring for health that your life can be more productive and enjoyed longer. Moses similarly observed the principle that obedience to God results in better health [Deut. 7:12-15].

Paul reminded young Timothy that bodily exercise profits a little compared to the eternal benefits of godliness [1Tim. 4:8]. The Greco-Roman world that dominated life and culture exalted the human form. The gymnasium was a center of life. Timothy undoubtedly was influenced by that culture and Paul was reminding his disciple not to put too much attention on his body since bodily exercise only provides a temporal benefit. Nevertheless, there is a benefit to exercise that should not be ignored. Fitness and strength impact your capacity to be productive and fulfill your calling. Some of the issues to consider include: regular medical check-ups, nutrition, exercise, predisposition to disease and abuse [e.g. drugs, alcohol].

2. Wisdom [the mind sphere]:

Wisdom is the godly application of knowledge that is often gleaned by experience. When God offered King Solomon anything that the king would ask for Solomon requested wisdom to lead God's people. His request pleased God, because the tendency of man would be to seek long life, riches, or the destruction of enemies. So God granted the request such that Solomon became the wisest man to walk the planet other than Jesus [1Ki. 3:5-12]. Solomon understood the value of wisdom.

James encourages us to seek wisdom from God in faith as God delights to impart wisdom liberally and without reproach [Ja. 1:5-7]. Thus growing in wisdom requires the pursuit of learning and risk to glean experiences to grow. A systematic intentional development of the intellect is necessary to effectively fulfill one's calling. Once you sense your calling in any particular season of life then obtain relevant information to

prepare you for your calling. For example, in college the selection of your major helps to focus your studies and education. In your calling it is helpful to read about Christian disciples as a foundation. Learn about theology and understand Christian doctrine generally. If you discovered a call to leadership resources focused on leadership are needed. Similarly a call to foreign missions would likely trigger a greater need and desire to read biographies of missionaries and learn about foreign missions generally.

Ask what you need to know for the life that God desires for you. *Acquire* knowledge by being educated in those subjects. *Apply* what you learn to grow. *Accountability* in your life provides confirmation that you are growing in wisdom as you stimulate the intellect and incorporate the lessons learned.

3. Favor with man [the soul sphere, personal relationships]:

The most important command is to love God with all that we are, and the second greatest command is to love others as you love yourself [Matt. 22:34-40]. The soul is the connection point for relationship with others. Consider the following list of seven key healthy relational traits:

- a. Compassion is the response to the suffering of others that motivates a desire to help [Eph. 4:32].
- b. Availability relates to serving others because you value them [Gal. 6:1].
- c. Forgiveness allows you to move forward in relationships because you have no yearning to avenge past wrongs [Col. 3:13].
- d. Encouragement instills others with hope and determination to act beyond their fears and sense of inadequacy to do what God has called them to [1Th. 5:11].
- e. Honor affirms and applauds those who do well while resisting the temptation to seek accolades for self [Rom. 12:10].
- f. Acceptance is the ability to receive value and harmonize with others who are different. You can accept people without affirming or approving of behaviors or attitudes that are beyond God's boundaries [Rom. 15:7].
- g. Humility is the capacity to defer to another's needs or authority instead of demanding preference for self [Matt. 11:29].

4. Favor with God [the spirit sphere, relationship with God]:

Spiritual maturity is more than following rules. A mature relationship with God is more than one-dimensional [e.g. prayer, Bible, or service]. It is characterized by love that is demonstrated by actions of obedience, attitudes of dependence, and the development of Christ-like character [Gal. 5:22-23]. It is associated with increased faith in God, understanding of God and experience with God.

Finding balance:

We have a few Christmas traditions in our home. On Christmas Day we open all the Christmas cards together and thank God for loved ones. We read the account of

Christ's birth and early years from Luke 2. Now that our sons are grown we each read a paragraph and talk about what it means. And we finish at Lu. 2:52 and look for balance.

We look at the four spheres described above and do some self-examination. How am I doing in each sphere? We rank where we are strongest to weakest. We share with one another for accountability and confirmation. Then we consider how we would like to change in the coming year to attain better balance. For example, I have found that my strongest spheres are my relationship with God and the mind/intellect sphere. I have had seasons that were so busy that I neglected my health and did not make as much time for relationships as I wanted. So I looked to make adjustments like seeking to get together with a friend or friends at least once a week to enhance the relationship sphere. In the body sphere, I still don't eat a very healthy diet and I don't get as much rest as I likely need, but I have started riding a bicycle regularly as a way improve in this sphere and I'm resting more. I personally like to review on a quarterly basis to see how balanced I feel. I'll also ask for feedback from my wife and some other friends to get their sense. Then I'll try to adjust as needed.

IX. Wise as Serpents and Harmless as Doves

How can Jesus' disciples be effective at reaching a community that is resistant, opposed, or hostile to Christ and the gospel? Jesus sends His disciples out as sheep in the midst of wolves [Matt. 10:16]. They were being sent as His ambassadors to a world that opposed His reign. His disciples are like seemingly vulnerable sheep among seemingly hostile wolves. But the key to being effective is not to be sheepish. As they were going to foray into the enemy's territory to gather the Lord's harvest they needed to be **both wise as serpents and harmless as doves**.

To be wise as a serpent relates to being prudent, careful, and intelligent. It has the connotation of street-smart, or able to deal with the likely challenges or dangers of life in a potentially threatening place. **To be harmless as doves** has an association of gentleness and peace; but the Greek term also relates to purity, innocence, and simplicity.

Here are three ways to be both wise as serpents and harmless as doves:

1. Relate:

Invest time to befriend and build relationships with people where you live, work, study, and play. For many Christians the majority of their social interaction is with other believers. Over a course of years the number of unbelievers that we develop relationships with tends to diminish. Befriending and building relationships is more than engaging. It requires an intentional investment of time and interest. In a pluralistic, materialistic, atheistic, post-modern, and declining Christian culture, unbelievers are increasingly disconnected from any church culture. Therefore, events connected with a local church or the gospel generally are likely to be increasingly less attractive to unbelievers, and thus less effective. For example, handing an invitation to your church's epic event to your local barista, supermarket clerk, or sandwich maker is not likely to stir them to attend. Although you may be a regular customer, unless you have gone out of the way to be extraordinary and create relationship the event itself does not have sufficient attraction. There are simply way too many epic experiences available in the world to compete with.

When we invest time to befriend and build a relationship we learn about people. We discover some of their interests, circumstances, triumphs, and tragedies. When we display the love of God by: simply listening with compassion and empathy, offering to pray with or for, offering to help, and sharing the hope of Christ, and our lives then our invitations to discover Jesus with us are more likely to be effective.

Wisdom helps us to realize the importance of relationships to reach a community that is resistant, opposed, or hostile to Jesus and the gospel. Wisdom helps us to admit that sometimes we are so busy, perhaps with church ministry and programs, that we lack the time to invest in relationships with our neighbors where we live, work, study, and play. Wisdom helps us to create margin by making changes in our lives so that we can develop relationships.

2. Respect:

Doves evoke a sense of peace and gentleness. To be harmless as doves requires us to relate to our community with a gentle and humble spirit that displays respect. We are to respect people as God's image bearers.

We are called to listen and discover another person's worldview with respect. Too often I have found myself not listening well or with respect. I can be talking with a person and interrupt them, or be rehearsing in my mind the rebuttal as they are speaking. Or perhaps trying to show the folly of their philosophy and my worldview is correct. It is only when I show genuine respect that I can be an effective ambassador for Christ.

Harmless as doves also relates to purity, innocence, and simplicity that can relate to my motive(s). In one sense, Christ's disciples want to see all come to faith in Christ. Yet, if I treat an unbeliever as a "project" they are unlikely to feel respected. If an unbeliever told you, "I will never become a Christian" how would you react? Would you continue to display love and compassion because that is what Christ has called us to do or terminate the efforts, because the "project" was doomed? If my motive is pure, to display God's love to my neighbors where I live, work, study, and play, and not to simply reduce my interaction with a person to an evangelistic project then I'm more likely to display respect.

3. Resist:

Resist the rant (I'm aware of the irony of my rant about the rant). Ranting on social media, or any other platform, in regard to the perceived immorality of the unbelieving culture is generally neither wise nor harmless. The seduction of the rant is the tendency to be affirmed (i.e. likes on social media) by those who share your worldview. But it is unwise and harmful because it tends to repel the people we are called to reach. As an aside, I don't believe that I've ever witnessed nor heard any anecdotal story of someone coming to faith in Christ because they read someone's rant and were convicted that they needed to repent and receive Christ.

It seems wise and harmless to be known for Who and what we are for rather than predominantly known for what we are against. If we keep the focus predominantly on Jesus rather than ranting about the perceived decline of the Nation or the culture's morals we may see more people come to Christ and our communities transformed. Sometimes, it is good to remember that Jesus did not come to save America, but to save Americans (and Nigerians, Canadians, Cubans, etc). Help people discover the reality of the transforming life of Christ, and the value of abundant eternal life that is available today. It is wise to display a life that transcends this material world and the shifting temporal circumstances. It is harmless to promote Jesus rather than your awesome local church and its amazing people.

X. The Power of His Resurrection and The Fellowship of His Suffering

The goal of the Christian life is to be conformed to the image of Jesus. We long to be like Jesus, and we struggle knowing that we have not yet attained what we earnestly desire. The Christian life is both our identity as image bearers of Christ, and our experience that on this side of eternity we don't fully measure up. We know that, as followers of Christ, the resurrection life is to be experienced on this earth, and more completely through the resurrection of our bodies. Paul pondered this struggle, and was inspired to contemplate how to make progress towards the desired goal, *"That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death"* [Phil. 3:10]. **Here is how you can progress towards the goal of a Christian life:**

1. That you may know Him:

To be conformed to Christ I must know Him. Paul understood that this required more than obedience to commandments. Furthermore, it is different than knowing about Him. And while it certainly contemplates knowing His words (teaching and doctrine) and works it is distinct.

When I met my wife, Karen, I marveled at her love for Christ, and the Bible. She was (and remains) the godliest woman I've ever met. She is also the loveliest woman I've ever seen. I knew some things about her, and began to get to know her. For the last twenty-five plus years, I've enjoyed getting to know her. I've enjoyed discovering her dreams, disappointments, desires, and distress. I've learned to anticipate how certain situations, words, and actions are likely to make her feel. I've become more aware of subtle nuanced non-verbal communication. We have shared emotional and spiritual intimacy and grown together towards the experience of unity. We have committed our lives in a covenant relationship to share life together. I've realized through the years that there are things that are important to her, like not driving too close to cars ahead of us (although we have different views regarding what is too close), and that I need to respect that boundary if I want our relationship to thrive.

Similarly, when I first met Jesus I marveled at who He is. I began to get to know Him. I discovered things that were a blessing to Him, and attitudes and behaviors that offended. I started to recognize the sound of His voice as I sensed Him speaking to me in a still small voice. His voice encouraged, directed, and even convicted me. And as I grew to know Him more, I sometimes discovered how I neglected important things that were obvious and that He kept repeating, but that I somehow failed to adjust my attitude and/or behavior. For example, I've recently been convicted that I have neglected Jesus' command to love my neighbor. Until I actually do this essential and basic commandment, and love my neighbor, I won't be conformed to His image.

2. That you may know the power of His resurrection:

To be conformed to Christ's image will take power. Jesus transcended the culture around Him (the world system), His flesh, and the enemy of men's souls. I must confess that this world and my flesh, let alone the devil, have a pull on me like gravity. Like a rocket trying to escape the earth's gravitational force, I need thrust (power) to transcend. Knowing Jesus means knowing the power that He makes available to enable us to be conformed to His image. The Christian life is characterized by the power of the resurrection given to us now for this life, as well as the life to come.

Resurrection power produces the fruit of the Spirit, and provides victory over life-dominating sin. That power allows me to experience progress in doing the God-inspired things I desire to do, and avoiding the God-inspired things I desire not to do. It is a power that energizes spiritual life, and a thriving relationship with our Lord. That power is pure and undefiled, and has no corrupt elements. On the other hand, earthly power is seductive and often corrupt. It is frequently pursued with less than pure (impure) motives. Earthly power is rarely pursued for the purpose of being conformed to the image of Christ. Resurrection power is sought for the purpose of being conformed to His image and thereby glorifying God.

3. That you may know the fellowship of His sufferings:

Paul had me at, *"That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection..."* It is the words that follow that tend to be a stumbling block, *"and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death."*

I generally am reluctant to volunteer to suffer, and I can't immediately recall a time where I prayed, "Lord I just want to suffer more so that I can be like You." Yet as I look back and reflect on my life what do I see? Certainly not a single set of footprints on a sandy beach where Jesus carried me. I see the Master Potter forming me His clay with just enough pressure to progressively conform me to His design. Suffering, has been a great tool to make me more like Jesus.

Jesus experienced the pain of betrayal, and I have known that pain too. And I had to then consider whom (or Whom) have I betrayed? That process made me a little more like Christ. Jesus knew the disappointment of followers who did not really follow, and I've had that experience too. And I had to consider how well do I follow Jesus or others? Again, the reflections made me a little more like Jesus. I've been ridiculed and wrongly accused like Jesus. And I had to consider how many times have I ridiculed and wrongly accused? After wrestling with God about those matters, I was a little more like Jesus. And in times of sorrow and anguish, I learned to cry out to my Father, as Jesus did. I discovered that I often feel closest to my God when I am suffering. And as a result of suffering I look more like Jesus than I would apart from suffering. Like the Arab proverb, "Too much sunshine makes a desert." I need the rain of suffering to produce fruit.