

The
Merchant
Church

LOVING FATHER MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE

OR:

(TRADING OUR WAY TO OBIVION IN N0RTH AMERICAN CHURCHES)

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FOREWORD

“Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works;”
Hebrews 10:24, KJV

Even as I seek in these pages to specifically challenge the church of North America, I honor its apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers and all who are serving God, within their calling, with all their strength. I pray as you read these pages that the Spirit of our Living God will encourage you to persevere with all your energy in the labor to which God has called you.

The Church belongs to Jesus. He is building it. It is His Body. He loves it and protects it. He is not pleased with those who are mean spirited, critical or judgmental towards His Bride. Therefore this book is written with great care. Its message has not come from a hard heart but from a heart of love. Let it challenge, let it convict, let it provoke you to love and good works.

INTRODUCTION

Is it possible that we are the church of whom Amos was speaking in Amos 8:11-12?
A church with lots of bread but with no ability to hear the words of the Lord.

“ ‘Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it.’ ”

Many in the church are starving while sitting at a banquet table loaded down with an unbelievable array of spiritual food! Somehow our thinking has been affected so that we now believe we can be satisfied with bread from this world that we make for ourselves rather than with Bread from Heaven. With our taste buds conditioned to the sweet flavors of false food the Bread of Life now lays like dust on our tongues.

There is an increasing awareness that the overall spiritual condition of the church of North America is desperate. Among the churches of the nations today, the North American church sits unique and privileged. No other church can match our investments in facilities and our display of spiritual activities. However, in the middle of all of our wealth and fanfare, a fog of complacency has drifted in.

We sit cloistered comfortably in our form fitting pews, under the expanse of beautifully designed steel structures that put to shame the palaces of kings in other parts of the world. We are awash in an unlimited supply of bibles, worship CDs, bible commentaries, spiritual books, study guides, DVDs, videos, audio tapes, 24 hrs/day radio and TV, endless preaching and teaching, and a continuous supply of conventions, with powerful prophets, pastors, teachers...it is an unending list!

Wealth beyond imagination! But in the midst of it all the church is an anemic, weak, skin & bone caricature of the vision presented in the Word! This has become the normal Christian condition. The means by which the powers of darkness have succeeded in bringing us to this state and by which they continue to war against us has become hidden.

There is a system operating in the earth, which affects us all. It is designed to sway the thinking of every human being. It has the ability to take ordinary people and cause them to act completely irrationally. It has the power to destroy relationships, separate families, divide churches and set nations at war.

Unwittingly, we who name the name of Christ have participated so deeply in this system that much of our thinking about the kingdom of God has become twisted. Settled, comfortable, complacent in our self-satisfaction, assured of God's good intentions towards us, we are unaware that how we think and what Jesus taught are literally worlds apart.

This system is operating freely within the walls of our North American churches. It is subtly (or not so subtly!) implanted in our minds, slipped in under the surface, sinister, powerful and all pervasive, affecting how we think, speak and act as members of the family of God.

For the purposes of this little book, as I seek to expose it and our involvement in it, I will call it the 'Merchant System'. We need to see it for what it is, know how it operates and take the opportunity to allow the power of the grace of God to free us.

1

DEVELOPING THE MERCHANT MIND

Our most precious possession is our mind. It is constantly under the assault of subtle deceptions offered up by the enemy. It is the place, where strongholds are built, maintain their control, or are torn down. This ‘merchant system’, which predates the creation of man is used by the ruler of darkness to hold the world in his sway. Through this system, the enemy has demonstrated his ability to affect the thinking patterns of humanity and to function freely in the Church of Jesus Christ.

SETTING THE SCENE

I spent thirty years worshipping in this merchant system. I was a businessman and over the years owned a unique variety of businesses...and thought I was having a ball. I spent the same thirty years in the church, much of the time involved in lay ministry, teaching and preaching while I attempted to raise my four children to know the Lord Jesus. All the while unaware that my life was actually a mixture of two totally opposing systems.

To me my life seemed normal. As a part of this current generation, I developed the same thinking and experienced life in much the same way as my friends in the next pew. I experienced God’s call into the ministry when I was 19, but thought I still had my own choices and went into business instead. After 30 years in business, living in rebellion to God’s call to preach the gospel, in His awesome mercy, He called again. This time, as the blinders over my eyes hiding my real heart condition were removed one at a time and as I repented for the sin in my heart, I was prepared by the power of His Grace to answer ‘yes’ to His call. When I finally submitted fully and went in obedience, seeking to flow closely with the Spirit’s gentle blowing wind, He told me that the time had not been wasted. The thirty years was actually preparation and He was willing and able to use everything, even the years of rebellion, for His Glory.

CREATING THE NEED

I remember when as a young man I turned away from the call of God and entered a life of trading. It began by being taught to sell life insurance. The first thing my teachers said was that I must create a sense of *need* in the mind of the client. I was told that creating need was the primary basis of all selling, as without a need there was no way that the client would be willing to part with his money. Once the client could be convinced that he *needed* my product, some of his money was going to be mine. So I was encouraged to invest significant effort in learning to use their techniques with which I would be able to convince the client that he needed my product.

When I learned to be aware that I had been successful in establishing the impression of *need* in the mind of the client, I was taught to turn my attention to *increasing the size* of that need.

CREATING VALUE THROUGH COVETOUSNESS

So, after creating the perception of *need*, I was taught to establish an awareness of the *value* of my product in the client's thinking. The fact that the client needed my product would determine my success in selling it, but the *value*, which he placed on my product, would determine how much he would pay for it!

Value was very important to me, the seller, because it would determine the level of my personal income. *Ultimately both need and value would exist only in the mind of the client.* Therefore I learned I must *influence* his thinking to create both of these things.

Value was going to determine how much the client *wants* my product. *Want*, or *desire* is a powerful tool in the process of influencing the actions of another because it is based on *covetousness*.

I was not a hesitant student, because I quickly understood that as a trader I would not be able to sell my product at the price I *coveted* unless my client *coveted* my product as much as I *coveted* his money. So stirring up covetousness in his heart was the way to convince him that he valued my product more than he valued his money...allowing me to succeed in my own goals.

When I would begin the conversation with a client he would have no need of my product nor would he attach any value to it. So, I was taught how to convince him that he needed my product, then how to convince him that he valued it, using his own covetousness in the process.

Covetousness isn't a word I hear a lot these days, either in society or in church. It seems to have lost its meaning in our modern thinking. It used to imply pending judgment since the Lord God on the mountain stated fairly clearly "**thou shalt not covet**". Our problem is that the entire economic structure we live within is built on covetousness, and if it is still *bad*, we are in big trouble!

So the easiest thing is to turn covetousness into something 'good'. Then we are fine!

AWAKENING PRIDE... THE MERCHANT'S POWER

Next I learned that if I am truly going to succeed in causing the client to covet my product, I must awaken something else in his heart to strengthen my trading position. *I must bring his pride into the picture.* If I can prick his pride awake it will strengthen his desire (covetousness) and later he will be amazed at how much of his money I left with.

Need is an acceptable concept because we genuinely require food, clothing and shelter. But we don't like to talk about covetousness and pride because they still have the ability to awaken the conscience. Since they can't be talked about openly, to complete my trade I had to learn how to broaden the definition of need, until it encompasses covetousness, and hides pride. I take my client who is convinced that I have his best interests at heart and I create a perception of need and value in his mind so he will buy my product. I stir up covetousness (he doesn't see it as covetousness) so that he will desire it to the extent that he will accept the price tag as the real value. Then I awaken his pride (but don't let him see it as pride) and he will go into debt to buy my product. *Success!!!!*

As I began to function in this way, my thinking subtly changed and I accepted two things. First, that it was all right for me to need and want someone else's money. (covetousness) Secondly, I in fact, deserved their money! (pride) This is the basis for our economic system!

In those days I didn't actually think in terms of *need, covetousness* and *pride*, I just began to instinctively react to peoples' responses. Some time went by before the Holy Spirit, through the Word, revealed to me what I had been doing.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Grateful to the learned men in the insurance business, with the basic principles of merchandizing fresh in my young mind, I entered a new business. Unaware that I was now under the care of much more sinister tutors, I descended into new heights of learning in the merchant system.

I was in the used piano business, rebuilding and selling restored pianos...but I had a problem. I could not seem to get people past the *need* stage and get them to *covet* my pianos enough to buy them.

These pianos were absolutely wonderful instruments with awesome tone quality. They were beautiful works of art, made with wood that had disappeared off the face of the earth two generations ago. But no one was buying and I was starving. Customers would come into my store, mostly convinced that they needed my product. (Suzy was about to start piano lessons) They had already chosen to buy my particular type of product, an older, fully restored piano. (A new piano was a poor investment because it would depreciate rapidly and its tone quality was less than the older ones.) But, I just couldn't get their money out of their pocket and into my pocket.

The following is how I learned (or was taught) to succeed by putting into practice the principles of this wonderful system of trading.

One day I had an 'inspiration' (it took me years to know where it came from). *My prices were too low!* So I went around my store and added \$1000 to every price tag. I started selling pianos immediately! It worked so well that I went around and added another \$1000 to every price tag. I sold even more pianos. Soon I couldn't keep up with the demand!

My new success had a most interesting effect in the market place. My competitor, who was selling the same product, was having difficulty making ends meet. He decided to 'wipe me out' and dramatically lowered his prices.

I sold more pianos! I expanded the business, hired more people and purchased rebuilt pianos from other shops to resell in mine. I was not starving any more. I was flush with success and my *own* wisdom so I began what I thought was *my own* experiment with human nature.

I had begun to understand why I had not been able to sell Suzy's Dad & Mom a piano even though Suzy needed one. They couldn't buy the ones I was selling under my original pricing scheme because the prices were too low. I had been telling them that the piano they were looking at was the best thing since sliced bread, looked better, sounded better, played better, was made with better materials etc, than a new piano...and was even priced lower! Sounds like a great buy! So why wouldn't they buy it?

Because, the price was too low!

When we set value on the foundation of pride the price tag really matters!

THE THOUGHT PROCESS

“If these pianos in front of me are so much better, why are they so much cheaper? Something does not compute. Suzy’s friend Jennifer just got a piano. (Which is the second reason why Suzy has to have one.) Jennifer’s parents bought her a ‘new’ piano for \$3000. Everyone in music knows that older pianos are better than new ones, so the piano I buy has to be older. Since the only measure of quality and value I have is the price tag, I can’t buy it if it costs less. If the price is lower then there is a hidden catch somewhere, and I will buy my piano elsewhere.”

I have a need, but I want something of value, I know value when I see it because I’m not stupid (pride). I know what others paid and I’m not going to be taken in (pride again). *Whatever you do at this point, don’t start analyzing your thinking processes as you bought your shiny new car!*

This is a microcosmic description of our entire economic system. I am not planning on tearing down our economic system. I am just trying to establish the fact that the system only really works on a grand scale when you can successfully hide covetousness and pride under the guise of need.

HOW HIGH (OR LOW) CAN YOU GO?

Now back to what I thought was *my* little experiment in human nature. I decided that since I couldn’t keep up with sales I would try to determine where the top end of covetousness was.

I selected certain pianos on the floor and increased their prices (value) even more. I was careful to choose the most attractive ones, which were generally of the best quality also. I jacked their prices up to the ceiling and they became my best sellers! This allowed me to gradually raise the prices of every other instrument. It was fun making money!

But I had created another problem for myself ...I had no low priced pianos. I was soon sending away those people able to remain free of manipulation, willing or able to spend only a reasonable amount of money. I solved that problem by creating a new class of piano...the ‘starter’ piano. These pianos were never refinished, but had been put in good serviceable condition. I felt that I was genuinely interested in giving everyone an opportunity to get a piano for their Suzy and I sold numbers of very good instruments, some every bit as good as the ones I was selling for much higher prices.

I now had a wide selection with a full range of prices, and I found that I had the perfect tool to increase covetousness and awaken pride. Whenever someone came in and complained about the high prices I could always point out that I didn't want them to buy anything *beyond their means* and would show them a *starter piano*. If they were operating in covetousness and pride, (there's no way 'our' Suzy is going to play on a *starter piano!*), I had them, and could sell them whatever I wanted!

Now although actual quality did vary to some degree in association with the price range there was really no absolute correlation between the true quality of the instrument and the price, particularly in the higher price ranges. What mattered more there, was attractiveness.

One day the power of my new knowledge of merchandizing was brought home in a startling way. I was moving my business to a different location. So I was selling out my floor stock. I had one particular piano, which at best was only low average in real quality. However it was just beautiful to look at! Made with gorgeous oak, carved, paneled, refinished in our own unique way of bringing out the highlights in the wood grain...just lovely. So of course it was priced high...for the discerning buyer!

A customer came in and fell in love with it! (Coveted it strongly.) He wanted to get a deal and offered a lower price. I said no. The price on the tag was the top end, at that time, \$4500. The average price of a similar new piano was \$3000. He was insistent that he really needed that piano. I still refused his offer and he got quite upset. So I told him of a man I knew who had a restored oak piano in his shop which was actually a better quality piano than the one he was looking at. I suggested that he buy that one, as it would be a better deal (cheaper). Remember the fellow I mentioned who lowered his prices to put me out of business? I gave the customer the address and he immediately left and went to the other shop.

When he walked out of my store I phoned my friend in the other shop and told him which piano of mine the customer was interested in. He was a good technician...so he knew from the name brand that my piano was a lower quality instrument than his. I told him the price I was asking. He was a poor trader...so he thought that my price was too high. I told him to show the customer his oak piano and suggested that, if he put a good price on it first, then gave the customer a bit of a discount off the price tag, he would make a profitable sale. I knew this man, I had trained him in piano rebuilding, I also knew he was starving.

Three hours later the customer came into my store, slapped \$4500 cash on the counter, wrote out his address, told me to deliver the piano and the receipt that afternoon and stormed out of the room! He was hot! I phoned my friend and asked "WHAT DID YOU DO TO THAT GUY?" He said, "when you called I had my piano priced at \$2800 so I lowered my price to \$1700 before he got here and I told him your piano was junk and you were ripping him off. Why, what happened?" I told him, and he was silent on the phone.

When we are gripped by *pride* and in the grasp of *covetousness* but have hidden both under guise of *need*, we simply must have what we *want*. He had to have my piano...it was impossible for him to buy the cheaper piano. *In fact the cheaper it was, the more impossible it was for him to buy!*

To some degree we are all involved in the process of trading I described above. We are all willing to trade. We trade what we have in hand to get what we have determined will satisfy our present *need*. Since we are all part of this 'merchant system', I think we need to know more about it.

Where did it come from?

Does it really affect the church?

Is it necessary to be concerned about it?

What do you think?

2

THE MERCHANT SYSTEM

Every system has a beginning. The human experience with this merchant system began early...in the Garden of Eden. Remember Eve and the serpent. Paul tells us that Eve was deceived but Adam was not. Let's look at the process by which Eve was deceived into making a trade with the serpent.

Genesis 3:1-7 says: **“Now the serpent was more *cunning* than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, ‘Has God indeed said, “You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” ’ ”** (emphasis mine)

It is interesting to note that the serpent was ‘cunning’, and restated God’s words in such a way that he created a vastly different impression of what God required. An impression, which caused Eve to begin thinking in a totally different way and led to a successful trade...for the serpent!

You see in Genesis 2:15-17, God actually did say that they could not eat from every tree in the garden. He said, **“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”**. It’s pretty clear that there was a tree they couldn’t eat from, so when the serpent came along saying, **“You shall not eat of every tree of the garden”** he was just stating the facts, right? Not really. God had prefaced His **“you shall not eat”** with this incredible statement of freedom and provision: **“of every tree of the garden you may freely eat”**. The serpent was interested in making a trade, and just happened to forget the first part of God’s word so he could focus her attention on the only exception.

So he began by turning the generosity and provision of God into restraint and limitation...all with just a few words. Eve had no ‘needs’ whatsoever. Everything was provided for her including the opportunity to walk and talk with God each evening. I am sure every question she asked during those intimate times, was freely answered by a loving God.

So why was she interested in what the serpent was marketing? She had an unlimited number of things to eat from the trees and plants of the garden and the Source of all wisdom walked and talked with her every day. The work, which she and Adam did in tending the garden, gave their lives purpose. And they had authority to carry out their purpose as they had been given dominion over the earth and all living things.

“Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’ ” Genesis 1:28 (emphasis mine) Dominion, control over the living creatures of this world, particularly man, is what the serpent was bargaining for. “Just listen to me, not God; just follow my instructions, not God’s. Let me show you how to be free to make your own decisions. You need what I am offering you...it will be good for you!”

When he said to the woman, **“You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”**, he was still speaking a form of the truth. We will see in a moment how close to the truth that was. Eve was not really interested in checking the literal accuracy of what the serpent was saying. She had begun to *need* the food, (“the woman saw that the tree was good for food”) and *covet* the sensual gratification, (“that it was pleasant to the eyes”) and with awakened *pride*, seek her own wisdom. (“a tree desirable to make one wise”).

The serpent was saying, “Listen gal, I’m helping you out here. The other guy is selling something of lower value. This deal is going to enhance your life, put you in the driver’s seat and make the folks around here sit up and take notice. It’s not going to be a bad experience, in fact, this beautiful fruit is real tasty. Just allow me to show you that what you get will be worth it. Trust me, I’m not lying, I’m just talking about what God said.”

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.” Genesis 3:6

Look at how God then describes what happened to them in Genesis 3:22: **“The LORD God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.’ ”** (emphasis mine) Remember what the serpent told Eve would happen, she would **“become like God”**...that’s close to what God said actually happened.

The difference was that God saw eating fruit from that tree as an act of disobedience. He knew that Eve was choosing to submit to the serpent instead of to Him, her Father. Deceived by the serpent, with the desires of her own heart stirred into being by the enemy’s trading skills, she chose to step into the serpent’s system. Eve saw eating the fruit as fulfilling a legitimate need. So she took something tasty that she coveted because in her pride she felt that she had the right to make her own decision and become **“wise like God”**.

How skillfully the serpent created the need, brought covetousness into existence until need became want, and then quickly pricked life into pride. Eve became deceived...led into the sin of pride by a few words, willing to trade her glorious purity, holiness, her relationship with Father to fulfill a need that had been created in an instant and only ever existed in her mind.

The next amazing thing is that Adam now participated in her sin willfully – he was not deceived. **“Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat of it.’ ”** Genesis 3:17

He made a decision. He had all the information. He understood what he was doing. He made the decision that what my wife can do, I can do too. I like good tasting fruit...so I'll do my own thing. A decision to deliberately act in opposition to the specific instructions of God. He disobeyed God and accepted the serpent's alternative. In disobeying God, Adam willingly submitted to the serpent and completed the trade. As they stepped into serpent thinking, Adam and Eve took with them the dominion over every living thing that God had invested in them.

Now, as the servants of the serpent, everything that Father had given man came under the influence of the serpent through his new servants, Adam and Eve, and through all their descendents who would willingly, one by one, step into his world system.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...” Romans 5:12 (emphasis mine)

So things of unbelievable agony for the whole human race, *sin* and *death* were traded into existence. The serpent made his most successful trade of all time, gaining everything available and giving nothing to man in return except disappointment, disillusionment, pain, bondage, sickness, suffering, death and separation from Father!

Satan has not changed his tactics. What worked in the garden works now. Only time, and the particular fruit we desire, separates us from the experience in the garden. The reality is that we are constantly in danger of being just as deceived as Eve, and are often just as willfully rebellious and full of pride as Adam.

Whenever we are operating in the serpent's system and allow covetousness and pride to rule us, we *will* have what we *will* have, and we reach out and pick our own fruit.

VALUE IS DETERMINED BY OWNERSHIP

What the serpent instigated in the garden was a new system on the earth...a system of trading, or merchandizing. He persuaded Eve that her need was such that she would be better off to trade what she had for a moment of personal gratification. A good trade for satan, from his perspective, not too good for all mankind, which includes you and me.

This new merchant system now became the standard operating system. Remember Cain and his sacrifice?

“Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the LORD. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the LORD respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.” Genesis 4:2-5

Cain brought his own version of the sacrifice. After all, don't *we* have the right to determine how *we want* to worship *our own* God? Cain's vegetables were just as valuable as Abel's sheep...in fact probably more valuable. He had actually worked for them, produced them by the sweat of his brow. All Abel had done was sit around while the sheep ate grass and grew fat. Cain knew the real value of his product...it shouldn't be too hard for God to see that too. He thought, "I can make a trade here. God said, sheep, I don't have sheep, but I own something more valuable to me than sheep so I'll just make a trade." The level of Cain's pride is amazing. He had the privilege of discussing his trade directly with God, yet still he argued...refusing to accept God's word. It didn't work. Coveting God's acceptance of his brother's offering, filled with wounded pride, he killed his brother.

Value is determined by how accessible the thing is to us. If we own it, if we have invested in it, if it is in our hand...then it's valuable and we think that everyone else including God should accept the value we place on it.

IT'S JUST GOOD BUSINESS

Now in the serpent's merchant system, man's new thinking allows for intense manipulation of everyone around him, using every means including Cain's method, murder, to trade up to what the other guy has. Amazingly, we think it's not manipulation but just good business...good merchandizing...good selling! We are so full of pride today that not only do we love this system, we actually claim we invented it.

Remember I have something and you have something. I have a piano and you have money. I want your money...I just have to make you want my piano and your money will be mine. Since we'll both be happy and satisfied at the end of the trade, it's just good business. A successful trade with two happy participants proves that the process is perfectly legitimate. Of course, I might have just a twinge of conscience if I paused to dwell on the fact that the poor mother on a low income has just been persuaded to finance herself to the limit for the next three years to buy my piano. But...there's no reason to go there because in the end we both got what we wanted. In the garden Eve and the serpent made a trade, one that the serpent had persuaded Eve was in her best interests, *a trade that she wanted as much as he did.*

In the merchant system, *success* determines what is right. The end doesn't even have to justify the means because we are all part of the system that has just worked for both of us and no one even asks the question.

If it works, it's right. If both are happy at the time the trade takes place, it's right. If no one seems to get hurt immediately, it's right. If it's available, possible and will satisfy me, it's right!

Any method used to complete the trade becomes legitimate because it all boils down to good selling technique. We all respect a good salesman who can stir up our covetousness and pride without making us aware of it in the process! It's the American way. It's the free enterprise system. It's apple pie and ice cream. Touch this system and you have a war...instantly.

That seems to be what James says in chapter 4:1-2. **“Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war.”**

GOOD BUSINESS MEETS GOD BUSINESS

Let's look and see how the Bible describes this merchant system we are talking about and the success which comes from using it.

Tyre was one of the great cities of the ancient world. In the description of Tyre, God reveals the system that satan still uses to sway the thinking of the whole world. The following, in Ezekiel chapter 27, gives us a wonderful description of the merchant system. It also helps us realize that perhaps the forefathers of our nations didn't really invent *our* free enterprise system.

“Say to Tyre, ‘You who are situated at the entrance of the sea, merchant of the peoples on many coastlands, thus says the Lord GOD:

“O Tyre, you have said,

‘I am perfect in beauty.’

Your borders are in the midst of the seas.

Your builders have perfected your beauty.

They made all your planks of fir trees from Senir; they took a cedar from Lebanon to make you a mast. Of oaks from Bashan they made your oars; the company of Ashurites have inlaid your planks with ivory from the coasts of Cyprus. Fine embroidered linen from Egypt was what you spread for your sail; blue and purple from the coasts of Elishah was what covered you.”

“Inhabitants of Sidon and Arvad were your oarsmen; your wise men, O Tyre, were in you; they became your pilots. Elders of Gebal and its wise men were in you to caulk your seams; all the ships of the sea and their oarsmen were in you to market your merchandise. Those from Persia, Lydia, and Libya were in your army as men of war; they hung shield and helmet in you; they gave splendor to you. Men of Arvad with your army were on your walls all around, and the men of Gammad were in your towers; they hung their shields on your walls all around; they made your beauty perfect.

Tarshish was your merchant because of your many luxury goods. They gave you silver, iron, tin, and lead for your goods. Javan, Tubal, and Meshech were your traders. They bartered human lives and vessels of bronze for your merchandise. Those from the house of Togarmah traded for your wares with horses, steeds, and mules. The men of Dedan were your traders; many isles were the market of your hand. They brought you ivory tusks and ebony as payment. Syria was your merchant because of the abundance of goods you made. They gave you for your wares emeralds, purple, embroidery, fine linen, corals, and rubies. Judah and the land of Israel were your traders. They traded for your merchandise wheat of Minnith, millet, honey, oil, and balm. Damascus was your merchant because of the abundance of goods you made, because of your many luxury items, with the wine of Helbon and with white wool. Dan and Javan paid for your wares, traversing back and forth. Wrought iron, cassia, and cane were among your merchandise. Dedan was your merchant in saddlecloths for riding. Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your regular merchants. They traded with you in lambs, rams, and goats. The merchants of Sheba and Raamah were your merchants. They traded for your wares the choicest spices, all kinds of precious stones, and gold. Haran, Canneh, Eden, the merchants of Sheba, Assyria, and Chilmad were your merchants. These were your merchants in choice items -- in purple clothes, in embroidered garments, in chests of multicolored apparel, in sturdy woven cords, which were in your marketplace.”
Ezekiel 27:3-24

There is more, but you get the picture. This was a city full of successful traders. Even we, immersed in the pride of our own self-importance at this point in history have to recognize...they had it right! They were merchants of great excellence! They had honed their skills to a sharp edge. They really knew how to sell pianos!

There was a little problem though, because as we read on, we discover that God is not as impressed with them as we are. In fact, He is about to move against them. Judgment is proclaimed and they are going to be destroyed.

“The ships of Tarshish were carriers of your merchandise. You were filled and very glorious in the midst of the seas. Your oarsmen brought you into many waters, but the east wind broke you in the midst of the seas. Your riches, wares, and merchandise, your mariners and pilots, your caulkers and merchandisers, all your men of war who are in you, and the entire company which is in your midst, will fall into the midst of the seas on the day of your ruin.

The common land will shake at the sound of the cry of your pilots. All who handle the oar, the mariners, all the pilots of the sea will come down from their ships and stand on the shore. They will make their voice heard because of you; they will cry bitterly and cast dust on their heads; they will roll about in ashes; They will shave themselves completely bald because of you, gird themselves with sackcloth, and weep for you with bitterness of heart and bitter wailing. In their wailing for you they will take up a lamentation, and lament for you: ‘What city is like Tyre, destroyed in the midst of the sea? When your wares went out by sea, you satisfied many people; you enriched the kings of the earth with your many luxury goods and your merchandise. But you are broken by the seas in the depths of the waters; your merchandise and the entire company will fall in your midst. All the inhabitants of the isles will be astonished at you; their kings will be greatly afraid, and their countenance will be troubled. The merchants among the peoples will hiss at you; you will become a horror, and be no more forever.’ ” Ezekiel 27:25-36

There was no question that judgment was going to descend on Tyre. It was going to be absolute and everyone would see it. The most important question we need to answer is, why such severe judgment? After all, they were just good businessmen, right? Since we also are under the sway of the same merchant system that controlled Tyre, it might be good to understand why God isn't happy. We know that they were successful businessmen, because we can see the results of their trading...but God sees what is in their hearts! **“For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”** 1 Samuel 16:7 (emphasis mine)

As we look at the next passage God addresses the man in charge, the prince of Tyre. (He could teach anyone how to sell pianos!) The Lord reveals through him the true condition of the hearts of the merchants of Tyre.

“The word of the LORD came to me again, saying, ‘Son of man, say to the prince of Tyre, “Thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because *your heart is lifted up*, and you say, “*I am a god, I sit in the seat of gods, in the midst of the seas*,” yet you are a man, and not a god, though you set your heart as the heart of a god (Behold, you are wiser than Daniel! There is no secret that can be hidden from you! With your wisdom and your understanding You have gained riches for yourself, and gathered gold and silver into your treasuries; by your great wisdom in trade you have increased your riches, *and your heart is lifted up because of your riches*),’ therefore thus says the Lord GOD: ‘Because *you have set your heart as the heart of a god*, behold, therefore, I will bring strangers against you, the most terrible of the nations; and they shall draw their swords against the beauty of your wisdom, and defile your splendor. They shall throw you down into the Pit, and you shall die the death of the slain in the midst of the seas. Will you still say before him who slays you, “I am a god”? But you shall be a man, and not a god, in the hand of him who slays you. You shall die the death of the uncircumcised by the hand of aliens; for I have spoken,’ says the Lord GOD.” Ezekiel 28:1-10 (emphasis mine)

Do you notice something familiar about the following; **“Because your heart is lifted up, and you say, ‘I am a god’ ”**? It sounds remarkably similar to the discussion in the garden. Remember the serpent’s words, **“You shall be as gods”**. How **“lifted up”** the heart becomes when pride enters. Then with that heart condition, God says of man, **“You have set your heart as the heart of a god”**.

Remember how pride is used as the basis of the serpent’s trading system? Through what has happened in the life of this man, the prince of Tyre, Father gives us a description of successful trading awakening pride in the heart of man. **“With your wisdom and your understanding you have gained riches for yourself, and gathered gold and silver into your treasuries; by your great wisdom in trade you have increased your riches, and your heart is lifted up because of your riches.”** (emphasis mine)

A good businessman...great trading wisdom...wonderful riches gained for his own personal gratification...great pride! Pride...which made him think he was his own god. God of heaven above was about to deal with this man’s pride, and He is the same God today. In the time of His choosing, He deals with pride and disobedience in the heart of every man.

God has revealed the merchant system’s ability to hide the tie between riches and pride. Riches feed the pride in a man’s heart causing him to ignore the God who made him. Trusting in his own abilities and the things he has made for himself, man becomes convinced of his own importance and begins to see himself as immortal...accountable to no one.

With his heart in that condition, the prince of Tyre, a man, is unaware that instead of being his own god he is in fact serving another, the King of Tyre, who, is not a man.

3

THE KING OF MERCHANTS

In the next part of Ezekiel 28, God begins to address a particular individual, someone He calls the “**king of Tyre**”, not the man on the ground, but the one who is controlling the man on the ground.

“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, take up a lamentation for the *king of Tyre*, and say to him, “Thus says the Lord GOD: You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. *You were in Eden*, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the sardius, topaz, and diamond, beryl, onyx, and jasper, sapphire, turquoise, and emerald with gold. The workmanship of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the day you were created. *You were the anointed cherub who covers*; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor; I cast you to the ground, I laid you before kings, that they might gaze at you. You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities, by the iniquity of your trading; therefore I brought fire from your midst; it devoured you, and I turned you to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all who saw you. All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; you have become a horror, and shall be no more forever.” ’ ” Ezekiel 28:11-19

The Lord is revealing who the real ‘king’ of this merchant system is. When the serpent came to Eve in the garden he did not invent something new just for her...he had been operating in his merchant system for a long time. The real king of Tyre is that same serpent, satan. This incredible being who God says was **"the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty"** was Lucifer, the **“son of the morning!”** who became satan, the prince of darkness, the king of Tyre, and the ruler of this world’s system.

God says that he was **“the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; you were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created”**. This awesome, perfect, beautiful, powerful, wise, anointed being became a thing of hissing and shame. God says of him, **“iniquity was found in you”**, and then He reveals the process by which that iniquity entered.

“By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned” (emphasis mine)

“By the abundance of your trading...” Trading was the beginning of the downfall of one of the most fantastic beings God created. *Trading which took place before God created Adam and Eve!* Long before the garden scene, the trading activity of this **“anointed cherub”** had already brought incredible destruction into God’s heavenly creation. Yet somehow we fail to see that our involvement in the serpent’s merchant system today has the same potential for harm in our lives. We continue to think it’s just good business.

“Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor.” (emphasis mine) Does successful trading produce pride? Pride kills, pride destroys, pride brings judgment and pride is the power enthroned in the serpent’s merchant system.

“You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities, by the iniquity of your trading; therefore I brought fire from your midst; it devoured you, and I turned you to ashes upon the earth.” Defiled sanctuaries! In the realm of all glory, where the goodness of God permeated everything...Lucifer’s trading brought defilement!

“By the iniquity of your trading” is a revelation. *Serpent trading is sinful.* His trading was iniquity in itself. Sin was deeply imbedded in it.

INFLUENCE, THE ULTIMATE POSSESSION

Back in the ages when this all began, Lucifer, the covering cherub, was perfect in every way, leading worship in the very presence of the God of Glory. In that incredible environment what could Lucifer possibly be trading? *What would have any value in the presence of Him who was all value?* This is a most important question. In the realm of the spirit, the realm of the manifest presence of the Glorious God of the ages, *what could possibly be worth trading?*

We find help in answering the question when we look at what Lucifer accomplished for himself by his trading.

The Bible clearly reveals that what the serpent ended up with was enormous influence. Somehow, by trading, he managed to gain control over a third of angelic hosts. Revelation 12:3,4, refers to satan as **“a great, fiery red dragon having seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.”** Then it says that he gained control over a third of the angels (stars) of heaven. **“His tail drew a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth.”**

Achieving that level of influence in the very presence of God was no small feat! Every being that Lucifer traded with had the opportunity to compare what he was offering with the glory of God. Yet Lucifer was successful. He is the ultimate trader...*very cunning.*

Influence is the most attractive thing that one can offer in the marketplace of men's hearts. Lucifer loved influence. Somehow he learned that other beings love influence too and used that knowledge to trade his way to a place of pride, where he saw himself as being above God.

Why did the “prince of Tyre,” the man on the ground in the actual city of Tyre, see himself as “a god”? It was because the “king of Tyre,” his king, the “covering cherub,” saw himself as being superior to the God of heaven. The ability of trading to lift the heart up in pride is unequalled. That is why it is used with such effectiveness today against the Church, the Body of Christ.

For Lucifer, the ‘iniquity of *his* trading’ brought the fire of judgment, not from God Himself, but from within Lucifer himself! The fire that destroyed him came from within. *The fire that pride ignites is all consuming!* God will reveal the iniquity that is in the heart, and in the end, if there is no remedy applied, if it is not repented of, the resulting fire brings complete destruction.

The merchant system originated in the heart of satan when he was Lucifer, the beautiful and powerful cherub. *Since this merchant system brought the downfall of Lucifer, we should probably pay attention to it.* If it is through trading that satan maintains his sway over this world, then many things in our thinking need to be re-assessed.

Supposedly, because we are intelligent, educated, experienced and well taught in the Word of God, if we understand the origins of something, we should also be able to understand where it is taking us.

God has clearly revealed the origins of this system but our love of its results and our pride clouds the awareness of the end it brings.

THINGS MIGHT NOT BE SO SIMPLE

Do not become offended with what I am about to say. I am absolutely grateful to be living in a day and age when America has the resolve and ability to step into the chaos and attempt to effect some change in the world. I honor those who are willingly sacrificing home, family, health and even life itself while attempting to bring security in this time of increasing mayhem. I bless you...Thank-you!

I remember a conversation I had with a pastor not long after the beginning of the war in Iraq. As we spoke about the war I said to my friend, “What if there are purposes, which we cannot see, hidden under the events of the current situation? I’m not talking about secret political intrigue and world-shaping deal-making by self-appointed political demi-gods, (which always happens out of the sight of us average folk). I am speaking about the fact that Iraq has a prominent place in the Word of God where it is called Babylon. It seems to me that in the scripture there are two cities of note: God’s city, Jerusalem, and satan’s city, Babylon. Jerusalem always seems to have had center stage in world affairs, but at the moment (as I write this) the war is tipping the greater attention to Babylon.”

I told my friend about a church where I had just been, where the pastor put on a service in support of the war in Iraq. This was the most incredible church service I had ever been to in my life. It began with a shortened ‘worship’ service and then it was announced that the choir would be singing some ‘special’ music. As the choir sang the hymn of each of the various divisions of the armed forces, into the ‘sanctuary’ marched a man or woman in full dress uniform of the service whose anthem was being sung. Five anthems, five men in uniform, (army, navy, airforce...) each represented by a soldier standing at attention on the platform in full dress. It was awesome! Everyone stood at attention and sang along with the choir! I am sure God was impressed. Then the finale – the national anthem! As we sang, the people raised their hands in worship (it was a charismatic church) and cried and cheered! It was obvious that the adoration in the singing of the anthem was significantly more heartfelt than the adoration in the singing of the ‘worship’ songs at the beginning of the service.

This really was an unusual experience for me...but the best was yet to come. The pastor got up to speak and with great energy and zeal, (anointing?) he preached himself to tears on the righteousness of the war in Iraq! He extolled the virtues of America, of the free enterprise system, of the greatness of the nation, of the Godly leadership in the White House and America’s God-mandated place in history as a righteous nation under God coming against satan’s man in Iraq. The congregation clapped, cheered and wept throughout!

But, I asked, “What if things are not quite as they seem to be on the surface?”

THE RIPPLES FROM BELOW

What if the description of Iraq in the book of Revelation chapter 18 is a literal description of events at the end of this age? What if we are approaching the end of this segment of God's creative, prophetic timetable (personally, I think we must be 2000 years closer to the end than when Jesus was on earth) and things are not exactly the way we understand them to be? *Is it possible then that current events could have a totally different meaning and purpose than what we heard in that church service?*

The place of Babylon in world affairs in Revelation 18 at the time of its final destruction is contained in the description of the loss suffered by the **“merchants of the earth”**.

“And the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her, for no one buys their merchandise anymore: merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of ivory, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron, and marble; and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil and frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men. The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things which are rich and splendid have gone from you, and you shall find them no more at all. The merchants of these things, who became rich by her, will stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.’ Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What is like this great city?’ They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.’ ” Revelation 18:10-19

Satan's city, Babylon, described here, has a pretty incredible economy! Sounds like all the stock exchanges of the world rolled into one! Tyre, reborn and enhanced! Babylon is the place where it is all happening. Babylon is the center of commerce, the center of trading. The twin towers are gone, but this description presents the possibility that one day there will be some kind of new, *world trading center*...in Babylon!

If this is a prophetic possibility...if this could be a literal end times description of the a center in a future world economy...then fascinating changes will be taking place in the coming years.

THE KING OF MERCHANTS BRINGS IT ALL HOME

The potential for the rise of Babylon is certainly real. Babylon sits on an oily sea of liquid gold. The necessary infrastructure is in place to pump it out of the ground and trade it for those increasingly wonderful Euros! As yet, just a few key ingredients are missing for Babylon to become an incredible power in the world merchant system as described in this passage: a stable government, a stable monetary system, financial institutions and entrance into the world trading organizations.

With these elements in place, the technology to diversify the economy will flow freely into the country, turning Babylon (Baghdad) into a formidable player on the world merchandizing stage.

Interestingly, as part of its plan to rebuild and democratize Iraq, the USA has committed to install every one of these key ingredients in the near future!

What if through these world shaking events, satan, the god of this world's system is simply moving into place the things which he needs to set the stage for his final attempt to win? What if we are just participating in *his* plan? *What if the economic skills and institutions which we have developed in the western world, have been perfected under his guidance as the king of merchants...for the sole purpose of bringing them home to Babylon today?*

We have been sitting in comfortable pews listening to pastors preaching on current events, while the ruler of this world has been completing the development of all that he is now transferring to Babylon. He is moving it all to the very place where he originally persuaded Adam and Eve to submit the human race to the sway of his system and from where he will ultimately orchestrate his final war on the Church.

What if there are other things happening under the surface, things which are revealed in the Word but which are locked up in the church because we are too busy trading?

THE END OF TRADING

The serpent's merchant system does have an end. God brings it to an end in Babylon in one day! If He ends it, is it possible that He doesn't love it as much as we do? Let's go back to our passage in Ezekiel. The results of Lucifer's trading were inner violence and defilement from a multitude of iniquities. ***“By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned...You defiled your sanctuaries by the multitude of your iniquities, by the iniquity of your trading.”*** (emphasis mine)

Does **“trading”** produce violence? Violence in our world...violence in our lives... violence in the Church?

It is from within the heart that sin comes forth. Out of the heart flow all manner of sin. Jesus was not confusing on this subject. He said, **“What comes out of a man, that defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.”** Mark 7:20-23

James also says it clearly. **“But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”** James 1:14-15

As Lucifer’s trading multiplied he became filled with inner violence and sinned. Is it possible that our busy trading hides the inner warnings of the same condition in our own hearts?

Do we see divorce as God described it, as violence?
Do we understand anger the same way as Jesus did, as murder?
Do we feel about abortion the way God felt in the days when the people burned their babies to their idols?

Trading defiles our sanctuaries! The Temple, the Church, the Body of Christ is defiled by trading. We must understand what this trading is, how we are involved in it and what the results are of its presence in the church.

The “King of Tyre” is the “King of Merchants” ...satan.

He lost everything because of the iniquity of his trading.

How are we doing with our trading?

Are we in danger of losing anything?

What do you think?

4

THE MERCHANT SYSTEM IN THE CHURCH

Warning! The following may make you uncomfortable. Do not read this chapter if you are offended when you feel the status quo of current 'church' is unappreciated or our 'holy' activities are questioned.

Has serpent trading come into our lives, is it even in the Church? Is it possible that we have institutionalized it? Are we willing to open our eyes from our long nap of self-satisfied complacency and look in the mirror through eyes clear of smug self-righteousness? Are we willing to look through our facade of *spiritual* activities and make a frank appraisal of the magnitude of our personal participation?

We know that sin has come upon everyone that breathes air on this world. The Word of God clearly says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" and, "the wages of sin is death" and we know that we are all "without excuse" before an absolutely Holy God. We are full of joy because of the sacrifice of His Son and have experienced personal salvation through repentance, faith and the power of His blood. We are walking in victory, freed from the bondage of our sin, demonstrating the love of God to the wounded, healing the sick and setting the demonized free. We are consumed by the passion of His love for us and have totally laid down our lives for the gospel and are living holy, consecrated lives, walking the way of the cross daily...dying to self, sin and the world...

Oh, I'm sorry, that was the gospel from several generations ago. Or, perhaps from today...preached and lived in places where the men and women are being put to death for their faith...just not commonly preached or lived in the church of North America.

I should have said, "We all know that Jesus died to give our lives meaning and purpose. His wonderful plan insures that we can have every one of our needs met through our local church programs. We love the wonderful facility that He has given us to worship in and are so grateful that our pastor will be there to help with Suzy if she happens to slip off the piano bench and get pregnant. God has been so faithful in helping us set up our new counseling program.

It is such a good way to ‘minister’ to those who are struggling to ‘understand’ their addiction or are trying to get over the emotional pain of an ‘unfortunate’ abortion. We are so blessed to see the wonderful results for many who successfully find new partners after their divorces! The support for parents who struggle with ‘difficult’ children is so uplifting and encouraging. It has been so helpful to learn that we don’t have to blame ourselves or feel guilty in any way! We are so glad that Jesus loves us and only wants the best for us! ”

Lord Jesus help us!

SWAYING IN COMFORTABLE UNIFORMITY

I remember once when I was in a town affected by a small earthquake. I happened to be in an old building, which I stepped out of quickly when everything started falling from the shelves. With amazement I looked up the street and for several blocks could see the lamp posts all swaying back and forth in perfect unison. Something hidden under the ground, which had great power, was affecting every lamppost at the same time and in the same way. Each lamppost swayed back and forth dramatically, but never came any nearer to the next lamppost. They were all effected at the same time and in the same way, swaying first one way then swaying the other way, maintaining perfect uniformity and staying exactly the same distance from each other. Perfect uniformity from a hidden power that could only be seen by the effects it caused.

The apostle John says in 1 John 5:19 **“the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one”**. This ‘sway’ may be something different from just those obvious sins that we can see so clearly in the lives of others around us!

We are all being swayed on a regular basis by something hidden yet very powerful. But when we are all doing the same things at the same time, why would we think there is anything wrong. Just a lamppost doing the same things as the next lamppost...we’re all fine. The nut who has a problem is the guy that stands up in church and cries out, *“God doesn’t like your trading. He is not impressed with your idols and He is about to deal with you!”* (Now there is a lamppost that’s out of sync. We don’t accept that kind of condemnation in this church! I think we should have the pastor review our vision statement and purposes for the next few Sundays. We’ll see if there are any more fanatics who have crept in. If they can’t sign on to what we’re all about we’ll just ‘encourage’ them to ‘fellowship’ elsewhere.)

“...the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.”

The whole world is trading in his merchant system, willfully swayed by the wicked one... and loving it! The influence of satan, through his unique arena of trading which he introduced to the human race in the garden, has swayed its way right into the church.

As long as he is able to keep a man functioning in covetousness and pride the serpent can maintain total control through his merchant system...whether the man is in the world, or in the church!

It is to the church that James says: **“For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there.”** (James 3:16)

TRADING TO BE SEEN

Our covetousness and pride have convinced us that we trade to satisfy our legitimate needs...everyone knows we have a right to satisfy our needs! (God promised over and over again in His Word to satisfy our needs so what’s the big deal? He wants us to be happy...didn’t He say that he would “freely give us all things”? So helping Him, help us, by doing a little trading on the side, can’t be all that bad!)

We all know about the deceitfulness of riches. That’s why we know that we are not deceived by riches and we can look around us at those who have more stuff than us...and know that they are deceived by riches. Right? When trading is the activity of life, our sense of personal worth becomes tied directly to our success in the market place. So, soon we are all trading, every day, in every way, for everything, and we judge our success by comparing our results with what others have accomplished in their trading. In the world, everyone understands that the measuring stick of successful trading is the amount of our possessions. In the church we now use the same measuring stick on each other, then add to our comparisons the amount of our ‘spiritual’ possessions and our level of participation in ‘spiritual’ activities.

Knowing *about* a truth is just a little different from knowing *the* Truth. The Pharisees knew *about* truth...so Jesus told the people; “do what they say to do”. But they didn’t know *the* Truth...so Jesus told the people; “don’t do what they do”.

Why in the world would you have or do anything if no one sees what you have or what you are doing? The Pharisees understood this. They prayed where everyone could hear them, had the right words, the right inflection in their voice...and waited to begin until those they sought to influence were within hearing. They hired trumpeters to go before them on their way down the street to the temple to put their money in the collection.

They were more than willing to trade their required *giving* under the law for *the recognition they craved*. They understood the value of money and knew God couldn’t do anything with the widow’s two pennies. (Mark 12:42-43) That pathetic gift was insignificant! They had spent more to feed their pet parrot that day.

If you are a successful trader you must be seen to be a successful trader. The merchant system depends on this to function. If you don't see my piano, how will I be able to trade it to you for your money? Then, if no one sees it once you have brought it home, (hence the piano party for Suzy) how can they acknowledge your trading skill? Don't they need an opportunity to compare it to the pathetic piano they bought from the other guy? *Why did you leave the price tag on it for six months, anyway?*

Are we in the Church of North America even aware of our sins in this area? No more than Lucifer was, when he was developing his trading skills in the very presence of God!

Do we know where it will take us...or even how far from truth it already has taken us? No more than Lucifer did, when he was consumed by the results of his trading.

ALL TRADING IS TRADING

What is the pulse of the church today? What sets the heart of the average 'Christian' pumping with excitement? Just quietly wander around the foyer immediately after a normal church service and listen to the conversations. What is the subject matter? Anything to do with what we have traded for in the past week? Do we even hear ourselves any more?

If there was something challenging in the Sunday morning message, by the time we get to the foyer, it is forgotten. Why bother to take it home, let alone allow it to disturb the digestion? How often does the minister's message make it out the door before it is stolen from the mind? (Man did you see that play in the third quarter last night. You should come over and watch it again on my new 32" flat screen, LED...etc, etc, etc, TV. Did I tell you about my new HDTV? Let me tell you, I could even see his nose hairs vibrate when he caught that ball! WOW!!! Oops, those two are praying, let's step out in the foyer, away from the music, and I'll tell you about the deal I got.)

Ahhhh, the joy of trading. We just love it!

(I wish that the pastor would see the gifts God has given me and let me speak to the congregation once in a while...they would hear a thing or two. If the pastor finally recognizes my anointing, things could really change around here. I think I'll put my name forward for a seat on the board. I could do a better job than the old guys that have been there forever. After all these years of tithing I deserve to have a greater voice in the affairs of this place. The pastor needs a strong voice to speak for the things that we really value in this church. If God didn't want me involved in running the church He wouldn't have given me the qualifications! That is what the gifts are for. Right? If I don't get an opportunity to be in leadership soon I may as well go somewhere else where they will recognize my talents!)

We're so sure that we are anointed and called...but when we don't get the recognition we deserve in our current place, we leave to find others who will give us the credit we crave.

Some time ago I had the privilege of attending an annual general conference of a major denomination. I happened to be standing by and overheard the following as a group in the corner with particular responsibilities wrestled with the issues of the moment.

“Where are our ‘Roberts Rules’ anyway? Oh there they are...no we can't use that ...it's not the latest edition and our constitution requires the latest edition. Who is responsible for this mess anyway? No one seems to realize what it takes to run an organization efficiently. We need to bring a good man in here who can instill some organization into this place. I know of a company that specializes in motivating people and teaches organizational skills ...we should get *them* to come and teach *us* how to run efficiently”

Do we ever wonder why churches have to use Roberts Rules to keep functioning? Or why many churches hire the unsaved to teach us how to persuade people to give money? Or why we borrow millions from the world to build our churches when the “earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof”? Or why we hire advertising agencies and put out expensive brochures and slick ads to attract people to our programs, when all Jerusalem came running to *just the sound of the Spirit*?

How did Power Point replace Holy power? The ‘Power Pointed’ message goes everywhere, exactly the same, verbatim, so that which ‘worked’ in one place, can continue to ‘work’ everywhere. If it was anointed once, then with Power Point it will still be anointed the 450th time, right? As long as we can keep it the same! Well oiled humor, practiced pauses, slick but canned, carefully timed presentations that work...we have it the way we want it. But, is it possible that God might actually have something slightly different to say to a different congregation...from the same passage?

INFLUENCE, THE ABILITY TO SWAY OTHERS

“I have a Word for you...the Lord says that you are about to come into your own ministry! Your time here under this man has been God's training in your life and now He is going to take you far beyond what you have experienced and raise you up to the things He has always planned for you. In your present place you have been restrained from becoming all that you could be in the kingdom of God. But when I lay my hands on you, you are going to be released and *set in place as prophet*. Great exploits are going to be normal in your life as God is now going to take *your ministry* to new levels. All *your dreams* of speaking in the big churches of the nation are about to come to pass! God has a *special place* for you...a place of *wealth*...a place of *recognition*! No longer will you have to wait and ask for opportunities!

Not only will people recognize *your special anointing*, they will run to *give you money* to carry on the work and propel *your ministry* to the place of prominence *you deserve!* Old is out, new is in...go buy yourself a new car! God wants you to be seen as a *son* in the kingdom of heaven! If you are going to represent that kingdom you can't live with this 'poverty spirit' on you any more...!"

Don't get the idea I'm dumping on the prophetic. I am dumping on the pathetic! I am dumping on ministering to people's idols!

Influence craves more influence and influence responds to influence. It's not just about the prophet craving the recognition of people and willing to trade for it by speaking to their idols. It is also about the person coming to the prophet, subtly offering to trade recognition and honor for the prophet's blessing.

We are desperately in need of a powerful awakening of the truly prophetic in the church of North America.

Is it possible that God might be tired of sin-filled, rebellious, unbelieving, idol worshipping, bench warming North American Christians going before His prophets and trading their way to a blessing?

Over a number of months, while a local church was experiencing a time when the Spirit of God was offering to open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings, I watched a series of godly, anointed men come and minister prophetically. Many hearts were truly challenged to walk in increased power as they experienced deeper submission to the Spirit of God. In the middle of it, there was a gal whose life was on display for all to see. She attended each series of meetings diligently. She openly represented the struggle hidden in the hearts of many as she lived a life of constantly changing relationships. Poor, broken, in deep bondage to many things yet she presented herself as spiritually mature and desperately craved acceptance...without repentance. She never appeared at a local church service unless there was a special, unknown minister in the pulpit. (She had been through every local church, had been ministered to by most local pastors...always rejecting their counsel as too constraining and judgmental.) During this time of meetings it was amazing to watch as prophet after prophet would come to town and single her out for special attention. They consistently declared over her the blessing of recognition in the church and positions of prominence and influence among church leaders and in the community. I was astounded. I sensed the genuine anointing on the men of God but stood beside them listening to their words in amazement, watching as right in the center of this environment of the demonstrated power of God, this poor thing was able to trade her way into a blessing.

Influence is the most desired commodity traded in the church today. Talents, gifts, money, looks, skills, training, connections, all are used unabashedly in the pursuit of influence...and it has all become perfectly acceptable!

Years ago I was at a church on one of the Hawaiian Islands. A gal got up and led 'worship'. She was fabulous...I had never seen anything like it in my life before. I sat enthralled.

She gave it everything...then glowed in satisfaction as the pastor extolled her virtues as a worship leader, stating several times to the congregation that "we have the best worship leader on the islands". That was when I realized that modern 'worship' had become a competition and now was used to draw people away from other churches.

What have we become? Why is the one who sells the most books and tapes the most anointed? Why do so many preachers of the Gospel, when they sell their books, wear expensive diamond rings on the fingers that hold the microphone? They dress in expensive suits, drive expensive cars, live in expensive homes and fly expensive airplanes...all to glorify Jesus?

The desire to build influence comes from the need to get bigger. *Trading up* is the name of the game. If I can successfully increase my circle of influence I will finally get to speak in bigger and better places! Soon, with a good manager working for me, I'll be able to establish *my ministry* so that everyone will have to sit up and take notice of *me*.

Size, prominence, influence - the door is open. There are no limits. Go to the best school, develop the necessary skills, carefully build your network of contacts...never speak anything that could be heard as negative, accusing or judgmental from the pulpit. Success is available. It's all there for the taking! *And it's church! It's all for Jesus!*

Just give the people what they want. After all they deserve it, and if I keep them happy, they will pay for it all!

We all just have to do a little trading!

5

THE DEFEAT OF MERCHANT THINKING

What did Jesus really teach, anyway? Are we really so under the sway of satan's system that we are more likely to be fulfilling his purposes than the purposes of Jesus? What about the 'Glorious Church', the 'pure spotless Bride', and the power of the gospel?

LIVING WITHOUT TRADING

When Jesus stepped onto the stage of human experience He came with a message. His message was the complete opposite of the message of the religious folk of His day. His response to their merchant system astounded them! He wasn't a trader. He didn't participate. They tried every way possible to draw Him into the system, without success, so...they killed him.

“ ‘Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?’ But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, ‘Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.’ So they brought Him a denarius. And He said to them, ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ They said to Him, ‘Caesar's’. And He said to them, ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.’ ” Matthew 22:16-21

They wandered away with their eyes crossed after that. Everything He said was opposite to the system under which they operated. Nothing He said made sense to them. He wasn't a trader and they loved trading. There was no point of connection. His thinking was completely foreign to their thinking...and they were the 'church', the organized religious folk, the ones with structure, history, tradition, assets...the temple rulers!

Jesus had no home to sleep in, no job that provided an income, no means of transportation, (other than a borrowed donkey), no retirement plan, no savings and what money did come in He gave to a thief to look after!

He hung out with losers who had no influence where it really mattered, called successful businessmen away from their businesses and paid His taxes with fish bait! When they were thirsty at the wedding He didn't negotiate the best deal with local merchants, making sure He got the pastor's discount, He asked for water and His Father gave Him wine. When He needed bread to feed the thousands He didn't trade for it (as his disciples thought He wanted them to)...He prayed for it. It seemed like He knew of a different system. He called it the Kingdom of Heaven.

He summed up His teaching on accumulating wealth in His answer to the rich young ruler of Matthew 19:16-22. This was a young man who was deeply immersed in the merchant system, yet zealous for God. **“Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ ”**(verse 21). Just give all your wealth away. That's a new system! (It doesn't sound like the one the serpent keeps whispering about.)

We don't see Jesus running after him when he **“went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”** (verse 22) Didn't Jesus want this rich, young, influential man to speak well of Him and use his position and money to get Him better speaking gigs? Apparently not. Jesus just wasn't a part of the system! And no one who mattered in the system could figure out what to do with Him!

The poor, who couldn't trade, loved Him.

The rich, who lived for trading, hated Him.

The religious, who taught trading, killed Him.

Jesus lived in and spoke from a different place. He didn't participate in the system. Everyone who said yes to His call then and says yes now...can't either.

One day my wife and I began to realize that our thinking had become the reasoning of this world. We were part of a system, which insisted we understand what we were about to do, before agreeing to do it. We liked thinking we could control the process and the outcome of the things we were involved in. We had somehow been taught that after we understood the trade we were about to participate in; after we had defined the personal expectations to be fulfilled; after we had planned how our needs were going to be met...we could obey the voice of God.

Then we began to realize that we must stop expecting God to speak only in relationship to the things we had already experienced and thought we understood. If our desire to consistently hear His voice was going to be satisfied, we would have to be willing to listen to Him speak from His perspective.

Then we began to realize that He really is supernatural and always moves outside of our understanding, hence life would have to be constantly miraculous!

Jesus is the very definition of the miraculous. Jesus never did anything out of His own desire or for His personal benefit. He never traded with the enemy once in His entire life. He only ever did the will of the Father. Jesus didn't do anything unless He saw the Father doing it. He didn't say anything that the Father wasn't saying. He is our example of a totally laid down life. He didn't lay His life down at the cross only; He laid his life down everyday.

He never once entered into their system. He calls us to follow Him. Following Him means we also live free of this world's system.

TEMPTATION IN THE WILDERNESS

The climatic clash of kingdoms that occurred in the wilderness is the ultimate revelation of the difference between the kingdom of heaven and the serpent's merchant system.

Just the king of merchants and the Son of Man, all of creation hanging in the balance... every spirit being clinging to each spoken word. This was the pinnacle of the king of merchant's skills being displayed. Everything that had worked on every other human being was brought to bear for forty days and then after forty days, the big guns came out. Only one problem...there was no point of connection! The best of the king of merchant's efforts fell on deaf ears. His best trading techniques proved totally fruitless. There was no way to trade with this man. This Jesus simply wasn't a trader!

We need to take a close look at this clash of kings.

“Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil.” Luke 4:1-2. This time of temptation wasn't just the three questions that we'll get to in a minute...it was a process of forty days. The opportunity was provided by the Spirit of God as Jesus was **“led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil”** Matthew 4:1. This was to be the beginning of the revealing of the kingdom of heaven which had come to the earth, a kingdom which operated outside of the control of the king of merchants and the sphere of his merchant system.

Note that during the preparation time of forty days, the softening up period, the temptations that Jesus faced but did not respond to are not recorded. We know they were significant because we are told he **“was tempted in all points as we are”** (Hebrews 4:15). So the forty days were filled with intense temptations similar to the ones we must personally resist today.

The king of merchants knows when the client is prepared for his trade and approaches at the moment that is the most opportune for his purposes. **“And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.”** Luke 4:2.

Forty days without food, being tempted in every way...then the king of merchant comes in person with everything on the table, all the stops pulled out! This is the sale of the centuries wrapped up in a moment of time! In forty days **“with the wild beasts”** nothing has worked, so now everything the king of merchants has to offer is available and he comes personally to complete the trade. He remembers what worked in the ages past when he offered the sinless angels of heaven a substitute in the very presence of the God of Glory.

“And the devil said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.’ ” Luke 4:3

The king of merchants is not stupid or forgetful. He is crafty and cunning. So first, he goes for the food issue, the legitimate need. He remembers the garden scene and his success with another sinless, holy human that had unlimited access to the heart of God. If it worked in the garden, in the midst of the most unbelievable array of delicious fruit ever assembled in the universe, it should work here. This human, at the instruction of God has been starving himself for forty days. The ultimate client for a little food trade!

The initial question is put in terms that immediately touch that most powerful selling tool we talked about earlier: pride. **“If you are the Son of God”**. Come on, come on, stand up and defend who you are...if you can. Have some bread. Make your own choice to end this now. I know God has sent You here and has told You to fast, **“led by the Spirit into the wilderness”** but you can decide for yourself when and what to eat. Just take a stone and make yourself some bread. Jesus answered and said, **“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’ ”** (Matthew 4:4). I’m not buying what you’re selling because I know My Father, the real King, and His Words are the source of life! Since I serve Him, I won’t be trapped into thinking I need bread before He has said that I need bread.

What? This human knows He doesn’t actually need bread to live? He isn’t willing to covet a little bread, even at the point of starvation? There is no pride to be pricked awake to help Him decide that He has the right to make a little bread for Himself?

Ahhh, but this Jesus likes to quote the Word of God. Well...the king of merchants knows how to use the words of God too. Using God’s words to stir up pride is his most effective tactic. It worked well with Eve. It is working well with the Pharisees. He has a nation full of them convinced that knowing God’s words and attending ‘church’ each week gives them the right to be proud. It has to work here!

“Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: “He shall give His angels charge over you,” and, “In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.” ’ ” Matthew 4:5-6

Notice the **“if you are the Son of God”** again. This has to be the most effective line in the trading game. After all, *if you are the Son of God*, if it is true, then why don't You show us? Why have it...if you don't flaunt it? Let the people know who you really are. Step out and show them what you can do. Everyone will believe when the angels catch You, they'll be forced to...it's in the Bible! It's not really going to be an act of presumption, (doing Your own thing without the instructions of Father) it won't really be pride. You'll just be giving the people a little demonstration of who You are, so when You preach they'll really listen.

“Jesus said to him, ‘It is written again, “You shall not tempt the LORD your God.” ’ ” Matthew 4:7. Jesus wasn't saying that it was wrong for Satan to tempt Him. Jesus was saying that it was wrong for Him, Jesus, to tempt His Father. I'm not going to test my Father's love and care for me. I don't need to, I believe His Word and it is everything. I don't need to be seen to be the Son of God by those looking for proof, or asking for a sign. ***I AM.***

Strike two Satan. You failed miserably to get Jesus to do his own thing by filling a legitimate need, now you can't even get Him to covet a little public recognition. This one is going to get away with the goods still in His pocket if you don't do something.

“Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.’ ” Matthew 4:8-9

Ok, this is where it's at! Everyone wants control over this world and what it has to offer. It's the prize of the ages. I have been ruling over it through Adam & Eve and all their descendants because every generation has been serving me. I know You want it, so I'll just give it to You. Well, not really 'give' it to You, I'll trade it ...for a price of course, a high price! (Remember, when we set 'value' on the foundation of 'pride' the price tag really matters.) But it will be a great trade for You. Just trust me, just recognize me, just worship me and you can have all this in trade! It's what You really want...the whole world will be Yours.

“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Away with you, Satan! For it is written, “You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.” ’ ” Matthew 4:10

Go away Satan. You think that you can persuade Me to trade for more control, for greater recognition, for greater influence and more possessions on this earth. Your envy of man's relationship with Father and your coveting of the dominion that Father gave man over this world made you think this world and its stuff is the prize. *But the prize is serving God!* You gave up serving God long ago. You don't realize that all you have is temporary influence in this world. Everything that you offer can't compare with serving Father! *Remember, Father said from heaven that I am His Son!*

6

THE MERCHANT SYSTEM...IN OR OUT

Regardless how many learned men today tell us that ministry is all about influence and that a shrewd pastor must use every opportunity to maximize his influence, the reality is that Jesus speaks a different message. He calls us to live outside the control of the system that sways this world.

Jesus dealt with the desire for recognition in the hearts of the men of His generation. Here is what he said about the Pharisees on the subject.

“But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi.’ But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Matthew 23:5-13 (emphasis mine)

“ ‘So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places, saying to them: when you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher.’ Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ Then He also said to him who invited Him, ‘When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just’ ”. Luke 14:7-14 (emphasis mine)

“Then He came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, ‘What was it you disputed among yourselves on the road?’ But they kept silent, for *on the road they had disputed among themselves who would be the greatest.* And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.” Mark 9:33-37 (emphasis mine)

Desiring influence, coveting prominence, seeking position, we find these subjects in so many places, addressed in so many ways, all in ‘red letters’ in the gospels. A significant part of the message Jesus preached dealt with these sins. Whatever we understand the Church to be, we are hit between the eyes by the fact that Jesus came as a servant, calling us to be servants, or perhaps more correctly, ‘slaves’. (Oh, oh, I knew there was something weird about this book. We are joint-heirs with Jesus. He calls us friends, even sons of God. And now we are back talking about being slaves?) Just hold on for a little bit, humor me in my delusions about the necessity of servant hood and we’ll get to the ‘friend of Jesus’ verses!

IT’S NOT MY FAULT

“So the Lord said, ‘If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, “Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,” and it would obey you. And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, “Come at once and sit down to eat”? But will he not rather say to him, “Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink”? Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, “We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.” ’ ” Luke 17:6-10.

I think each of us has heard this parable used to encourage us to grow in faith, and to assure us that when we get a little more faith, we’ll all do great exploits for God. **“If you have faith as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be pulled up by the roots and be planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.”**

We just need that little mustard seed faith and then we will start throwing things around! Only problem is that we don’t ever do the miraculous stuff, because Jesus hasn’t taken our faith to that higher level yet. *But when He does we’ll be the first ones to the front lines. Watch out for flying trees!* (Will you excuse me a moment I have to return my broker’s call.)

What do we do with the rest of the passage? I realized one day that I had never heard anyone preach on the second part, about the unthankful slave owner.

So here's the story. Your slave is working together with you in the field. It's a very hot day, you have both put in twelve hours and you're both really tired. Now the man is your servant. Not a union man from the Hall that has rights and is prepared to exercise them. You own this guy. So, you come in after work and you seat your slave comfortably on the couch, bring him a cold drink, take his shoes off and quickly run into the kitchen to prepare something for him to eat. Jesus says, not likely! You are going to have him do that for you! You are going to tell him, "go clean up, bring me a drink, get my supper and when I'm done, then you can eat."

And here is the kicker to our way of thinking. You aren't even going to say thank you, because the slave is just doing what a slave does, carrying out your instructions immediately, willingly and thoroughly, without complaining or expecting anything in return. In the master/slave relationship obedience is everything. Obedience is never up for discussion. Every slave obeys, all the time. The option of choice does not exist. The slave is free of the requirement to obey only when he is in his casket.

To understand the teaching of this parable we must look at the verses immediately preceding it. **"Then He said to the disciples, 'It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, "I repent," you shall forgive him.' And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith.'"**

Luke 17:1-5. Jesus is teaching His disciples and us about forgiveness.

He begins by telling them some kingdom news; people are going to treat us badly and it is impossible for anyone to go through life without that experience. In fact, the RSV translates this verse **"it is necessary that offenses come"**. Then Jesus says that God keeps good records and will deal with the offender. But, not only does God note the action of the offender He also sees how we react to the offence. He says that we have only one acceptable way to respond to the offender, we must forgive. And forgive, and forgive, and forgive, and forgive...seven times in the same day, for the same sin! Now, at the end of this little teaching, the disciples cry out **"Increase our faith."** Then Jesus tells them about the servant getting supper. When we put it all together we see that Jesus is painting a picture of our hearts.

We think that when God tells us to do something we have the right to say to Him; *"I can't, and it is not my fault because You haven't given me enough faith yet! I don't have to follow Your instructions God, until You increase my faith."*

We have come to believe that attending the Sunday morning service is the same as the slave working with his master in the field all day. So we think that when we head to our homes or jobs, or whatever happens to be occupying our hearts at the moment, we can expect Jesus to wash our feet, give us a coke and serve us our food. I don't think that is the way it works. Do You?

Have we forgotten perhaps...that we belong to Him?

Jesus is using the parable to deal with their excuse for planning to be disobedient. They were saying that the task was too difficult to accomplish with the faith they had been given. Through the parable Jesus says to them, your problem isn't a lack of faith, just a puny little mustard seed bit of faith can do miracles. Your problem is your disobedience. You think that you can blame Father for your own disobedience. You want it to be His fault that you are unwilling to fulfill His commands.

Jesus said that they were just unwilling to obey and we are just like them. We do the same thing. His Word stirs our hearts. We hear His instructions. But instead of obeying, we 'humbly' bow our heads and ask to be excused, until He gives us more faith so we can do what we are told. Then, since we want to be seen as good stewards when Jesus comes, off we go trading while we wait for the faith.

If He hasn't finished changing our hearts yet, how can we be expected to quit trading until He gives us more faith? Since 'God helps those who help themselves', we just do a little trading, just help ourselves to a little more of this world's stuff. Just until Jesus comes and fill us with faith so we can be humble and obedient.

HUMBLE AND OBEDIENT

Let's look at this a little more from James 4:10 "**Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.**" And again in 1 Peter 5:6 "**Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.**" When Jesus says to humble ourselves, do we think it is still His responsibility to do it for us? Do we think that He will just zap us one day and we will be humble servants that always do what He says without any excuses?

Not likely! He will never do for us what He has told us to do ourselves. *And He will never tell us to do something without already giving us the faith to do it. Our problem is not lack of faith, or lack of any other gift of God, it is a lack of obedience.* We just won't die to our own agendas and obey Him. We are so willing to say, "what You are asking me to do is too difficult, so I'll wait until You fix me, then I'll obey." We die by the thousands in our churches, lying quite still at last, in the beautiful casket we traded for...disobedient to the end.

What is the gospel of Jesus Christ? Does it really have nothing to do with the system of this world? Don't we need to pick a little fruit from the tree, make a little bread, just to sustain ourselves?

Just because serving God was worth more than the whole world for Jesus, does that mean we have to think and live the same way? What about me, I have a mind, I can figure out what I can trade for in this world and not get burned. Surely, Jesus wouldn't expect me to say no to everything that I can trade for, after all He was the one that gave me all these talents!

THE MERCHANT CRY... I CANNOT COME

Are you ready for another parable? Jesus never seemed to run out of them!

“And Jesus answered and spoke to them again by parables and said: ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who arranged a marriage for his son, and sent out his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding; and they were not willing to come. Again, he sent out other servants, saying, ‘Tell those who are invited, ‘See, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and fatted cattle are killed, and all things are ready. Come to the wedding.’ ” But they made light of it and went their ways, one to his own farm, another to his business. And the rest seized his servants, treated them spitefully, and killed them. But when the king heard about it, he was furious. And he sent out his armies, destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city.’ ” Matthew 22:1-8

Farms and businesses have to be tended. We won't succeed if we don't pay attention to business. After all we live in a free enterprise system and long ago we bought the line “the one who dies with the most toys, wins”. Come on we're not like the guys in the parable, we wouldn't actually kill someone who called us away from our trading to a party...we're Christians! (Aren't you sick of the pastor continually harping on tithing! Someone needs to talk to him...seems like he expects us to give regularly. It's as bad as my car payment. Doesn't he know I have my boat to pay off and the kids need money for university so they can get ahead in life? I have important payments to make every month! You tell him if he keeps it up I'll see that we get a new pastor!)

There actually is a great King who has issued an invitation. In the end He will not be pleased with those who ignored Him.

“Then He said to him, ‘A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, “Come, for all things are now ready.” But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.”

And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.” Still another said, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, “Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.” And the servant said, “Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.’ Then the master said to the servant, “Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.”” Luke 14:16-24

Remember the lyrics of the song?

I cannot come to the banquet,
don't trouble me now.
I have married a wife,
I have bought me a cow.
I have fields and commitments –
That cost a pretty sum.
Pray hold me excused –
I cannot come.

“For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.”

Wow, I don't want to miss out on that supper. I'm sure glad I got in the gate when I was twelve. (By the way, is supper ready yet dear? Remember I have to leave early for my sailing lesson because you want me to drop Suzy off at her piano lesson. Did you straighten her out about that silly Bible Camp thing? She wasted two weeks there last year. She needs to get her priorities straight or she's not going to do well in the piano recital! She'll never win if she keeps wasting time doing other things. If the Pastor calls while I'm gone, ask him if we're on for golf tomorrow, thanks. I'm really hoping he's made the decision to buy the group life insurance policy for the church staff...*we're off to Hawaii if he goes for it!*)

A NARROW GATE

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Matthew 7:13-14

Narrow gate...huh...narrow mind is what you really mean! Jesus didn't call us to be long faced poverty minded Christians. He's our 'friend'. He wants us to have the best things in life! He has called us to be people of 'excellence'.

We have the power of God at our disposal...we can be the very best at everything we do. Then the world will sit up and listen. When they see the success we have by following 'biblical business principles' they'll want to come to our church. (But I won't invite anyone until the place looks better. I wish the pastor would quit dragging his feet on the renovations. What's the big deal anyway? Just borrow a couple of hundred grand and get the place looking like we're not a bunch of backwoods hicks who don't know how to manage our money.)

We like our "wide gate" gospel. It tells us that we can load up our 5-ton truck with everything this world has to offer, throw a buck in the offering plate for the toll, and motor along the four lane at 80 mph! (I just love the new pavement the pastor laid down for us on Sunday...I always knew Jesus wanted me to be happy!)

We have lost sight of what the narrow gate looks like. Many with the responsibility of describing it to us have long ceased to do so. Those who used to model it are nowhere to be found. So now, not only are we having the normal difficulty finding it, *but we don't know what we are looking for anymore!*

Lord Jesus, please help your Church!

7

THE TRADE OF THE AGES

Just as Jesus was about to get on the cross He said to the traders of His day “**if my kingdom were of this world my servants would fight**”. That’s different. In His kingdom Jesus’ servants don’t fight? So if we’re fighting, which system are we operating in? If Jesus didn’t fight for His rights in this world, why do we fight for ours? How could Jesus have been willing to die on the cross if He had not been laying down His rights every day he lived?

We have been taught to think that we have a right to demand that God satisfy our needs for personal recognition. Who can gather for himself the most influence before retirement? Who can get the ear of the pastor? (Or better yet, who has the influence to hire and fire the pastor?) Who can build the biggest church? Didn’t Jesus die so we could be successful by using the very best trading techniques? *Then when everyone sees our success, they’ll run into the church and ask who our broker is...and we can win them to Jesus!*

When Jesus came He brought a different system, the kingdom of heaven. He brought it for us. So if we are His disciples, shouldn’t we be operating in His system?

TREASURE IN THE DIRT

Let’s look at another parable that contains an incredible hidden mystery. “**Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.**”

Matthew 13:44

So, there is a man working in a field. Probably, back in those days he was plowing with an ox and a wooden plow. He most likely had worked in that field for years, like his father and grandfather before him. All he ever gained from his work were the bare necessities of life. The field wasn’t his. He was only paid by the day. At least he owned the ox. His poor grandfather almost starved making the lease payments on someone else’s ox.

One day as this man is working in the field the plow suddenly hits a stone. Stones are somewhat of a family tradition. His grandfather built the south fence with stones he hauled off this field. His dad in his lifetime built the west fence. Now here he is building the east fence, almost done too. One thing this field produces in abundance every year is a fine crop of stones.

There is a ‘thunk’ and a bump as the plow is dragged over yet another stone. Quickly he checks the plow...relief floods in as there is no noticeable damage. Laying the plow aside he gets down on his knees and begins to dig around the stone so he can carry it off the field. But as he digs around it, to his surprise he doesn’t find a stone, but something that looks like old blackened leather! With increased curiosity he digs a little more and sees that it is actually an ancient leather bag made from raw hide. Hardened with age, now impervious to decay, it is still strong. His excitement rises. Carefully he rolls it over in the hole he has made around it, finds the tie-cord, all rotted away, and pries the stiff leather open.

In utter astonishment his eyes behold an unbelievable treasure! Diamonds, rubies, emeralds beautiful jewels of every description! Everything his family had ever earned in generations of work would not be enough to buy the smallest jewel that was in front of him. In awe he stares at a priceless treasure!

Quickly looking around, making sure that no one sees, he furtively covers it over with handfuls of dirt, leaving it in the hole in the ground. He backs the ox up, guides the plow lightly across the top of the treasure. Now it is completely hidden again. The only thing anyone can see is the last furrow the plow made. He whips the ox into a run and heads home.

With complete singleness of mind and total determination he begins to sell everything! His wife tells him he’s gone insane. But he sells everything! He sells the little house that his father built on the tiny corner of land that the owner of the field rents to them. He sells the ox that he made his living with, the brand new plow, the spare set of clothes his wife had sewn for him. Everything goes! His neighbors think he’s nuts. He’s practically giving away the things that he slaved for all his life. But they don’t mind, they know a good deal when they see one! Soon everything is sold! He counts the coins. He needs just a little more. His shoes and his winter cloak go to the neighbor and finally he has enough!

“For joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.”

Barefoot, dressed in his old clothes, trembling inside with suppressed joy and excitement, he goes to the owner of the property and buys the field!

It’s party time!!!!

REVEALING THE KINGDOM

What is this all about? Why did Jesus always teach using parables? Why couldn't He just say what He meant right up front like the Pharisees always wanted him to?

Matthew 13 is a chapter of parables. This parable of the treasure in the field is right in the middle of several parables about the kingdom of heaven. They give us context and insight into what Jesus is teaching here. Jesus begins teaching with a parable about a man working in a field, planting good seeds, in all different types of soil. Later, He continues teaching with another parable about a man who plants good seed in his field but who has an enemy that comes along and plants bad seed in the same field. **“The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares (weeds) among the wheat and went his way.”** (Matthew 13:24-26) The field ends up filled with a mixture of wheat and weeds.

He continues with another kingdom of heaven parable about a mustard seed. **“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”** Matthew 13:31,32

Then he gives another parable. **“The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”** Matthew 13:33

Sounds like the kingdom of heaven is pretty interesting. But why does Jesus use so many different pictures to describe it to us? Are we having that much trouble getting it? Let's see. The kingdom of heaven is like a man sowing seed on different types of ground. It's like a man sowing good seed and an enemy sowing bad seed. It's like a mustard seed. It's like leaven in flour. It's like a treasure in a field. In verses 45 and 46 it's like a merchant looking for pearls. Finally, at the end of this chapter in verses 47 and 48, it's like fishing in the sea with a huge dragnet.

PARABLES EXPOSE HEARTS

In the middle of all these parables is this fascinating statement.

“All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.’” Matthew 13:34-35

In these parables Jesus is revealing secrets! He is revealing them to a particular group of people, those whom He calls babies. **“I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight.”** Luke 10:21-22 Jesus was revealing secrets hidden by God since before He created the world. He was revealing them to those who were not trying to trade with Him but were willing in childlike faith to simply hear and obey.

The religious folk who traded in the synagogue every day were completely stumped by Jesus’ parables. They were always caught between wanting to understand Him and hating Him because they couldn’t. They considered themselves to be wise and prudent but in formulating and arguing their tenants of higher criticism they just lowered their understanding. *Human rationalizations didn’t help them understand the words of Jesus because in the kingdom of heaven they couldn’t trade their learning and pride for anything...they just lost their minds.*

This is all new stuff for the serpent too. Paul tells us **“we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”** 1 Corinthians 2:7-8

All his trading ability couldn’t help the serpent understand what Jesus was talking about in the parables. In the end, as the serpent’s wise and prudent followers killed Jesus, they destroyed the power of the very system satan was trying to protect!

FATHER’S HEART REVEALED

When giving the understanding of the parable about the man sowing good seed and his enemy sowing bad seed in the same field, Jesus says, **“He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man.”** (verse 37) That’s what He calls Himself, ‘the Son of Man’. Then He says that the field is the world. So in that parable Jesus is speaking of Himself sowing good seed in the world. When we apply this understanding to the parable of the treasure we find an awesome revelation about Father, Jesus, the kingdom and us!

Father in heaven looked down upon the world that He made and saw it as a field spread before Him. As He surveyed that field, He saw an unbelievable treasure buried under the dirt of sin and the darkness of rebellion! His heart was completely consumed with the desire for the treasure before Him! He saw the value and understood what it would cost. He was willing to pay the price! He gave the most precious thing in the universe to buy the field, the very best He had, the life of His own son, Jesus...because of “the joy of the treasure”!

Nothing was too valuable for Him to give in exchange for such a treasure!

Jesus says in John 3:16-17 ***“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”***(emphasis mine). The kingdom of heaven is all about Father’s joy in the souls of men, *you and I are the treasure hidden in the field!* Your soul and my soul are the diamonds and jewels that Father saw when He decided to send Jesus to give His blood to buy the field. The life of Jesus in exchange for the souls of men!

Jesus participated in Father’s plan and brought to earth a different system. He gave everything without expecting anything back for Himself, nothing at all! Jesus gave everything He had, His own life, so Father could have the treasure that gives Him joy.

Now that’s a switch. I give everything I have, even my life, and someone else gets what gives *them* joy? It’s not about *what I get*, but about *how much I give!*

What kind of trading is that? The Kingdom of Heaven kind!!

The Word of God says **“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (Romans 5:8) When we were unthankful, sinful, rebellious, disobedient, self-righteous, full of pride and coveting the stuff of this world...God demonstrated His love by sending His own Son to die for us.

This does not compute in the merchant system we live in. How could Father ask His own Son, whom He loved completely, to give His life for those who hated Him? Only when there is a relationship of such depth and oneness, and the desires of each heart are so interwoven, that only one thought emerges. I only want to do what the other person wants to do, I only want to be what the other wants to be, I only want to say what the other wants to say. I love what the other loves and I love the other’s life more than I love my own life.

So Father, You have seen the treasure in the field and You love the souls of men...I love them too...here I am send Me. Use Me to buy the field, I will pay whatever price is required. I too can see the beauty that will shine from them when they are dug out of the dirt and set in the light of the glory of Your face!

This is all nonsense in the merchant economy! Why would anyone make a deal to trade access to the most wonderful treasures of sins forgiven, holiness and a priceless eternity, with someone who doesn’t have the ability to pay? The first thing we find out from our prospective clients is ‘do they have the capacity to pay’. Why waste time with someone who can’t pay the bill?

OUR HEARTS EXPOSED

Some time ago I had dinner with a representative of a major denomination. He was in town doing a survey to see whether or not his denomination should start a new church in our town. In the past some of the folks in town had had a relationship with his denomination. At present they weren't too happy with the level of trading they were allowed in the other local congregations, so they had encouraged him to come and take a look. After listening to him discuss his work for a while, with curiosity, I asked him what criteria his denomination would use to make the decision to come to our town.

Unabashedly, he said that his first priority was to look closely at the income levels in the neighborhood surrounding the location of the proposed new church. The decision to plant the church would be positive, if the average personal income was high enough to insure that the new disciples coming to Jesus would be able to make the mortgage payments on the church building which the denomination would construct and finance!

Jesus said He came to preach the gospel to the poor. (I guess that was before trading came into the church.) Jesus didn't require the poor to be successful traders before the good news could be preached to them. Is it possible that successful trading might actually be keeping men from hearing the good news?

There was a treasure in the field, buried in the dirt. Jesus came to buy the field to get the treasure for His Father. He did it with His blood. He brought with Him a system completely new to this world! The system He called the '**Kingdom of Heaven**'! A system completely opposite to satan's 'merchant system'.

Jesus gave His life so Father could have what He loves...what gives Him unbelievable joy...the souls of men and women, to enjoy for all eternity!

You have just read the first half of the message of the gospel read on to Chapter 12 to read the second half of the message of the gospel.

8

DECEIVED INTO MERCHANT THINKING

With the awesome love of God so clearly demonstrated, how is it possible that men and women can be deceived so easily into accepting the serpent's cheap substitutes? How can the Church still be so susceptible to the enemy schemes? How does he influence our minds, causing us to fall into his merchant system?

Isn't our worship more powerful than ever? Aren't there potent new prophetic revelations and anointings coming on the Church as Jesus prepares a 'spotless bride' for His coming? Why then is the enemy's grasp on the hearts of those attending church still so evident? Why do powerful ministers of the gospel fall deeply into trading with increasing frequency?

The merchant king is using five levels of deception against the Church as the end time approaches. And he begins by coming as a serpent against those who minister the Word.

To those ministers of the gospel who have remained faithful over the years, preaching the Truth while remaining free of the enemy's deceptions and manipulation...God bless you. I thank you for speaking the message of repentance, dying to sin, self and this world, the victory of the cross over the powers of darkness, the Lordship of Jesus, the Love of Father, the Presence and Power of Holy Spirit.

I thank you for swimming upstream, standing alone and remaining a beacon of light in dark times. May your hands be strengthened, your souls encouraged and your spirits refreshed with Power from on high. Your words were used to bring light into my own soul and the souls of many who are now crying out the word of Truth. Please persevere, as the day of His appearing approaches. Let joy be your strength in the face of opposition. May the Spirit of Power be upon you in the battle for Truth.

Level One Deception: Trading in the Pulpit

Since I now spend most of my time travelling, speaking from the pulpits of various churches, I will be free in discussing how the serpent uses his merchant system to infect those of us who serve as ministers of the Word. We are his first targets in his attack on the Church and therefore the ones through whom his successes are first displayed.

When we come to Matthew 24:3, we find Jesus speaking about future catastrophic events. Later, when He sits down with only His disciples they ask Him this great question, **“Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?”** Note that they are asking Jesus for a specific sign, one sign, **“what will be the sign”** (emphasis mine). They are looking for something very precise so that when they see it they will be certain that His return is imminent. Jesus answers them with, **“Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ’ ”** (Matthew 24:4). (emphasis mine)

The sign that Jesus gives them is ‘deception’. **“Take heed that no one deceives you.”** He says that this is how they/we will know that the end is near...deception will come against the Church. Not just any deception but deception that comes across the pulpits of the Church! He says, **“many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many”**. Jesus says that those who will **“deceive many”** will be those coming **“in my name”**. That is...*they will come in the name of Jesus*. They will be speaking to those who want to listen to someone preaching in the name of Jesus. That would be the Church!

I used to read this incorrectly. I would look at this passage and think that these deceivers were the ones who would stand up in the pulpits of the nation and declare that ‘they’ were Jesus, after all they were going to be saying, **“I am the Christ”**. (I was sure they wouldn’t be able to deceive me, because I would know that *they* were not Jesus!) Then, one day Holy Spirit said to read it again. Then I saw that Jesus was telling the disciples that these deceivers are going to come in His name (Jesus), saying that ‘He’ (Jesus) is “the Christ”. They are not going to call themselves ‘Jesus’. Jesus is speaking. He is saying they will come in His name saying that He, Jesus, is the Messiah!

Well that’s different. There are going to be *many* of these men who will stand and speak to crowds of *many*, identifying themselves *as ministers of the gospel*, declaring Jesus is the Christ, He is the Anointed One, He is the Savior! From that platform of truth, they will deceive many. (This reminds me of the garden scene with Eve, and the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness...just the ‘truth’, just the words of God, right?)

What are they (we?) going to be saying that will produce such powerful deception, especially since they are clearly identifying Jesus as the Messiah?

It is possible that we in our generation, here in the church of North America, are the first who can answer that question. *Our generation has had the dubious privilege of sitting for a lifetime under an increasing number of ministers and teachers (I include myself) who have declared Jesus is the Christ but who have been unwilling to declare Jesus Christ is 'LORD'.* In His day Jesus cried out **“Why do you call me Lord, Lord and don’t do the things I say?”** (Luke 6:46)

We love to preach about Him as Savior, as the Anointed One but too many have refused to preach about His Lordship. We don’t like to speak about the Lord/slave concept of servant living and ministry. (After all, we pastors are supposed to be in charge right? I read a book once that told me all about ‘My Ministry’ and ‘My Authority’ in the local church! Surely others are supposed to be servants!) In our generation, many of us who preach have been calling Him Lord, but we haven’t been doing the things He said.

Jesus said that we should be like Him. Jesus came as the anointed servant, preaching the gospel to the poor, healing the broken hearted, setting the captives free, opening the eyes of the blind, releasing those oppressed by the enemy...declaring the time of God’s favor! (Luke 4:18-19)

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:28

Jesus, the Lord of Glory set aside all His own rights, He came to this earth, sat in the dirt, clothed Himself in a servant’s robe, and washed the feet of those who would betray Him! That is only possible if one is truly dead to one’s own desires. (Honey, I am fed up of these hours with no pay and no appreciation. If this church thinks that I am going to continue to be their doormat, they have another thought coming. Listen, at the next board meeting I’m going to demand that they raise my salary. After all, I have my master’s degree now. If they don’t agree to a raise I’ll take on the professorship of religious studies they are offering me at the university. As least they recognize my abilities.)

Many of us, as ministers of the Word, have not been personally willing to die...but we were willing to change the gospel...just a little! Well, perhaps we didn’t really change it, we just decided to emphasize the truth of His ‘unconditional love’ and ‘unfailing grace’ as the central part of our gospel. We still use the words of God...just not all of them! I wonder...from whom did we learn that? So, the primary focus of our North American gospel became Jesus’ desire to make us happy in our lives here on the earth.

Our gospel has produced many converts. When asked what the purpose of the church is they frequently say, “The church is supposed to provide for MY needs and the needs of MY family”. (After all, I’m the one who pays the bills around here!) Why shouldn’t people feel that way? Haven’t we, the preachers, often thought and lived with that philosophy? Isn’t that why we have been preaching that message?

Jesus came as ‘Redeemer’ to redeem our lives in this world, so why shouldn’t we have the best of everything? In fact, Jesus said we are no longer servants (slaves) but ‘friends’, right? Because Jesus is a true friend, He wants me to be completely satisfied with my life. He wants me to have the best there is. (He made sure I received the best training, and now with the right trading techniques, I’ll be able to succeed in building a church that everyone will sit up and pay attention to!)

Earlier when I was speaking about our ‘servant’ relationship with God, I said I would look at the concept of ‘friendship’ with God later. So let’s look briefly at ‘friendship’ with Jesus, beginning with His teaching in John 15:15-16. **“No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.”**

Jesus clearly tells His disciples that He does not refer to them as servants any longer. So why am I speaking about slaves and servant-ministry? Well...because it’s a softer message. I want you to read the whole book without becoming offended!

We get Jesus’ definition of what his ‘friends’ are like from the verses immediately preceding this passage. There He says, **“greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.”** John 15:13-14. Mmmm, ‘friendship’ in Jesus’ way of thinking means we are willing to die for someone else...mmmm. And ‘friendship’ in Jesus’ way of thinking means we are willing do everything He commands...mmmm. Well that changes the flavor a little. So, because we are all His friends we are all supposed to be doing what He says to do...happy, obedient, fearless, willingly dying? That is the normal life of a true friend of Jesus? But haven’t we been told that our loving friend Jesus came to make things a little easier for us?

So, as a servant, we had to do everything we were told, but as friends we have to do everything we are told...and die too! Not die because we are commanded to die. But die because we love our friend Jesus and are willing to die for others. We lay down our lives for others, just like Jesus laid down His life for us...then He calls us His **“friends”!**

Isn't it cool to be the 'friend' of Jesus?

Jesus also says, that when we are His friends we must know who it is important to please. **“And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!”** Luke 12:4-5 (emphasis mine). As a minister, do I please Jesus the Lord who is my friend, or do I please those in the congregation who want to run me out of town if I don’t shut up about the fact that Jesus is Lord. Of course, because Jesus is love, grace, patience, mercy, and all that good stuff, He’ll make sure that I know who is opposing me. Then He will give me calming words to satisfy them so that I will be able to continue my important ministry, be well thought of in the community, and complete this great work for Him...right?

“You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake.”

Luke 21:16-19

It appears that the death, which He promises us, is very similar to the death, which He was willing to die! Welcome into ‘friendship with Jesus’ fellow pilgrim! You see the message of servant hood really is a softer message. For the moment we'll continue with that message and not talk about friendship, then I won't have to refer to James 4:4. **“Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”** That will only get me going on again about the need to stop trading in the merchant system of this world.

Now, as a minister of the gospel, I know I can't sell the message of that kind of friendship with Jesus. So, I choose instead to emphasize His love and grace. I tell people that Jesus came to make them happy...without preaching about this ‘dying’ thing! I just do my little trade...acceptance and appreciation from the congregation in exchange for a comforting message.

(Hi there, I guess you haven't been around here for a while. Did you hear about little Suzy? It's quite sad really. She fell off the piano bench and got involved with Joe, you know Deacon Bob's son, Joe? ‘They’ got pregnant, but somehow Deacon Bob knew just where to get a private abortion for Suzy, so...no one really heard about it. Suzy fell into depression afterwards. We were so worried about her. We sent her to the best psychiatrist in town ...the church even paid the bill! Nothing seemed to help. She started hanging around with the wrong crowd. You remember Sammy? The one with the smart mouth, spiked red hair and the earring? I had to kick him out of the church a few years ago...well, he ended up in drugs. (We all knew he was no good!) He got Suzy into drugs. The long and short of it is that they pulled her body from the river this morning...so sad. She was such a beautiful girl. I sure am glad she got to Bible Camp that one time before she got so committed to the piano. I remember the day she asked Jesus into her heart. Thank God, it would be an awful funeral to preach if all I had to talk about was the last few years of her life on the street!)

Jesus says in 1 John 5:4, **“whatever is born of God overcomes the world”**, and He says over and over again in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, things like... **“To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.”** (I can't preach that at Suzy's funeral, two thirds of my church would leave!)

We in the pulpit really are the first to feel the serpent's attack. When he manipulates us into using God's Word the way he used what God said in the garden, we are trading in his system. We have sacrificed the power of the gospel on the altar of self-preservation. We have traded the love Jesus has for the sick, demonized and dying, for acceptance and security. Many of us have been doing it for a long time. *God will hold us accountable!*

In our generation we have stood in the pulpits of a nation and preached a gospel without a personal cross. We dished up desert without and meat and potatoes. *We opened a wide gate to a broad way and people have been rushing through with their five ton trucks loaded with the things of the 'good life in Jesus' and we became their parking attendants!*

Father please forgive us! Bring us to repentance before it's too late for our generation!

When will our generation hear Jesus say through our mouths, as His pastors and teachers? **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”** Matthew 16:24-26

When will we, His ministers, be willing to live Paul's reality stated in Philippians 1:21? **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** Are we really His ministers if we don't say what He said, live like He lived, and die like He died?

The first level of deception is preaching as Truth a 'gospel' that deceives, a gospel without a 'Lord' Jesus, without a cross, without a death.

So, what about you, what gospel have you believed?

LEVEL TWO DECEPTION: TRADING IN THE PEW

The result of preaching a gospel without a cross is that one makes converts who follow without dying. (And we wonder why there is so much strife in the church?)

So as a minister of the 'level one' gospel, I tell people they just need to say 'yes' to a few simple questions to experience all of God's wonderful blessings. “So, you know that God loves you and wants you to have a wonderful life? “Yes?” You know that Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins of the whole world? “Yes?” You know that hell is bad? “Yes?” You know that you have to ask Jesus into your heart so you can go to heaven and not go to hell? ” “Yes?” Now with every eye closed...no one looking around...just put your hand up so I can see it...good, you can put it down...now just say this little prayer. “Dear Jesus, thank you for dying for my sins. I ask you to come and live in my heart. Father, I thank you for making a place in heaven for me and that I am now your son...amen”. Now if you're comfortable, just if you're comfortable with the idea, I want you to come and see me up here at the front after the service. I want to give you a certificate that will help to remind you that you are saved and a brochure about all our programs that you can enjoy here in our church, “Yes?”

You came hungry for something real...honestly seeking God. You knew that your life was a mess, that if things didn't change you were going to do something desperate! Now you're convinced that you're saved because I'm the 'pastor' and I have told you that you are 'saved'. As a minister, I'm supposed to know these things and you trust me.

So you begin to look at everyone around you in your new church family. They seem to have their lives altogether, enjoying the good life! Why wouldn't you get your own five ton truck and go for it? Isn't life grand! When you want a car, your new church family will teach you how to pray for it, telling you that Jesus promised us "all things"! After a while the good life becomes a reality. Your new friends help you find some great deals on property and the principles in pastor's special 'money management seminars' kick in. Years go by, your retirement portfolio is growing nicely, you've moved up to a new house and the kids are heading off to the best universities. They are really going to get ahead! *Thank-you Jesus!*

Suddenly things in the church change unexpectedly. Your pastor has been called on to bigger things. He's been faithfully honing his skills on the eighty or so local folk for the last nine years. Now a bigger church in the city needs his talents and has offered him double the salary. (It really wasn't fair that we didn't have the funds to recognize his new Master's degree). Now you're on the pastoral search committee for a new pastor.

This is a new experience! "You know the first guy we brought in to speak stood up in the church and said 'so, you haven't died to your sins and your own desires and this world's system yet? Well you need to repent and become a disciple of Jesus!' *CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT!* It sounded like he thought that we weren't even saved! Didn't take us long to 'thank' him and send him on his way. The nuts that are out there now! We're going to make sure that the next guy we interview has the right education. We sure miss our pastor with his master's degree. He really knew how to communicate God's love and acceptance in our post-modern age! (By the way, have you seen the latest plans for our new sanctuary?)"

"I set watchmen over you, saying, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!' But they said, 'We will not listen.' " Jeremiah 6:17

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." 2 Timothy 4:3-4

Sadly, for some time, ministers of another gospel have been tickling our ears in the manner described in Jeremiah 6:12-15. **"They heal the hurt of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace!' ...when there is no peace"**. Now it is very difficult to get the sweet taste of that kind of fruit out of our mouths.

“You know there is a guy that’s been phoning us steady, I think he’s our man. He is young, has the right education and a great vision for the church. He has already told me several excellent ways of financing the new sanctuary! He just seems to say all the right things. I’m sure he’s the one we want.”

“They zealously court you” Galations 4:16

There is a lost generation sitting in pews and in positions of responsibility in the churches in North America, a generation who has been robbed of the power of a true gospel. We are a generation that said yes to our own gospel but refused the opportunity to say yes to Jesus as ‘Lord’. We are the generation that agreed to pay for the buildings and programs as long as we were allowed to continue enjoying the things of this world. We are the generation who offered our children into the arms of the god of mammon, encouraging them also to go for the gold, which tarnishes.

But, it is not too late!

We are the ones who traded the Spirit, His power and gifts for influence and position. We are the ones who satisfied ourselves and then demanded that our ministers satisfy us also. We are the ones who allowed our love to grow cold and let the church of North America descend into the abyss of personal gratification, bringing shame and reproach upon the name of Jesus.

But, it is not too late!

Repentance is available while life moves through our veins. The generation of our living children, the most populous of all time, still has the opportunity to see Truth displayed in our lives. What will you do with the Gospel of Jesus the Christ, the Lord of Glory, in the days to come?

LEVEL THREE DECEPTION: DELUSION IN THE PULPIT

Before I get back to our discussion of the kingdom Jesus brought to the earth I will briefly lay out the other three levels of deception. You judge for yourself where we are.

In Matthew 24:11-13 Jesus continues to flesh out His warnings to the disciples about the deceptions that will follow in the last days. **“Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many.”** And again in verses 24-26, **“For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand. Therefore if they say to you, ‘Look, He is in the desert!’ do not go out; or ‘Look, He is in the inner rooms!’ do not believe it.”**

The first level of deception was preaching a gospel that deceives and now we see the third level of deception, which is closely related to it. When a minister of the gospel falls to the temptation of preaching an 'attractive' gospel in order to have the 'success' of a 'bigger congregation' happily paying 'bigger payments' on a 'bigger mortgage' for a 'bigger building' than he used to have, he opens himself up to some powerful delusions. Nothing is so convincing as success!

"Look at what I've done in ten years! We have 3000 attending, a brand new sanctuary with seating for 5000 and we probably built too small! We have a staff of 27, six doctorates, seven masters degrees, and there is more money in the bank account than we know what to do with! Pastors are coming from all over to learn our techniques! We have even tapped into government funds! That's where the real money is! When we committed to meeting their guidelines and staffing requirements they began sending clients to our programs. Our counseling department has its own building and is operating as a separate ministry with three fully trained psychiatrists from the best universities on staff. Now we can send the people needing counseling there instead of having them hang around the church using up my time! I have developed programs to meet the needs of everyone that comes in our doors. Don't tell me I'm not on the right track.

The people know what they need. When we listen to them, and give them what they want they love to come to church. They know that they can come here on Sunday morning after a tough week in the world and leave feeling happy and encouraged, not condemned! My people are just fed up with hearing all this 'Old Testament' stuff about repentance and sacrifice. Jesus died for a 'beautiful bride' and I see them in church every Sunday...there isn't a single bum in our entire congregation! Just take a look at all the BMW's in the parking lot on 'Bible Study' night! Bless God!

I know that evangelist came through town and told us we were worshipping idols. Somehow he sneaked through the cracks and got in the pulpit. I won't make any mistakes like that again! It wasn't my fault, Deacon Joe recommended him. (Joe isn't a Deacon here anymore!) After that guy was here, there were more stressed out people lined up for counseling than we had ever seen...long-time church folk too! It was amazing how easy it is for these predators to disturb the peace in a church. Sure glad we shut him down after the first night.

My people need to know that from now on I will protect them from those negative sermons that talk about dying! From now on in my ministry, my anointing is all that's needed. I know what is best for my church. I've been appointed by God to build this church and no one is going to come in here and tell my people that they are in danger of going to hell! God speaks to me directly and the folks around here know that. My people know that they can come here on Sunday morning and hear God through me. They don't have to hear anyone else! We are not going to have them running off to anyone else's conferences any more! From now on, if anyone bucks the system I put in place, they're gone! And there'll be no more outside speakers in this place!!!

Jesus said in John 5:41-44, **“I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes only from God?”**

I leave the discussion of this level of deception with a brief comment from 2 Peter 2:1-3.

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. *By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.*”

(emphasis mine)

Ministers of the gospel, coveting personal recognition, requiring slavish obedience from their followers, in reality demanding their worship, trading the souls of men for success.

Father, have mercy on the church of North America!

LEVEL FOUR DECEPTION: DOCTRINES OF DEMONS

I have heard it said, “the only problem with deception is that it is very deceiving!” As the church falls further into deception, all restraint against the enemy’s plans to fully substitute his doctrines for the life of faith and obedience will be destroyed.

“Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.” 1 Timothy 4:1-3

Deceived but unaware, following demons and their teachings, these people are without conscience, manipulating others to trust lies. They fix the church’s attention on demon substitutes to keep people from knowing God. Consumed with a fascination for demons and their activities, they disdain marriage, promoting new forms of ‘loving relationships’ without covenant, without gender, based solely on personal pleasure. They substitute diet for holiness. (Here we are, back in the garden again eating the fruit of the tree!) Like snake oil salesmen of bygone days they purvey magic elixirs promising life, health and happiness...stealing from people the faith of Jesus and the power of the Spirit.

In Revelation chapter 2, Jesus is speaking to the church in Thyatira. A church filled with people who pride themselves on “**knowing the deep secrets of satan**” (verse 24). (TEV) Jesus says that they are following “**that Jezebel who calls herself a prophet**”, allowing a demonized woman “**to lead my servants astray.**” How? “**She is encouraging them to worship idols, eat food offered to idols, and commit sexual sin**” (verse 20). A church immersed in searching out secrets of satan. A church encouraged to worship idols but unaware of what they are doing. The powers of darkness that sit behind the idols being worshipped, love the recognition they receive from God’s people.

What more success could the serpent have than to get the church’s attention fixed on the very demons that are deceiving them!

Is it possible that one day the church will be persuaded to trade the message of peace with God through the total victory of the cross, for a perverted message of ‘warfare’ against forces of darkness? A message of spiritual warfare that exalts the shadows of this world, a message that gives the demonic realms great credibility for their armies, their organization, their power, their names, the areas of their influence, their territories and on and on...until they are the only topic of teaching?

This won’t be the real warfare that Jesus and the disciples demonstrated. No demons will be cast out of people to set them free. No strongholds in the mind will be pulled down as described through Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church. (2 Corinthians 10:4-6)

Demons are agents of the king of merchants. They are real but they must submit to the name of Jesus because He defeated trading with them on the cross. *We are instructed to cast them out, to set people free! Not to trade with them or worship them.* Giving them the attention they desire dulls the conscience and opens up one’s mind to follow them into full time trading without restraint. Full time trading opens up the life to idolatry and every other sin.

Will the day come when we in the church allow the enemy of our souls to hide his real activities under the guise of our powerful teachings? A day when ministers appear to speak with authority over the enemy, but in reality are using the enemy’s power to gain influence and recognition in the church? No wonder we will be unable to cast the demons out, we won’t be able to see them anymore!

When that day comes, the church will be walking in the fourth level of deception, listening directly to the enemy and teaching his doctrines.

“Because they are filled with eastern ways; they are soothsayers like the Philistines, and they are pleased with the children of foreigners. Their land is also full of silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures; their land is also full of horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is also full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made.” Isaiah 2:6-9

There is a time when people with twisted minds will fill the church. People whose minds are full of eastern thinking. At that time God will be preparing to act as He did in the days of Tyre and deal with those whose hearts have been traded to the enemy.

“I will...punish the men who are settled in complacency, who say in their heart, ‘The LORD will not do good, nor will He do evil.’” Zephaniah 1:12.

Self-assured, confident, full of empty religious platitudes, living comfortably with the demonized in the community, appreciated for their success, golfing with the leaders and shapers of the town, posing no threat to their way of life.

They will be completely submersed in the merchant system, holding themselves up in the community as examples of success, attracting more followers to their ‘church’. Blindly selling their souls through serpent trading as they receive trading tips directly from the demons operating the system. Wealthy, idolatrous traders, not only satisfied with what they have gained from their trading, but worshipping the results of their efforts.

Remember our passage in Ezekiel 27 and 28? The merchant city of Tyre was completely controlled by the “King of Tyre”, the serpent, through his merchant system. Everyone was trading successfully, but at what cost? Filled with twisted thinking, loving their trading, wealthy, satisfied, idolizing their possessions, worshipping their own success and abilities, they were blindly enthralled with the demon hordes that made it all possible.

Until God removed them and their wealth!

Where are we on this journey into idolatry and deception as we park the new motor home at the end of the driveway for all to admire? Washing it, when it’s not dirty. Waxing it, just to feel it! (Too bad I had already made the deal on it when that missionary came last week...could have thrown a few dollars her way to help her out with a new orphanage.)

Are we just casually trading a few eternal possibilities for the pleasure of a new chariot...or have we listened to something a little more sinister? (God is soo understanding! He knows I needed this to impress my new boss and show him I am totally committed to my new position. I’ll have to work lots of overtime just to make the payments! Too bad I won’t be able to help out with ‘meals for the poor’ at the church this afternoon...I have some new polish to try out!)

A deceived church, listening to demonic teachings, successful, worshipping the work of their own hands. Convinced they are living the abundant life, praying for more successes, unaware that now the voice guiding them comes through a dark throat.

Is this still the church of a future time?

And it can get worse?

LEVEL FIVE DECEPTION: DELUSION SENT FROM GOD

There will come a time when God says enough is enough.

“The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because *they did not receive the love of the truth*, that they might be saved. *And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.*” 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (emphasis mine)

This is the final level of deception. How unthinkable! God will actually send **“strong delusion”** to confirm the deceived *in the church* in their deceptions!

Surely Jesus would never do that to His beautiful bride? No He won't, not to His Church! The problem is that we look at the outside and see the church, but God looks in the hearts and sees His Church...there is a difference! God will deal with the church and He will build His Church! By the time this level of delusion is put on the church, the Church, that is really the Church, will have already stepped out of the merchant king's system. Then God will deal out strong delusion to all those in the church who knew the truth but **“who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”**

Many in the church believe a fantasy about the time after the rapture of the Church, when the anti-christ rules. They think that they will experience revival times then...when the man of evil is revealed. *They have been convinced that though they sit idle in pews today, living totally for this world, when the anti-christ is revealed they will run into the churches and truly give themselves to Jesus!*

I have a revelation for you! It won't happen! If you think that way, you are deceived!

If you have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ now, but have still refused to repent and die to everything but God by the time the anti-Christ is revealed, it will be too late for you. There will be no glorious battles for you to fight in the war against the anti-Christ, *because you will be one of his followers!* Why, because you *did not receive the love of the truth* when you had the opportunity. If you refuse to receive the love of the truth now, God says that He will make sure you can't receive it then!

“For this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” (emphasis mine) During this coming time, God himself will insure that all those who heard the truth, but continued trading for the pleasures of this world, will believe the power, signs and lying wonders that the anti-christ will be peddling!

I know that you might have heard the gospel that says a loving God would never do something like that...you are confident that *God will know that you always intended on obeying Him one day! But that day will reveal that you traded your good intentions to the serpent...for an eternity in hell!*

Father is an awesome, loving, Holy God, absolutely righteous, ultimately just, and fair. He saw you buried in the dirt in the field, loved you there, and paid an unbelievable price for your soul. His love for you and His desire to share the joy of His heart with you is total...but He will not be mocked.

Father does not leave us confused on how He will send this level of delusion. He gives us an example. In the following interesting passage of scripture, a scene is described in heaven where God has determined to end the life of the wicked king Ahab. So God gathers around Himself a group of spirit beings and asks them, “ **‘Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall (die) at Ramoth Gilead?’ So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, ‘I will persuade him.’ The LORD said to him, ‘In what way?’ So he said, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And the LORD said, ‘You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.’** ”
1 Kings 22:20-23

The time for Ahab to repent was ending, and God sent a lying spirit to deceive the prophets Ahab listened to. God was faithful to His own nature and also sent a true prophet, speaking the truth to the king, giving him one last opportunity to repent. Ahab had the truth and the lie and had to choose which to follow. He did not repent. He had traded with the king of merchants all his life and he traded with him to the end.

He was so deceived that he even thought he could use his trading skills to outwit God, so he traded places with the king of Judah as they went into the battle. The king of Judah dressed up as a king should, and Ahab put on ordinary clothes, assuming the enemy would see the king of Judah and think it was himself. Wow...that will fool God for sure! Ahab died from a stray arrow. It was Ahab’s final trade with the serpent. Ahab chose to do it his way and received hell in trade.

“But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, *did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.*”
Revelation 9:20-21 (emphasis mine)

At the end of the age, when the anti-christ comes to power traders don’t suddenly repent and stop trading in the enemy’s system. When that time comes, if we are in the church but still trading for what the serpent is offering, we won’t repent either. Like Ahab, we will trade to the end, only realizing we were deceived as we peer into the flames of hell.

“Then he opened his mouth in blasphemy against God, to blaspheme His name, His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. *All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. If anyone has an ear, let him hear.*” Revelation 13:6-9 (emphasis mine)

If we delay, we are already deceived. Our names must be in the book of life before these events take place.

We will not have the opportunity to repent in that coming day because our trading will have given the serpent his greatest prize...our minds.

9

PRODIGAL TRADING, PIGPEN LIVING

In our pursuit of the revelation of the mysteries hidden in the parables, we are going to look now at the first part of Jesus' teaching in the parable of the prodigal son. In a later chapter, we will look for what has been hidden in the second part.

“Then He said: ‘A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, “Father, *give me the portion of goods that falls to me*” So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’ “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; *for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*’ And they began to be merry.’ ” Luke 15:11-32. (emphasis mine)

“Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.” I want *my* inheritance now. I want what is *mine* now. Give *me* what I have coming to *me*. Give it to *me* now! No, I won't wait until the time when you decide I should have it, *I want it NOW!* You say that it is mine so *give it to me now*. You say I'm not ready for it, but I think I am ready, so *give it to me now*. You say you did it all for me, so *give it to me now*. You're the one who said it is *my* inheritance, and you have more than enough for yourself, so *give me my inheritance now!*

Have we been like the prodigal? Have we ever come before our heavenly Father and said, “*You say in Your Word that You have provided everything in Christ for me, so give it to me now!*”

In our gospel we have been taught that the prodigal son is the person who used to attend church. Now he’s back-slidden, living in the pigpen of sin and debauchery. We know who the prodigal is, because we see his car parked at the bar every night, and we *hear* things about him!

I would like to open this up a little. Our new gospel, which we developed to fit the North American realities of personal wealth and self-centered living, tells us that the things of this world are the blessings of God. God has provided me with a new car, a bigger house, a cabin on the lake, a six-week holiday in Europe, plus, a new church building with comfortable pews to worship in and a new pastor who is sooo encouraging!

Everything we ask God to give us seems to be for our own comfort, the satisfaction of our own desires. (Oh what is your problem? Of course Jesus wants us to have the best. He said that He would give us the desires of our hearts, what kind of a weird gospel are you writing about? You’re still caught up in that poverty spirit. You need to renounce that thing out of your life and take the investment course on Thursday night down at the church!) Really?

In our gospel we tend to get our understanding of what God’s blessings are from selected passages in the book of Job. God clearly shows us that He made His friend wealthy before He tested him. After He tested him He gave Job even more wealth than he had before. So it really is all about money! My Bible says that I can ask God for anything and He will give it to me because He loves me...in fact He is just crazy about me! So we say to Father, “*give me my inheritance now*”, and He does, and we are ecstatic! Let’s party!

(I know the poor are dying by the millions in other parts of the world, but that’s just their lot in life. God put them there and put me here. So I’m just going to enjoy the good things that God has given me. AND NO ONE IS GOING TO LAY A GUILT TRIP ON ME! Besides, those countries are really getting what they deserve. God is judging them for the witchcraft and sin of their ancestors. When they get their act together and start trading in the good old North American way they’ll get an economy going and be able to look after themselves. *It surely doesn’t do any good to keep throwing money at the situation!* They have to do something for themselves, start working for the good life, like I’ve had to. No one came along and just handed all this stuff to me. God gave me the opportunity...but I had to work hard for it.)

Give me my inheritance now! We have followed our new gospel with great diligence and we have asked, and asked, and asked, and asked again...until we have received our inheritance, now.

(Listen the prodigal lives down at the bar. I saw the girl he was sitting with through the window one day. I know what he was doing with her. The prodigal is the one who is wasting what his father gave him on sinful pleasures but I'm not wasting what God gives me. I'm doing everything that I can to be a good steward of the resources that God has put in my hands. I made sure that I got a very conservative broker and he is taking care of my investments. I have a growing fund for our retirement so that we will be well taken care. In fact my investment counselor told us that it will work out best for us tax wise, if we take early retirement. So now we are planning on retiring next year! That gives us 5 more years to do everything we always wanted to do! We are going to see everything in this world that there is to see! All the years of work and saving are paying off. Thank God that He blessed me with a good education. I've had an incredible life, never been sick to speak of. The kids have all grown up, they have good degrees and are well on their way to making it big. I've always followed sound investment practices and have accumulated enough to live in comfort for the rest of my life. Praise God!)

“Then the word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? Therefore speak to them and tell them, “This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any Israelite sets up idols in his heart and puts a wicked stumbling block before his face and then goes to a prophet, *I the LORD will answer him myself in keeping with his great idolatry. I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.*” ’ ”

Ezekiel 14:2-5 (NIV)

Is it possible that sometimes we ask God for things that help us serve our idols? We have been taught that if we prayed for it, and receive it, it must be God's will for us. Then it's ours to enjoy with a clear conscience. But, what if the things we pray for so earnestly are already idols in our lives? What if our desire for them came from trading in the serpent's merchant system? What if we are just asking God to bless our trading with the enemy?

That's what my 30 years in business was like. God was sitting in heaven looking down at me, John, praying for favor with the bank manager so I could borrow another \$500,000 to expand my business. On more than one occasion God leaned over to Ezekiel and said "...hey Zeek, look at John praying down there...doesn't even know his life is full of idols. What do you think, should I let him ask me for anything? Mmm, yes I'll let him ask me. I'll give him what he wants. Hopefully, one day before he dies, he will have had enough of his of empty idolatry...then I'll have a chance to get a hold of his heart! Go ahead persuading spirit, tell the bank manager to give John his loan." And off I went, so grateful to God for answering my prayers and 'blessing' me. It only took four days to get approval, praise God! What a record! Can't wait to tell the pastor how good God is.

That was my life, what about you? Has God ever had a conversation with Zeek about you?

A prodigal son is willing to trade on his Father's goodness to get what he wants. He knows that the Father is good and has stored up valuable assets for His children, things purchased at great cost to be passed on in the right time.

Father has a wonderful inheritance planned for each of his children, to be given when they are properly prepared to receive it. God knows the right time...*but the prodigal wants it now!*

TRADING THE PRESENCE FOR THE GOODS

The prodigal is a consummate trader. First he trades the presence of his father, being with him in his house, for the goods his father has for him. Then he goes out and trades the goods his father gave him for recognition, pleasure and personal gratification. He ends up in a pigpen!

When we demand the goods, which Father absolutely wants us to have, before we are prepared for them, we will always end up in a pigpen. Let's be honest, many of us in our modern congregations are living in pigpen religion. We craved recognition, pleasure and personal gratification, and traded our way into the pigpen by demanding that Father give us the goods now. And we have been taught from the pulpits of our churches that it is perfectly correct for us to do so. (How else would I be able to play golf with the pastor if I couldn't afford the lifetime membership and guest fees at the club?)

What have we become?

Where are we in our thinking?

Why do we so love trading in the serpent's merchant system?

Do we hear how we pray?

Do we see the idols in our lives?

Do we feel the Father's grief as he looks at our hearts?

Are we willing to consider just how far we carry on this trading in the church?

We send our finest and brightest to our seminaries telling them to come out prepared to build 'churches of excellence'. We want them to be the best that is humanly possible to be. 'Humanly' possible? We say that we expect them to be gifted by God, *but we are willing to trade spiritual gifts for talents*. We say we want them to demonstrate the power of Spirit, *but we are willing to trade the Spirit's presence for good programs*. We say we want them to be anointed in their preaching, *but we are willing to trade a Word from God for three professionally delivered points that make us feel good*.

We encourage them to obtain the best education possible. When they succeed we accept them as professionals. When they require a salary and benefit package based on their education and the salaries of other professionals, we give it to them. (After all that's what we would want if we were going to waste our lives preaching.)

Many are willing to trade in the system that we ourselves are worshipping in. We tell them not to speak about repentance and holiness any more...so they don't. We ask them to minister to the idols in our hearts...so they do. They spent years in the schools we built, learning our merchant skills. Why not, it works!

PIGPEN RELIGION

What about when we seek spiritual gifts instead of the Spirit? When we are willing to trade His presence for His power? What about when we learn that a healing service where a miracle happens produces a bigger offering? Then do we go for miracles? What do we get when we are willing to trade away God's presence for His gifts...money? When we notice that if we prophesy success and recognition over people, more people come and when we prophesy a trumpet call of warning against sin and complacency, no one comes...do we start to prophesy to people's idols? What do we do when people tell us that they don't want to hear negative sermons about sin, the blood and the cross? Do we only tell them of God's unmerited favor and unconditional love that puts no requirements for change on the human soul?

Holy Spirit please don't leave your church!!

Just how far have we gone in the trading game? We take the stuff of this world, which we demanded from God, and waste it on our own pleasure. We take the gifts and the anointing of God, and waste them on the praise of man. We take the wealth God intended for us to give the poor, and waste it on the construction of large church buildings, filling them with self-centered congregations.

Jesus deliver us from ourselves!

We persuade the elderly to join the church estate-planning scheme and give a portion of their estate to God (the church building fund that is) after they die. We effectively tell them, "Keep it all for yourself while you live, but after you are dead we will help you take a little away from your children, so God will get His share. He'll be so pleased with your sacrifice. We know you haven't sent it on before you...but we'll show you how you can drag it in afterwards." What can we give to God, from this world, after we are dead? Why do we think it counts?

Father forgive us!

TITHES AND OFFERINGS

We understand that the temple in the Old Testament is a picture of the Church, the 'Body' of Christ, in the New Testament...in everything except money! *Now here's a revelation of our hearts...we teach that when it comes to our money the 'temple' is the 'local church' building!*

What if the temple is actually the Body of Jesus Christ on the earth with regards to money too? What if the tithes and offerings were truly brought into the temple? What if we actually gave our tithes to those serving at the altar and didn't force them to spend the money on our comfort? *What if the first ten believers in the congregation had the privilege to covenant together to give their tithe directly to the support of the pastor. One tenth from ten people gives a full salary. What if every ten believers covenanted together to tithe consistently and gave their tithes as support for a specific man or woman in full time ministry?* How many ministers would then be roaming the earth with their needs met and more, bringing the gospel to the poor?

Heresy you say?

In Old Testament days when people became deceived, they gave gifts to Baal and in return received the wealth of this world. They brought gifts to the temple of Astaroth and in return received sensual pleasures and satisfaction in this life. They sacrificed their children to Molech and obtained recognition and influence.

Why do we bring gifts into our temples (churches)?

What if offerings above the tithes were put into the poor box and actually given to the poor of the earth, instead of to Baal as payments on our new sanctuary? Do we really think that we build our beautiful multi-million dollar edifices to satisfy the heart of Jesus? Could we just be using the things of this world to attract the people who like worshipping Baal?

People come into our pleasure palaces and are wowed by our million dollar sound systems. We entertain them with weekly professional performances and tell them they are now worshipping Jesus rather than Astaroth. Really? Could they just be enjoying the same things they always did, only in a different environment?

We teach the Word of God as 'good bible principles' to our young men and women. Then we send them to the best places of higher learning to be trained as leaders of excellence who will know how to develop influence in their communities. We tell them it's God's will for them to rise to the top along side of those who are worshipping in the ways of Molech, not noticing that those worshipping Molech and those worshipping Jesus, now look the very same!

When will we invite people to turn from idols and serve the living and true God? When will they hear a message inviting them to leave the merchant system, enter another kingdom, take up their cross, and die the way Jesus died?

Only when that is truly our own experience!

Jesus had some things to say about the church at Sardis. **“And to the angel of the church in Sardis write, ‘These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars: “I know your works, that *you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead.* Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works perfect before God. Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you. You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” ’ ”** Rev 3:1-6 (emphasis mine)

How is our hearing these days? Do we hear our Savior say **“*you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead*”?** (emphasis mine)

Are we really alive in name only? Is it possible that we could be that deceived... alive only in our own minds? Jesus says that there are a few who have kept their robes white. **“*You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments.*”** (emphasis mine)

Jesus always has a few remaining who have not traded with the enemy.

Dear Jesus may we be among the few.

10

MERCHANT WAYS

“Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.” James 4:13-16

Church traders, James has something to say on the subject of trading! He is familiar with the process...it’s been around for a while. He sees us with our *“boastful”, “arrogant”, “evil”* hearts heading out on the golf course with the newest visitor from church in tow, intent on selling him his new home. James says, hold on, it’s time to quit trading in the serpent’s merchant system.

Did you note where in the sentence James puts **“If the Lord wills?”** It’s before **“We shall live and do this or that.”**

Ask Father first...there’s a switch! We generally make our plans to trade like crazy without even thinking about Father. When we have decided exactly what we are going to do, we say, ‘we should pray about it’. So we quickly tell God what we are going to do and add a little ‘Lord willing’ at the end of it. *What if God isn’t willing and says ‘no’?* Does His opinion matter to us? Are we willing to hear Him say no and stop what we are planning? Or have we traded for so long that we assume Father is willing...every time! James might be telling us to make sure we have heard what Father has in mind for us before we decide to trade in the serpent’s merchant system.

In our ‘Bless me Father club’ we reverse the process. We have been taught that Father will bless us in *all* of our efforts no matter what they are, if we just add a little ‘Lord willing ...ok...thank-you Jesus’ prayer after everything is rolling.

We have come to believe that since we are His dear children, Father is always willing to bless us with the desires of our hearts. So now it seems right to us to decide that a blessing is whatever we want in this life.

Learning from the serpent we have developed the art of following selective parts of the gospel, allowing our conscience to die while we satisfy our thirst for pleasure.

“Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.” Psalm 37:4. We only memorized the last half of this verse. We loved the **“He shall give you the desires of your heart”** part, so we headed out for a life of trading. We take care of the **“Delight yourself also in the LORD ”** part by going to Sunday morning service once a week. When will we be honest with God and ourselves and recognize that what we really delight in are the things of this life?

The next verse says **“Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.”** Psalm 34:5. We are delighting ourselves in the Lord God when He sees righteousness and justice come from our hearts. Then out of a new heart we preach the gospel to the poor as we feed them, we heal the sick, the brokenhearted and proclaim freedom to those whose minds are taken captive by the enemy. We give sight to the blind and set free those oppressed by his demons.

In many of our lives there is no such fruit. Perhaps we can remember a time when we were on fire for God and couldn't get enough of His Word. A time when we loved singing songs of faith, losing ourselves in His love, when we were eager to spend intimate hours with Him in listening prayer. But that was before we realized that we needed to get ahead in this world.

One day we looked over the fence and saw a poor eighty year old pastor still struggling to make a living by preaching the gospel because he had no retirement funds and we said, “not me, I am going to make sure that I can enjoy my retirement”. So we looked over the other fence into the serpent's merchant system and decided that we could eat whatever fruit we wanted to and make our own bread. We made a decision to take care of business now and serve God later...but among the thorns of the merchant system 'later' never comes.

We may have been a fast growing plant on the road to fruitfulness at one time but the **“cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choked the word, and it became unfruitful”** (Mark 4:18-20. We missed the fact that those who truly delight themselves in the Lord have no greater joy or reward at eighty years of age, than sharing the goodness of God with men and women, calling them to righteousness and justice.

We, the church of North America, have swallowed serpent substitutes to the point that we are no longer able to answer the call to live in another kingdom. The instruction Jesus gave to the young ruler to **“go sell all you have and come and follow Me”** has no more meaning to us than it did to the Pharisees. We insist that the things of this world, which we have accumulated through great sacrifice are God's blessings and we no longer have a kingdom view of the abundant life Jesus purchased for us.

BUYING OUR WAY IN

Remember Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5? At the time when those in the Church were selling all they had and were giving to others in need, Ananias and Saphira decided to participate. So Ananias **“...sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”** Acts 5:1,2

They thought the idea of selling stuff and giving the proceeds away was a great idea...as long as the money could be traded for a little recognition and acceptance. “You know Saphy, sweetie, if we sell the land your mom gave us and give some money to the church, I could ask to have my name stand for one of the new deacon positions the Apostles are talking about. They would have to give it to me, everybody knows we manage our money well. Of course we’ll just keep a little to put aside for a rainy day. God is sort of like the tax man, you know, He doesn’t really know everything about me.”

They died! God actually did know everything about them and He didn’t think that trading with the enemy was amusing. Trying to come into the kingdom of heaven but continuing to trade in the serpent’s merchant system...*not on your life Ananias!*

What do you think? Just put a little money in the offering like everyone else. Just to fit in, get a little recognition, get elected to the Board next time around...God sees it all! Is Father amused at our Ananias and Sapphira trading techniques in the church? Just a doting, loving Father, smiling down on His spoiled children saying “that’s ok, you’ll understand when you step into glory and see all the wonderful things I have prepared for you.”

Not on your eternal life!

Remember the baptized believer of Acts 8:18-19...Simon the ex-sorcerer? He’s been active in the church for a while. He wanted to use serpent rules to trade for kingdom power in order to gain influence and recognition. **“When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, ‘Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.’ ”**(NIV)

Now here’s a prize in the Kingdom of God, an unabashed trader. “Just how much will God charge me for this kind of power and influence? Let’s cut to the bottom line. I loved the influence that I used to have when I was well known as a trader in the serpent’s system. I know real value when I see it. So how much serpent gold will this authority cost and where do I pay?” **“But Peter said to him, ‘Your money perish with you, because you thought that the gift of God could be purchased with money! You have neither part nor portion in this matter, for your heart is not right in the sight of God.**

Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity.’ ” Acts 8:20-23

JUST GOOD INTENTIONS

Jesus’ cry to the Pharisees was “...**why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?’ ”** Are we doing the things He said? Individually? Corporately as a church? What did Jesus say to do?

He gave us an interesting little parable in Matthew 21:28-32, the parable of the man with two sons. “**‘But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, “Son, go, work today in my vineyard.” He answered and said, “I will not,” but afterward he regretted it and went. Then he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, “I go, sir,” but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?’ They said to Him, ‘The first.’ Jesus said to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you that tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him; but tax collectors and harlots believed him; and when you saw it, you did not afterward relent and believe him.’ ”**

Jesus gives us the application so this is not a difficult parable. Look you religious folk, Pharisees, you are the second son, you are disobedient. You say you are going to obey, but you never do! Even when you have an example in front of you that puts you to shame you will not repent and actually do the things I say.

What did the tax collectors and the harlots do when they heard Jesus? They repented and they quit sinning! But doesn’t it say here that they just believed Jesus? Yes and when they just “believed”, the religious folk who didn’t believe, “saw it”. What did they see, the inside of their heart? No, they saw that when Jesus said “go and sin no more” to the harlot, they couldn’t sleep with her any more because she had quit sinning! When Zacchaeus stopped cheating them and handed them money, four times more than he had stolen from them, they saw what obedience to Jesus looked like.

We in this North American church are a generation that loves to say, “it is what’s in my heart that counts”. We quickly respond like the second son. Yes I’ll go! We have good intentions of obeying Jesus one day when we get a little break in our trading...but we never do, we just love our trading too much. When there is an altar call, we flock to the altar, cry crocodile tears over our “weaknesses” and our “mistakes”, and promise God we’ll do better next time. But we quickly dry our eyes and immediately go back to our trading. Why? Because we think that obedience does not require change...it’s merely about having a right heart attitude. When we say we will obey, but never do, what is really in our hearts?

THE END OF TRADING

Jesus has some strong things to say about those who are consumed with trading. He gave us some examples of those who hoard the things they have accumulated, refusing to care for the poor He loves. There is a story of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus.

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” Luke 16:19-31

Why do we love sermons that tell us we can have it all here and now? Do we consider the implications in the account of this rich man? We were so relieved when we heard that the results of our trading are really the *abundant life* promised by Jesus in John 10:10. Since *we* were promised the abundant life, why would we think that our trading in this world should benefit anyone but ourselves? Could it be that many of us are like another rich man that Jesus spoke of in a parable in Luke 12:16-20. This guy had his Registered Retirement Savings plan filled to the limit!

“Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: ‘The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’” So he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’ ” ’ ’ ’ ’

Many people tell me as they are approaching retirement, “when I retire I am going to do everything I ever wanted to.” Some are retiring as young as 50 & 55, determined to satisfy themselves for the rest of their lives. To me that sounds a little like the guy in the parable. **“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ ”** Luke 12:20

TREASURE IN HEAVEN

Remember the account of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-27? Jesus told him to sell all he had and give all the money to the poor. And then he would have treasure in heaven. Treasure in heaven! His treasure on earth could end up as treasure in heaven! Afterwards Peter said to Jesus **“we have left all and followed you”**.

“So Jesus answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time -- houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions -- and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.’ ” Mark 10:28-31.

Often when a sermon has been preached from this passage we have heard that if we give a dollar to the church, or the speaker, or a particular ministry, then Jesus will give us a hundred dollars back. What a deal! (That’s a lot better than what He promised the rich young ruler who would have to wait to get to heaven to receive his reward.) We are convinced that Jesus is telling the disciples and us, that when we give, we get paid back now, with interest. Is there any better investment plan than this? Give, and get a hundred times more in return!

Let’s see now, Jesus was talking about anyone who had left possessions and relationships **“for My sake and the gospel’s”**. Does the promise apply if we just put a little extra in the offering plate in order to get the 100% return? Are we giving for Jesus’ sake and the gospel sake when we sign up for the evangelistical 100% dividend deal? Could it be that we are actually giving for our sake then? Is it possible that our real motivation is the ‘here and now’ dividend that we are expecting and not the benefit to Jesus and His kingdom at all?

We love the idea of the 100% dividend **“now in this time”** particularly in the area of money. We are sure He was talking about money even though He uses the words, **“houses”** and **“fields”**. He couldn’t be speaking about actually leaving a home or an income producing property behind and going out to preach the gospel. How would we get the benefit of the 100% dividend then? He has to be talking about the money, right? Let’s look at the other promises in these verses to see how they might be fulfilled in our lives.

Suppose we leave 2 brothers and 3 sisters for Jesus, we get 200 brothers and 300 sisters back! Wow! Does ‘Mom’ have any say in this? Sounds like a lot of labor pain! But, it might work out because Jesus also says that we’ll have 100’s of mothers too! Then along with all the sisters and brothers we get 100’s of children! Then comes the best part. We get all these brothers and sisters and mothers and children in the middle of persecutions.

Do we still think we can get the ‘Jesus promised 100% cash dividend policy’ out of this passage of scripture? Might it be possible we are so in love with the benefits of trading in this world’s system that our thinking is colored just a little? What if Jesus was talking about something different than our ‘give to get theology’ we throw in the face of God? What if He was actually speaking to those who, like Peter, really did walk away from everything and follow Him?

What if the promise in this passage only applies to those who do the same thing? What if it doesn't apply at all to our stingy, calculated giving that demands a tax receipt as a record to show God how much He owes us?

Maybe Jesus was talking about another economy, the kingdom of heaven kind, where He sent the disciples out preaching the gospel of repentance and told them not to take any provision at all with them. Just go preach and when you come into a house you will find someone prepared to provide for your needs. There you will find a mother, brothers, sisters, a roof over your head and food from the fields on the table. Wherever you go preaching the gospel you will find more members of your new family, ready to receive you and provide for you. When you are publicly whipped and beaten, there'll be someone there to pick you up out of the garbage heap where you were thrown, and nurse you back to health. Then you can go to the next town, meet more of the family, and do it all over again! ***"...houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions..."*** (emphasis mine)

"But what about my reward for the extra \$20 I gave in the offering?" (Don't worry, as we enjoy spending much more on our lunch after church, an angel in heaven will be carefully writing down that \$20 gift. The courts of heaven will hear about the sacrifice!)

Will we ever admit to our love of money, repent of our sin and be cleansed? Or will we just keep trading until we are on the other side of a great gulf watching someone else receive the rewards that Jesus promised to those who would follow Him?

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Matthew 6:19-34

The only false god Jesus names in the New Testament is the god called 'mammon'. The NIV translates the word as "money" instead of "mammon". ***"You cannot serve God and money"***. (emphasis mine) That's different, we can't serve both God and money? We have been taught that God wants to give us money and since He is giving it to us we should enjoy it to the full!

Maybe that's another gospel, a North American gospel? Maybe it was developed long ago in the city of Tyre? Maybe some preachers have been ministering to our idols?

Jesus told the rich young ruler to give his money to the poor and he would have treasure in heaven, later, when he got there. We say give to the building fund so you can have a new stadium to sit in once a week and you will have treasure here on earth, 100% more than you gave. Give to the new million dollar sound system fund and you will get to listen to awesome 'worship music' while you are enjoying your 100% dividend! Give to the children's ministry fund and we will give your kids the best children's programs possible!

Surely we couldn't just be giving everything to ourselves...could we?

DEPOSITED IN HEAVEN

"Then He also said to him who invited Him, 'When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just.' " Luke 14:7-14

Jesus said to give to those who can't or won't ever pay us back. Too often we only give if the preacher really begs and in the very least promises we will feel good about ourselves for giving.

Jesus said that treasure is transferred to heaven through the poor.

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' " Matthew 25:31-40 (emphasis mine)

Jesus sees a gift given out a heart stirred by love, to supply someone else's need, as a gift given to Him. He said that if we have given it to the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, then we have given it to Him.

He's in Heaven...so it ends up there! It's so simple, money is just great if we can let go of it, but if we can't we are worshipping it. And we can't have it both ways. If we are storing it up for ourselves (hoarding it) while the needs of the poor go unmet, we are worshipping it. Period!

In the pigpen of the merchant system the things we traded for and hold onto tightly are the things we love. Jesus said that if you want to know where your heart is just look and see where your money is stored. The apostle John put it this way in 1 John 3:16-17, **“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?”** The only way we have to demonstrate that we love God is to love others. By giving...and giving...and giving...

Our money is either in our possession or it is in the hands of Jesus in heaven. Either we are using it for our own pleasure or we are using it for His pleasure!

Father really does love the treasure that His Son gave everything for! When He looks at the souls of the lost, the poor, the defeated, the dying, His heart is filled with longing for them, anticipating the joy they will bring into His kingdom! How can we say we love God when we don't rejoice over the things that give Him joy?

A LOVE AFFAIR

If Jesus was satisfied simply with food to eat and clothes to wear, why do we listen to someone telling us satisfaction comes from having what he is selling? Remember how the serpent convinced us that we really had to have the last thing he dangled in front of us? First a little persuasion to create the need; then a little more to arouse our covetousness; then a quick look over the neighbor's fence to awaken our pride until...we had to have it. Once again we bowed down and worshipped in the serpent's merchant system.

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” 1 Timothy 6:6-10

We know who loves money! It's the guy who has more than we do! *The love of money is so subtle. That's why the cunning serpent has so much success getting us to trust in it more than we trust in God.*

We have arrived at the place where we commend those who live in covetousness. I once heard a preacher put it this way; “How many times have you heard this said about a man, ‘he’s a good man...he loves his money...but he’s a good man!’ We *don’t* say ‘he’s a good man...he loves his pornography...but he’s a good man!’ Why, because *we like money*’ ”. We have an ongoing love affair with serpent stuff so we give grudging respect to successful traders who are storing it up in noticeable volumes.

We are not exempt from scrutiny simply because we don’t have a lot of money. God says, “**Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.**” Ecclesiastes 5:10 (NIV)

How satisfied are we with our incomes?

We have responded to a gospel and have asked Jesus to come into our hearts, but our lives are still centered on the accumulation of stuff. A few of us tithe but most of us don’t. Instead we say, “everything I have is God’s, I’ve given it all to Him”. We seem to be waiting to hear Him say what He wants us to do with it. In the meantime, until He tells us differently, we’ll be good stewards and accumulate as much as we can for Him in the years we have on this earth! How thankful we are when God doesn’t tell us what to do with it before our retirement! Then we can travel and play golf as long want.

THE SIN OF SODOM

We are experts at pointing the finger at others, foolishly comparing ourselves with ourselves! (I’m not as bad as Joe. He’s the one that bought the new motor home you keep harping about!) We know the sins God really hates and will judge. It’s those sins recorded in the Old Testament, those horrible acts of perversion and idolatry...like what they did in Sodom and Gommorah. (But He can hardly blame me for enjoying the things that I prayed for and He gave me...can He?)

Just what were the sins of Sodom? God says “**Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy. And they were haughty and committed abomination before Me; therefore I took them away as I saw fit.**” Ezekiel 16:49-50

They were proud? They had too much food? They had too much free time to spend on their own pleasures? (These were the sins of the people of Sodom? How can that be? This is all the stuff that I’ve been praying for!) They didn’t feed the poor or clothe the naked? Why? Because they were haughty! Haughty means: “having or showing arrogant superiority to and disdain of those one views as unworthy”. Then they began to participate in homosexual abominations before a Holy God...and he took them away.

How far are we, the church of North America from the same condition? Aren't we arrogant, proud, self-satisfied, self-centered, full of bread, overweight from rich food, not caring about those who can't dress well enough to feel at home in our new sanctuary?

Don't we have more free time than the church of any generation before us? Why do we have so little time for prayer, for knowing God or ministering to those for whom Jesus died? Why do we get angry and hold back our tithe when the preacher goes on for more than 20 minutes? Why have we been willing to spend millions on our pleasure palaces we call churches while the world starves?

We the church of North America, in our generation, have had the opportunity and ability to fund enough ministers of the gospel to reach every place on the globe! But instead we have chosen to put our money in our retirement plans, beach condos, motor-homes, investment portfolios and pleasure toys!

Speaking of our time in history, the Apostle Paul puts it this way. **“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.”** 2 Timothy 3:2-5, (NIV)

Does this describe us? Could this be why there are churches in the poor countries of the world who are now saying “don't send us missionaries from North America any more, we can't live with the gospel you bring”? Is that why they are now starting to send missionaries here...*to preach to us?*

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days” James 5:1-3 (emphasis mine)

Are we the last days church for whom this warning was penned?

Are there two classes of Christians? Those Jesus calls to sacrifice and discipleship and those He calls to wealth and the enjoyment of the pleasures of this world? Are there some rich young rulers to whom Jesus says; “it's ok for you...you can keep loving your money and still follow Me”?

Are we a church filled with merchant ways, a church full of rich young rulers?

What do you think?

11

KINGDOM WAYS

When our heart is truly centered on Jesus and His desire for others, Father lavishes His blessings of righteousness and justice upon us.

When our hearts are broken for the needs of others we become a conduit of provision for them, instead of a collection center for personal wealth! Then Father demonstrates His ability to increase the cash flow and keep up with our giving!

THE WAY OF A KING

How do we keep from submitting our hearts to the serpent while we live in the middle of his system? Thankfully Father has not left us without examples of how to function in this life. Let's examine a few to help us see what kingdom living looks like.

Solomon gives us the opportunity to see how God responds to what is inside the heart of a man. In 2 Chronicles 1:7, Solomon has become king, having received the kingdom from his father David. God appears and asks him this question, **“What shall I give you?”** Solomon's answer reveals a heart condition that God loves to respond to. **“Give me wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people; for who can judge this great people of Yours?”** 2 Chronicles 1:10

Then God said to Solomon: **“Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked riches or wealth or honor or the life of your enemies, nor have you asked long life -- but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself, that you may judge My people over whom I have made you king -- wisdom and knowledge are granted to you; and I will give you riches and wealth and honor, such as none of the kings have had who were before you, nor shall any after you have the like.”** 2 Chronicles 1:11,12

God appeared to Solomon and presented him with a blank check, backed with all the resources of the Creator of the universe! Whatever you want Solomon, just ask!

Solomon's answer reveals his heart, and his heart is for the people. He knows what his people need most is a wise ruler. He is aware of his own lack and asks God to fill out the cheque on behalf of the people...not himself!

Please give me wisdom to be a good ruler of this people. God responds by giving him what he asked for...with unbelievable wealth that he didn't ask for! That's different! Why would God give him riches, wealth and honor...more of it than anybody else ever had, when he didn't ask for it?

Because, God likes it, when we honestly want something just for someone else's benefit...without any ulterior motives! That's kingdom living!

THE WAY OF A WOMAN

In Proverbs 31:10-31, Father provides us with a detailed description of a trader of the kingdom kind...a successful woman!

“A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: ‘Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.’ Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.” (NIV)

Notice that the husband of this woman of “**noble character**”, “**has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.**” This woman brings her husband “**good, not harm, all the days of her life.**” And, “**she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.**” And, “**she opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.**” And, “**she watches over the affairs of her household.**”

Her attention is on the needs of her husband, her family, her servants, the poor and the needy! She is successfully trading but is not doing it for herself. *Unselfish trading!*

It sounds like the way Jesus thought about His life...give it up for others!

Unselfish trading...that’s a very destructive concept for the agents of the serpent’s merchant system! They have no way of controlling her if they can’t create some sense of personal need and get her to covet something for herself. How can they awaken pride in her when she is doing everything for other people and not asking for personal recognition or praise?

Laying down her life for the needs of others but very successful in what we thought was the serpent’s game, where he always won! This has a nice ring to it! The only difference seems to be this thing about not doing it for herself...mmm?

The serpent’s merchant system is built upon covetousness and pride, but this gal is free of those things. So, it’s back to this heart thing again. God looks on the heart, and what He sees there, counts for everything. Giving trading profits away to benefit others only happens when the deep desires of one’s heart are the same as the deep desires of the heart of Jesus. That is when deep is really crying out to deep.

THE WAY OF A SCOUNDREL

During the ministry of Jesus, whenever someone stepped into a new way of living it always seemed to have something to do with obeying Him and loving others. We know the story of the little guy, Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector in Luke 19:2-10. When Jesus came to Jericho this little rich guy runs ahead of Him and climbs up in a tree so he can see over the crowd. Jesus calls him down and invites Himself to his house...and all the religious folk get real ticked. Jesus did not go to their houses but went to the home of the town crook...a protected Roman government agent! If Jesus had any discernment, surely He would have chosen to eat with them and not Zacchaeus!

Then Zacchaeus starts doing things that turn their stomachs. First, they see him all around town taking care of the homeless, giving them tens of thousands of dollars. Then he knocks on *their* doors and hands *them* money, which he had stolen from them! Not just the money he had stolen but *four times as much!*

“Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.’ ” Luke 19:8

I give half of everything I own to the poor...I pay back four times the amount I have stolen...what kind of radical, weird discipleship is that? Giving away money after you have already paid the taxes on it? Giving away half of all that you own? Giving it to the poor? How are *they* going to help you in your next trade, what influence do *they* have? Making restitution? If I return money to people I stole from, they will find out I’ve been cheating them! If I admit to any wrong I’m liable to get sued!

Nothing in Zacchaeus’ response to the words of Jesus made any sense to those unwilling to step free of the merchant system. In a moment of time, he was released from his bondage to that system and began operating in a superior kingdom. *He stepped out of serpent trading and into kingdom giving!* Then Jesus says something about Zacchaeus that he never says about the religious folk. **“Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”** Luke 19:19

Zacchaeus gave away his money. What an amazing thing! And Jesus liked it! Jesus even said that it was proof that Zacchaeus got saved. When Jesus comes into the home something changes. When Jesus speaks and someone obeys, things are different.

What kind of a stir would be created in our communities if one morning some of us North American Christians got up and decided to obey Jesus?

Would a few religious folk become offended?

Where would Jesus find us, with the obedient or with the offended?

THE WAY OF LOVE

“And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, ‘Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor.’ And they criticized her sharply.” Mark 14:3-5

Listen, we are talking about an entire year’s income here. This oil was far too expensive to waste! Waste? Mary loved to sit at the feet of Jesus, immersed in the peace that surrounded Him. When she did her sister Martha complained, criticizing her for sitting, wasting time.

Now Mary gives extravagantly out of love for Jesus. This time, even some of the disciples criticize her! They sound like the Pharisees! (Isn't it amazing how quickly we become religious and self-righteous around money?)

“But Jesus said, ‘Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me.’ ” Mark 14:5

What would we have done, criticized her or thanked her for blessing Jesus?

THE WAY OF OPPOSITES

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.” Luke 6:32-36 (emphasis mine)

In the Kingdom of Heaven everything reflects the nature and character of God! And God is **“kind to the unthankful and the evil”**. Are we?

Originally, Christians were known as ‘the People of the Way’. We are going to look at the ‘ways’ of the kingdom, Jesus brought to the earth. How do we live on earth, function in Jesus’ kingdom, without submitting to serpent trading? Jesus gives us a few ways in chapters 5 and 6 of the book of Matthew.

Every way in the kingdom of heaven is opposite to one of the rules in the serpents merchant system. Let’s pick out just a few, but watch out, these are different ways than we are accustomed to. *These are the ways of life, eternal life!*

Way # 1: Be sincerely happy when people lie about you, spit in your face, and put you in prison because you are a believer.

“When they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad.”

Way # 2: Don’t retaliate, when wronged.

“It was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. ...who ever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.’ ”

Way # 3: Give the unreasonable, demanding, person everything he wants and more.
“If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also...who ever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.”

Way # 4: Give away whatever you have to whomever needs it...if he is just borrowing it, don't ask for it back.
“ Give to him who asks you, ...from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.”

Way # 5: Love your enemies.

Way # 6: Bless those who curse you,

Way # 7: Do good to those who hate you,

Way # 8: Pray for those who spitefully use you and who persecute you...”
**“I say to you, love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you, and
pray for those who spitefully use you and
pray for those who persecute you.”**

Way # 9: Give away your money secretly. (Refuse tax receipts?)
“When you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly”

Way # 10: Don't be religious just to get recognition.
“When you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men...pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Way # 11: Forgive, everything, every time.
“If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Way # 12 : See #10, and cultivate intimacy with Father, so you won't become religious.
“When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance...that they may appear to men to be fasting. When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.”

Way # 13: Stop loving and keeping for yourself the stuff you acquired by trading in the serpent's system.

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”

Way # 14: Stop worrying. Enjoy Father's kingdom provision.

“Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; ...your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ... seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

Kingdom ways, absurd impossibilities...without the love that was in the heart of Jesus!

THE WAY OF DEATH

God said, **“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”**. Isaiah 55:9. And Jesus said **“My kingdom is not of this world”**. *Jesus came from, and brought with Him another kingdom. A kingdom only understood by one who is dead to merchant ways. A kingdom where death really is life!*

When the serpent tells us that the wealth and power he can supply is what we need, we believe him...because unlike Solomon, we won't set aside our own desires and ask Father for things that will help others.

When the serpent tells us that real value is in the things we can obtain through his system, we listen...because unlike the virtuous woman, we refuse to freely supply the needs of others without requiring recognition.

When the serpent tells us to hoard our stuff and hide our guilt in using his system, we do...because, unlike Zacchaeus, we trust in stuff more than we trust in Jesus, and refuse to make things right.

When the serpent tells us that those who walk free of his system should be judged and criticized, we repeat his words...because unlike Mary, we close our hands and reveal our miserly hearts.

The serpent wants us to obtain abundance through his system, to take it from his hand. Remember in the wilderness that is how he offered Jesus all the wealth of the world. Why aren't we now as deaf to his enticements as Jesus was then?

If we walk in the kingdom that Jesus walked in, we follow Him to a cross to die on. If we die like He died, we receive the life He lived! We can't receive it any other way. If we hold onto this world, this life, we lose the life that can only be ours by dying. The ways of the kingdom are opposite to the ways of this world's system.

“Jesus answered them, saying, ‘The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified. Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. *He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.*’ ” John 12:23-26 (emphasis mine)

We cannot comprehend His words unless we can step out of this world's thinking for a moment. **“I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.”** The death He is speaking about produces something. It is not just the end of something...it is the beginning of much new life, much more grain. The seed is put in the ground and as it dies a plant grows and produces many more kernels of grain. Grain is seed that dies to produce more grain, that dies to produce more grain, that dies to...

“He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Here we go again in the way of opposites! If we love our life, we lose it? Jesus was the firstborn from the dead and He says here **“If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also.”** Follow Me! Where? To death. I am going to die, follow Me. I am going to a cross, follow me! After I die I am going to be with my Father and I want you to follow Me all the way there. Dying really does produce life. Why, because then we will keep our lives for all eternity! Trust Jesus, He has shown us the way.

Paul said that if there is no resurrection from the dead then we are the most miserable of men. If this world is all there is then the serpent is right...we had better eat drink and be merry!

Do we really believe there is resurrection from the dead? No, not unless we are willing to die to this life. Can we follow Jesus without dying? Sorry...no. Dying begins here and now, like it did for Jesus. If we are willing to die to this life and live out the Father's desires, then we also will rise to a new life in a new kingdom...beginning here and now!

We must know the way of death, know that we are grain that dies to produce more grain, that dies to produce more grain, that dies...

12

THE ULTIMATE KINGDOM TRADE

We get one opportunity in this life to make a trade of supreme importance and eternal consequence. One incredible trade...per life! The revelation we need about that trade comes to us once again through a little parable. It is found in the parable that follows the one about the man finding the treasure in the field, it is the parable about the pearl of great price.

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

Jesus continues His Kingdom teachings in Matthew 13:45-46 saying, **“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price (value), went and sold all that he had and bought it.”**

In chapters 2 and 3, we learned that the word ‘merchant’ is only used in the Bible to describe either satan or man. We learned from God’s description of the men of Tyre, in Ezekiel 27 & 28, that successful trading fills the heart with pride. We found that the men of Tyre succeeded by following the leading of the ‘king of merchants’, the serpent, who we were introduced to in the Garden of Eden. The question is, does the merchant in this parable represent us (man) or satan? This is a kingdom of heaven parable. Satan has no place in the kingdom of heaven...so the serpent slithers out of the picture.

Therefore the merchant in this parable can only represent ‘man’, you and I. We are about to learn something awesome about the kingdom of heaven and how we relate to it.

Remember Jesus’ teaching in the parable about the treasure found in the field? In just a few words He revealed the purpose of the ages, secrets hidden from before creation. In that parable, how wonderfully Jesus brought to light Father’s desire and love for the souls of men and His provision for their forgiveness! Now in this parable, Jesus is about to teach us something of the desires in our own hearts and show us the only response possible to Father’s awesome love. All in one short verse! Isn’t it amazing how God can say so much in so few words, but it takes us pages to convey a single thought?

THE MERCHANT

There is a **“merchant seeking beautiful pearls”**. The passage does not say that the man is a ‘pearl merchant’, or that he is ‘a merchant of pearls’. It simply says he is a merchant who is seeking beautiful pearls. This man is a trader, a merchant. He is honing his skills in the fine art of trading. He has learned the principles of the merchant system we have been discussing...things I learned when selling pianos. We are not told what his regular stock in trade is but whatever it is, in the middle of buying and selling, this guy has a thing about pearls. He is always looking for beautiful pearls.

THE SEARCH

He loves beautiful pearls, values them highly. He is looking for rare ones of highest quality, hard to find and easily lost. Lovely pearls, able to be worn as jewelry or kept as an investment. Small but expensive, needing to be carefully guarded, they are displayed only to those who appreciate their beauty and value. This merchant knows what he likes in a pearl. He has studied every piece of information he could find and spoken to anyone who is knowledgeable. He knows what characteristics establish value, the ingredients of beauty...color, shape, texture, gloss and weight. As yet, he has not seen the ‘ultimate’ pearl, but he is sure that it exists. So he searches everywhere for beautiful pearls hoping one day to find one of great value!

He meets a lot of people as he travels to many places in his life of trading. Always buying and selling from different people, developing his client list. Everywhere he goes he keeps his eyes and ears open, looking for beautiful pearls. He asks his new contacts, do you know of any pearls for sale...have you seen any...is there an estate sale happening? Pearls are always on his mind. He searches diligently, making sure he always has enough in the bank to trade for a beautiful pearl if he finds it. The search continues. He follows every lead, every rumor, tracks down every possibility.

Suddenly in the most unexpected place he comes onto the rarest of all! A find of such incredible value! A pearl of rare beauty! It dwarfs everything he has ever dreamed of. A pearl of great price!

THE COST

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price (value), went and sold all that he had and bought it." Matthew 13:45-46

Suddenly all normal trading is irrelevant to Him! He has laid eyes on something, which has a beauty he can't even describe. Now he realizes that from all the years of learning he only had a partial understanding of perfection and quality. The worth of what he has now found goes far beyond anything he had ever heard about!

He speaks with the one who has the pearl and he hears the price. He begins to count the cost! A shock wave physically washes through his body...it will take everything he has accumulated! Everything he owns will have to be liquidated!

It will cost him his savings, his home, his business, his future in trading...everything! It will cost him his reputation. Everyone will think him insane for giving all he has ever worked for... just for a pearl. Who would make such a trade? It might even cost him his family! He has no idea how his wife and children will react to leaving their comfortable life so he can have the thing he has always looked for. He has talked about it so much, for so long, that for years the family has walked away from him whenever he mentioned pearls. Now what will they do if he gives up everything they value...just to get what he must have?

If he makes this trade there will be no way of going back. No way to start again! If he invests all he has in this one pearl, there will be no resources to re-establish a business again. What banker would trust someone who would give up everything...a successful business, home, family, everything...for a pearl? Where will he live? What will he eat? How will he provide for his family?

But he has no choice, he must have the pearl! Others may never have taken the time to check it out, but he knows its real worth. He cannot let this opportunity pass! He may never get another!

So he ***“went and sold all that he had and bought it.”*** He sold everything...and it cost him everything! All of his worst fears became reality, as the pain of losing family, friends, comfort, reputation, became a reality! His life, as he knew it, ceased to exist. Everything changed. *But he had the pearl! Its beauty and value to him was worth it all!*

THE PEARL

In Revelation chapters 21 and 22, Jesus is describing to us through John the apostle something of the construction and beauty of the City of God. Contained in the vision of this celestial city is a description of pearls, which no man has ever seen. The purpose for which they are used gives us insight into the meaning of the pearl in our parable.

“He carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. Then he measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits, according to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel. The construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass. The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. *The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. ...But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.*” Revelation 21:10-21, 21:27 (emphasis mine)

What on this earth, where even our gold tarnishes, can possibly compare to something in that eternal city? There is no darkness there! Father’s presence radiates glory through walls of purest gold! One can only enter this city of unimaginable beauty through its gates...and each gate is a pearl. A pearl, which is a gate, that we must pass through one day to enter that heavenly city.

The pearl in our parable is a gate! A gate that opens and lets us step into the Kingdom of Heaven! What could be more important to a human soul than finding and obtaining that pearl?

Jesus said... **“I tell you the truth, *I am the gate* for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. *I am the gate*; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.”** John 10:7-9 (NIV) (emphasis mine)

*Jesus is the gate who must be found in this life! He is the entrance to Father’s kingdom!
Jesus is the pearl of great price!*

“And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart.” Jeremiah 29:13 (emphasis mine) He is worth searching for with all our strength!

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. *Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*”

Matthew 7:13-14 (emphasis mine)

Jesus is the gate, the narrow gate. Narrow because it is in the shape of a cross. The only way to enter is to stretch out our hands, step up to the cross and press through. The things of this life must be laid down before we can pass through that gate.

But still, deep inside we sense there is something that will give this life meaning and be worth finding. Even in the midst of all our trading, many of us have been searching for that which has real value. We read, study and dream about it. We yearn for it! We have a deep knowing of its existence...so we continue our search. Then one day, we come face to face with an incredible truth...a pearl, its beauty beyond our imagination!

Truth that is a person, Jesus! Only when we get a true glimpse of that Pearl, is our love for Him awakened. Suddenly we realize that all the stuff of this life can't compare in value with Him!

Then we hear the cost...it is everything, even our very lives!

THE PRICE

“Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, *he cannot be My disciple.* And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me *cannot be My disciple.* For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it...lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, “This man began to build and was not able to finish.” Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has *cannot be My disciple.*’ ” Luke 14:25-35 (emphasis mine)

The man wanted to build the tower. He didn't really look at the cost. Maybe it just seemed like a good thing to do. Others were building their towers, so he thought he would build his tower too. Full of self-confidence he just assumed he would have what it would take to carry him through to completion. However, when he was in the process he began to understand what the real cost would be, then he was unable or unwilling to make the commitment to finish and gave up part way through.

In the end everybody looked at his unfinished efforts and mocked him. He had not bothered to find out the cost before he started.

Jesus continues with the account of a king who looks out over the wall of his city and sees an impossible situation. He sees an enemy, another king, with an unstoppable army coming against him. With twice the men his enemy will have no difficulty tearing down the walls of his city. In the coming battle, family, friends, wealth, position, even his life...all will be lost! Everything he owns will belong to another. There is no opportunity to negotiate a deal. There is only one way for him to survive, surrender completely...without attempting to hold onto anything. He must fall on his face before that king, laying everything down, even his own life! In the end his life will be saved as the king has mercy on him, because he was willing to give up totally...without conditions!

Many in the church started to build their tower, but now without finishing, have stopped building. For a season they appear to be master builders, but they started without knowing the cost. As the reality of the price seeped into their understanding they ceased construction. Regretting the time lost to trading and determined to regain what they unwillingly gave up...they return to the life of trading with increased urgency. *They started but are not able to finish!*

Many in the church looked over the walls of their false securities and through eyes opened by the gospel at one time clearly saw the realities of the power of the cross. But, not willing to leave their stuff or surrender their lives, they hope for another solution and try to negotiate a deal that will not cost them everything. Behind the walls of their own reasoning they hunker down, trading with all they strength, hoping vainly that their stuff will protect them in the end.

Oh how we love trading in this world. What satisfaction we receive, brief though it may be, from our latest acquisition! What euphoria as we experience fleeting moments of success in our drive to quench our insatiable thirst of pleasure! What joy we obtain from gratifying our pride by manipulating opportunities to gain momentary recognition! What love we have for the things that will destroy us.

Many are in the middle of loosing it all, ultimately in danger of eternal personal loss.

Do we hear the heart cry of Jesus as he weeps over the treasure He died to buy, **“you can’t be my disciple”**. If you don’t love Me more than you love anyone else, even more than you love your own life, **“you can’t be my disciple”**. If you are not willing to die the death I died, **“you can’t be my disciple”**. If you are not willing to give up all the things that you obtained by trading in this world, **“you can’t be my disciple”**.

These are cries of anguish!

Do we understand? He is crying His heart out when he says, “you can’t be my disciple”! It is the desperate cry of love in the face of the approaching loss of a loved one!

How will we reply?

“No, I won’t put my love for Jesus ahead of my love of my family. No, I can’t give up my own life and all the plans unfinished and desires yet unfulfilled. No, I can’t give up all the things that I’ve traded for over the years. No, I will not humble myself and bear the shame and reproach that He bore. No, I will not die the death He died.”

Or, perhaps we have heard the gospel that tells the real value of the pearl and a different response wells up from deep within our hearts. Perhaps we have been searching with all our hearts, for a long time, and now have something before us more beautiful than we ever imagined. Perhaps we are hearing a message calling us to pay the full price.

Our heart’s response is...Yes! ...Yes! ...Jesus is worth it all! *We have no choice, we must have the pearl!* We know His real worth, even if others have never taken the time to check it out. We must not let the opportunity pass. We may never get another! Will we go **“and sell all that we have and buy it”**?

And we do, and it costs us everything! All of our worst fears are realized, as the pain of losing family, friends, comfort, reputation, becomes a reality. Our lives as we knew them cease to exist...all of life changes!

But... we have the pearl, His beauty and value to us is worth it all!

Is this the message of the gospel which you have believed?

13

JESUS SPEAKS TO THE MERCHANT CHURCH

“To the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ”

Revelation 3:14-22 (NIV)

Jesus, **“the faithful and true witness”** is addressing one of His own churches. He begins by reminding them that He is *the* witness. He is the only witness that is always absolutely faithful and true. When He says that He has seen something, He has seen it. When He says he has heard something, He has heard it. When we stand before Him not one of us will be able to say to Him ‘that’s not the way it was’.

To be a witness a person has to be there at the time the event took place. When Jesus said, **“I am with you always, even to the end of the world...”** it was true. He has been with them, witnessing *all* their deeds. He knows what they have been doing! He has been there to hear *all* their words. The deeds He has seen, and the words He has heard, are evidence of their heart condition...it’s lukewarm! What would cause a church birthed out of the Spirit’s fire on Pentecost to become lukewarm?

With their own words they identify the activities Jesus has been witnessing. They say **“I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.”** They have been trading! This is a church full of successful traders! Is it possible that their success in trading somehow cooled their hearts towards Jesus?

They had become satisfied with the things of this world and with their spiritual condition. Their financial prosperity had deceived them into thinking they were spiritually prosperous also. They saw themselves as having no needs, none whatsoever, material or spiritual! A church with no needs! (This is the church that most of the current graduates from our modern seminaries can only dream about! A church with no needs! Who couldn't negotiate a good salary and benefit package in a place like that!)

They had ample funds for every program and hired the best to keep things running smoothly. They 'bought' the best worship team in the area and they put on conferences every month. Pastors flocked to their conferences on growing a church, just to see first hand how 'church' is really supposed to be done. They boasted a new, covered stadium with great acoustics, just completed and no debt! They had Ipullus and Thuddas coming around on the regular circuit and other big names were lining up for a spot. They attracted the best graduates from Alexandria and Athens to staff their expanding list of programs! Money was no object!

The church's recent push to get the town fathers interested in their plan for restoring the inner city had netted two pro-consuls as new members! How thankful they were that they listened to the consultants suggestion to install private viewing boxes on the upper level of the new stadium. With those additions to the building they were now able to provide the level of service that this class of new member was used to! (Having the pro-consuls on board, the church leadership now anticipated no problems when it came to rezoning the adjacent properties!) God is so good!

"I am about to spit you out of my mouth." "Is there something wrong Jesus? We are doing everything that we can to reach our community with 'our' gospel. We have spared no investment in our facilities to attract them! We hired the best polling agency before we designed our program mix. We know we are providing what this community wants! Jesus what do you mean that You are going to spit *us* out? How can You say that when we have invested so much of 'Your' money. Let's sit down and work things out, 'ok'...Jesus?...Jesus...?"

They have forgotten that He is the true witness. He has seen their hearts!

Listen, can you hear Jesus speaking to them...?

"I am *"the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation"* it is time for you to listen to Me! You have been saying lots of things, but I am Jesus, the true witness. I have watched all your deeds and I know they reveal a lukewarm heart! Now listen to Me, because I must deal with your heart if you are ever to be with Me in glory. What I am about to say to you is important...so I advise you to listen carefully. I am going to speak to you about your real needs, things that have real value, things that are not polluted with your pride.

What you have been saying, tells Me that you have been trading in the serpent's merchant system. Your words reveal that the stuff you have accumulated is more important to you than the true riches I have been preparing for you in glory.

You've taken your inheritance in the here and now! You are proud, your heart is lifted up! The way you talk reminds me of the prince of Tyre. Perhaps you are beginning to sound like him because you have been trading in the same system for so long.

THE POVERTY OF RICHES

You say, "***I am rich***".

Rich in what? Money? Have you forgotten that I walked on the earth without money? When I needed a little My Father had a fish bring it to Me. I never accumulated money, so why are you so captivated by it? Why is gold that tarnishes so valuable to you? Only because you listened to the serpent tell you it was....when you traded with him for it!

Rich in what? Church buildings, property, assets? I created the universe....built the world for you to walk on....made the mountains for you to look at! I wasn't awed with the temple in Jerusalem when I walked in its corridors, why do you think that I am impressed with your stadium? When it is time for Me to shake the earth in a few years....it's just going to crumble.

Rich in what? Church programs? I have the ages planned for all eternity! You are not even able to imagine the awesome things I am preparing for those who truly love Me.

Rich in what? Influence? Your network of self-centered, self-appointed fellow traders all coveting the praise of men, doesn't impress me. All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.. Even though I am the ruler of God's creation. I gladly left my place beside the Father to bring you genuine authority.

Rich in what? What? The things and recognition that you thought you needed, that you coveted and gathered for yourself by your trading? The stuff that you now proudly display before Me, thinking it gives Me pleasure? Your love for all that just proves that you are lukewarm towards Me and My Father!

I am Fire, I live in unapproachable light! I like hot! If you were hot I could fan your flames with My love and you would shine as the stars for all eternity. If you were cold My fire could ignite you into a blaze of eternal life!

But you are lukewarm! My fire has no effect on lukewarm. You think you are hot, so My fire has no attraction for you. You love your life in this world and now you want Me to ignore the real condition of your heart and give you life in eternity too.

“I am about to spit you out of my mouth.” I have not yet spit you out. I am offering you one more chance to repent and turn to Me. Please, look at yourself through my eyes ... ***“you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked”***, and you don’t even realize it!

Wretched! The beggars that you turn away at your new stadium doors look better to me than you. You think they stink, but it is your pride that really smells!

Pitiful! Nothing is so pitiful as a wretch who thinks he is prince. You think your filthy, tattered rags of self-righteousness are princes’ robes. Take a look at yourselves!

Poor! All your gold and silver can’t hide the poverty in your hearts from Me! I came preaching the gospel to the poor who love Me and they will be in My kingdom even though you won’t let them into your new church! If you knew that you were poor I could give you My riches, but you think you are rich and don’t need what I have for you!

Blind! You are wandering around in the dark, stumbling over everything...unable to stop yourself from touching and tasting everything you bump into! Even a little child could show you the way. You think you know where you are going just because you have others following you. Your pride has blinded you to your real condition!

Naked! Naked before Me and naked before the world around you. You are the only ones who think that the fine clothes on your bodies hide your hypocrisy. The pro-consuls know that you are just trying to use them, and I know it too! The people in town who you have been trading with all these years know you love your new chariot more than you love Me and My Father. You are naked to everybody except yourselves!

My Father loves you and I gave everything for you so that you could freely enter the Kingdom of Heaven! Hear me...there is still an opportunity for you. Please open your eyes before it is too late. I have provided everything, so you need to listen to Me now as I have wise counsel for you.

You love trading, so I will speak to you in the language you know. Your membership lets you inside your new church but you don’t have the things which will allow you to enter my kingdom!

I want you to listen to my counsel and understand! ***“I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”***
(emphasis mine)

BUY FROM ME

I am Jesus. Buy gold from Me, Jesus. Buy white clothes from Me, Jesus. Buy eye ointment from Me, Jesus. If you want to be traders, start trading for things that count in My kingdom! Get your supply from the source of all supply! If you are going to live in the kingdom of heaven you must obtain things that have value here with Me.

You have lots of merchant gold from your serpent trading but there is refined gold that you must have to be rich in My Kingdom. Only the gold that has been through My fire can withstand the presence of Father. You can only obtain that gold from Me.

You have traded for clothes that look beautiful to you here. But the clothes you must wear in My kingdom are the white clothes that will cover your nakedness in the light of My Father's presence. You can only buy them from Me.

You have lots of ointments and perfumes from your trading. But the eye salve that will remove the scales which are blinding you must be purchased from Me.

Come all you traders...you must have these things....so trade with Me for them! They are of absolute value, kingdom value...refined gold, white clothes, eye salve. These are the things you need in My kingdom.

Everything you are grasping now is a substitute! None of it will survive in the Kingdom of our God!

BUY GOLD

"I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich".
(Revelation 3:18)

In the wilderness Moses built a tabernacle patterned after the one in heaven. Everything in the holiest place was made of purest gold; the golden censer, the ark overlaid with gold and the golden pot that had the bread from heaven in it. Where My Father resides, everything must be covered with purest gold. The head of each one who enters the kingdom of My Father must be covered with gold that is purchased from Me.

In My Father's presence My head is covered with a crown of gold. **"...on the cloud sat One like the Son of Man, having on His head a golden crown..."** Revelation 14:14-15

Everyone in the kingdom of heaven wears a crown made of this same refined gold. **"Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads."** Revelation 4:4-5.

You also must have such a golden crown to wear when you enter My Father's kingdom. If this gold covers your head then you will be invited to gather around the throne of My Father in heaven! If you know what My gold looks like, you will recognize true kingdom riches on those who have purchased their gold from Me. Golden crowns, not made from the gold you can touch like the Laodicean gold you love so much, but the gold that everyone in My kingdom can clearly see!

Laodiceans, buy My gold. Wear all the richness of Father's love. Be anchored in peace, secure in the revelation of the goodness of My Father. Display the true riches of eternal wisdom and knowledge that comes from knowing Me and My Father.

(Colossians 2:1-3)

Lay down your life. Wear a golden crown, the glory of Father's character. Let My Spirit rest upon you with His love, His joy, His peace, His longsuffering, His kindness, His goodness, His faithfulness, His gentleness, His self-control.

(Galations 5:23)

These crowns are being prepared even now as My love refines you. If you are willing to purchase one from Me, when I come in my glory, **"...you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.** 1 Peter 5:3-4.

But your lives are filled with the same things as all who worship in the serpent's system. You love serpent gold but still think you are different from those outside your church.
You all look the same to Me!

"And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" Romans 2:3-4

Your love of the gold you can touch with your hands and the applause of men has caused your desire for My Gold to cool.

The golden crown once seemed to be yours but now has slipped from your grasp.

Count the cost. Hold nothing back. Trade everything! Above all else purchase from Me refined gold that will gleam with glory in Father's presence!

Please buy this eternal gold from Me!

BUY WHITE CLOTHES

“I counsel you to buy from me...white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness.” Revelation 3:18 **“We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness are like filthy rags.”**

Isaiah 64:6

Remember when I walked with you and I told you about the need for a wedding garment. I told you the parable about a great king who put on a wedding feast for his son and all the invited guests refused to come. Remember how I said that the servants went out and compelled those on the streets to come in? Then, **“when the king came in to see the guests, he saw a man there who did not have on a wedding garment. So he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you come in here without a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ”** Matthew 22:11-14.

There are clothes that you must have if you are to feast in the presence of My Father, the great King. If you don’t have them, you will not be allowed a place at the table. There will be no exceptions there! Your Laodicean finery that you traded for so diligently cannot cover your nakedness in the kingdom of heaven, where the light is so bright it shines through the walls. It’s not that you have just let your clothes get dirty but you are now shamefully naked! You are now trying to get in without a wedding garment! No one without the proper clothes will be allowed to eat at the table with the great King!

You know what the clothes of the Kingdom look like. You have seen them on Me. Remember the day I took my disciples up on the mountain? **“Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.”** (Matthew 17:1-3). Clothes that in the presence of Father reflect His glory and shine as purest bright light! These are the clothes that will cover you in the kingdom with Father. With them on, you will be invited to eat at the table for all eternity! Everyone in the kingdom of heaven wears these clothes. The majestic angels who serve me wear them.

Some of you saw them in the days after My resurrection, before I ascended to My Father. **“And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.”** (Matthew 28:2-4).

“And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.” (Mark 16:5) **“And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.”** (John 20:12).

You saw them once again, even as I ascended to my Father. **“And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven?’ ”** (Acts 1:10-11)

All those who ride with Me in the day of My glory wear the white clothes you must buy now. **“He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses.”** Revelation 19:13-14 (emphasis mine)

Those who stand before My throne in the kingdom of heaven wear them also. **“ After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands...Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, ‘Who are these arrayed in white robes, and where did they come from?’ And I said to him, ‘Sir, you know.’ So he said to me, ‘These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’ ”** Revelation 7:9-14 (emphasis mine)

Robes made white in the blood of the Lamb. Cleansed from sin! Robes of righteousness. white clothes...the clothes of the kingdom!

“ ‘Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” Revelation 19:6-8 (emphasis mine)

The fine linen of righteousness. No more filthy rags, no more nakedness. The most diligent of traders in the merchant system of this world will never find clothes as brilliant as these robes of purest white! Repent, be cleansed of your filthy rags of self-righteousness. **“Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”** (Isaiah 1:18). Let My blood wash you clean. Hear Me as I **“counsel you to buy white clothes”**, robes of righteousness available only from Me, Jesus!

BUY EYE SALVE!

Remember I showed you how to open blind eyes and then I sent you out to do the same thing! But you can't open the eyes of others when you are blind yourself? I told you about the Pharisees. **“They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.”** (Matthew 15:14)

How are you different from them? You are just as blind. There are scales over your eyes, crusty scabs, festering scales. The things that you have been looking at for so long have become attached to your eyes! You can't see through them any more! When you read about the abundant life with Me in the kingdom of heaven, you think I am talking about your new stadium, or your new chariot, or your new gazebo with hot water for your bath! You can't even see the kingdom of heaven because your eyes are only focused on the false successes of your trading. Your pride in your achievements has blinded you to the reality of true kingdom riches!

Pride! Blindness! Pride in the heart of Lucifer...blind to his loss of glory! Pride in the heart of Adam & Eve...blind to their loss of glory! Pride in your hearts...blind to your loss of glory!

Remember when I washed the blindness from the eyes of the man? **“They brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, ‘I see men like trees, walking.’ Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everyone clearly.”** Mark 8:22-26

I was about to heal the man, but before I did I led him out of town, away from the things made and coveted by men. Then I spat on his eyes! Yes, I spat on him. I know you have complete medical coverage for your people and have the best physicians available on call! I know you think it's an insult to spit on someone and it's not the way you do things there in Laodicea! But I will always work outside of your understanding and pride! Kingdom ways will never satisfy the arrogance in your hearts!

I touched him. He just submitted to My touch, humbled himself so I could do what I needed to with him. Then I touched him again, a second touch.

A humble heart, eye salve. A gentle touch, partial sight. A second touch...then full vision!

“Then He sent him away to his house, saying, ‘Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town.’ ” Mark 8:26 You can see now! Don't go to the place where man's pride will cloud your vision again. You don't need their awe to stir up your pride. You can see. Go to your own place. Don't look at the distractions of this world or listen to the traders trying to sell you into blindness again.

You Laodiceans are blind...just like he was! Come and get eye salve from Me. I am your Healer. You love to trade...so trade with Me and get what you really need! Put on the salve of humility that will wash from your eyes the oozing scabs of pride. Humble yourselves while you can still see a glimmer of light, because if you won't, soon all light will be gone.

“ Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Revelation 3:19,20. Look around, find Me! I am not even with you anymore, there was no room for Me. You were so busy with the things you loved that you never felt me leave! I am outside the door! I am the one that is knocking! I am calling you from outside the door! Will you hear Me? I love you! I can't let you go on this way! I am calling you. Turn away completely from your own self-sufficiency and pride...let Me be your supply. Turn your heart from trusting in yourself to trusting in Me! Open the door and let Me in so you will be able to see again!

“To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Revelation 3:21

There is a future with Me in glory! Come I have a place for you beside Me! Humble yourselves! Repent! Overcome! Buy from Me the things that you really need.

“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters; And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy?” Isaiah 55:1-3

You can't put a price in Laodecian coins on the eternal gold, the white clothes and the eye salve I have for you. All are beyond value in the terms you understand. You can buy them, but not with your gold. You can only trade for them with faith, repentance and humility. Give up trusting in yourself, loving the things of this world, loving your sin and boasting in your own accomplishments...receive from Me the things of My kingdom.

Hear me today, **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”** Matthew 16:24-27

What will you give in exchange for your soul? I am asking for everything...everything that you think your life is made of! If you give Me your life, your whole life, then I will give you My life! My life really is everything!

I gave up heavens' glory, My place beside Father, My life, because I love you. Follow Me to your own cross, do what I did...lay down your life. That's what it takes!

This is My gospel!

I want you to come and be where I am. If you want that too, then do what I did...give up your own desires and become like Me. Is this life too much for you to let go? If you hold onto it, you don't get to sit at Father's supper table for all time. If you sit in a pew every week but you don't get to sit at that table...what will it matter if you are successful here beyond your wildest dreams? What will all this stuff be worth then?

This is the trade. Stop loving this world, deny yourself, and give up your life as it is now, because I love you! In exchange I will give you everything I purchased for you!

Is this the gospel which you have heard, or have you been following another?

14

THE RETURN TO FATHER

Just how close are we to God's description of the Church in 2 Timothy 3:1-5? **"In the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power."**

We love ourselves, we think we are such hot stuff. (Honesty is less painful today than it will be when we stand before Him.) We think we impress God with all our activities but just like the Laodecians we are unaware that we have become lukewarm. We love this world so much we abort our babies so we can continue trading without interruption. We love our money. We love all the stuff we can buy with it, especially the big new house we purchased when all the kids left home.

We talk endlessly about our latest acquisition always professing good intentions of using it for the kingdom of God. We openly compare our chariot to those of others, boasting of its superiority as we drive to church early to get a prominent parking stall. We can't even see our hearts any more! With our idols well displayed we have become a church full of hypocrites. What about the rest of the passage?

Do we see any disobedience to parents in our churches? Are we thankful enough to give joyfully to the needs of others? Are we holy enough to be despised by those who love their sin? Are we kind enough to display any of the love of Father to a dying world, or do we just pass by? Are we forgiving enough to walk free of bitterness and the bondage of self-preservation, or do we sue for *our rights* in the courts of the land? Are we pure enough in our thoughts towards those with whom we disagree that we refuse to speak evil of a brother believer...whether it is true or not? Are we self-controlled, willing to be accused, slandered and maligned without becoming angry? Is there any brutality in the church? Are there any in the church who are correctly described as despisers of good, traitors, headstrong or haughty?

Surely, we couldn't be called "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God"? Surely we couldn't be accused of "having a form of godliness but denying its power."

It is not too late!

In the church, the hearts of some are yearning for renewed fellowship with Father. Some are experiencing a holy dissatisfaction with our ongoing love affair with continuous trading. Kingdom change starts with just one heart...my heart ...your heart! It is possible to be free of the serpent's merchant system. There is a cry for new life rising in the throats of some.

PIGPEN TO PARADISE

The Power of God turns the death of the pigpen into new life!

It is time to look at the second part of the parable of the prodigal son. After some time, as he sat in the pigpen, the prodigal **"came to himself"** or as it says in the NIV, **"came to his senses"**. When he did he said, **"How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'**" Luke 15:17-19

His eyes open. He begins to see his true state in comparison to his father's servants. He realizes that his position stinks and he is sorry for his condition! He is not just sorry for himself but sorry that he has sinned against heaven in the sight of his father. The apostle Paul says, **"godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death."** 2 Corinthians 7:10-11

There is a sorrow that leads to life and there is a sorrow that leads to death. Many become sorry they are trapped in the pain their sin brings but they refuse to take responsibility for their actions, admit their fault and change their ways. They are very sorry for themselves but they continue in their sin until they die. The prodigal's sorrow led to life because he saw his sin for what it was and repented.

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 says **"you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."** The prodigal came to the place where he was willing to admit his sin to his father, turn away from the pigpen and return to his father. He actually does it...he goes back and repents. We can become really sorry for ourselves but never take one step out of the pigpen...that is death!

When pigpen living is exposed in the light of a fresh vision of life with Father we have an opportunity to repent. We can be totally sick of the pigpen, but unwilling and unable to do anything about it until we begin to hunger for Father's presence. When we see that Father is the source of life, and love Him more than our sin and rebellion, and repent, we can step out of the pigpen.

It is through repentance that we can turn away from serving the serpent in his merchant system and begin to serve God. The prodigal son repented, he turned away from the results of his trading and went home to his father.

Now notice what the father said about his son. **“for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.”** Then he repeated the same thing later to the older brother, in verse 31. **“And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’”** (emphasis mine)

My son...your brother...was *dead*, he was *lost*! He was *dead* the father said, *dead*! He said it twice just so we would be sure to get it. In our North American church, why don't we hear what the father said about his son? Why, because we are the church of good beginnings. Remember Suzy's funeral that I told you about earlier? How peaceful it was for all the folk in the church who were living in sin? After all if Suzy ended up selling her body on the street for three years, and she went to heaven like the pastor said...then for sure I'm ok. I've never done anything like Suzy did, and I asked Jesus to come into my heart when I was twelve too! I know that I haven't really been 'living for the Lord' since I was sixteen...but I go to church regularly...sort of. Some day I'll get serious about God again!

“Dead”, does not fit into the gospel we traded for. Our gospel says that if we just once asked Jesus into our heart we are set for all eternity! After all, the prodigal was still the father's son when he was in the pigpen, right? *Yes...but he was a “dead” son!* If he hadn't come to his senses, repented and returned to his father, he would have starved in the pigpen of his own choosing, his body eaten by the very pigs that he served.

The reason we refuse to talk about the “dead” son in the pigpen is that we love the comfort in the lie of our ‘good beginnings gospel’.

GOOD BEGINNINGS

In the beginning, when we first changed the gospel so that we could spend our lives trading with the enemy, we still had a big problem. The problem arose because at that time we were still aware in our conscience that our lives were full of sin!

Then we still understood that Father was displeased when we decided that we could eat the fruit from any tree we wanted and make our own bread however we wanted to. We still knew that He was looking for obedient hearts who would love Him and be willing to walk by faith. But loving God, obeying Him and living by faith meant that we would have to stop trading. Something had to be done.

So what the preachers of our new gospel did was simply tell us that all that really matters is the beginning! (How quickly the serpent provided a simple answer!) And we bought it! Why not? Who wants to have to **“overcome to the end”** before getting all the benefits? Especially when we learned in our new gospel that Jesus wants us to have it all now, in this life! The abundant life! In John 10:10 we learned that Jesus **“came that we might have life and that we might have it more abundantly”**.

We bought the idea that when we ask Jesus to come into our heart we get “life”...which is the ‘everlasting life’ part and then we get more “abundant life”...which is the ‘here and now’ part! We love our modern message! Why worry about a little trading? We’ll just agree that if a well educated man with fancy words made our face wet, mumbling something over us while we messed our diaper...or if we said the ‘sinners prayer’ once...then eternity is taken care of once and for all. Now we can get on with unrestrained trading and enjoy the abundant life that Jesus died to give us!

*Just one small problem what do we do with **“this my son was dead”**?*

When he truly repented and came back to the father, *then* he was **“alive again”**.

If we are living in the pigpen and the father in the parable happens to come along, he would take one look at us and say “dead” _____ Flat lined!

The son could be made alive again because he saw himself as the father saw him, dead! Only that which is dead can be revived!

When we, the lukewarm church, cry out for revival without admitting that we are dead...we are merely asking God to bless us in our pigpen!

“And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ‘But the father said to his servants, “Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” And they began to be merry.’ ” Luke 15:20-24 (emphasis mine)

REPENTANCE

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.” The first place we come to on the journey back to Father is the place of true confession. Confession is being willing to say the same thing about ourselves as Father says about us. He said His son was dead. We are dead in our trespasses and sins...whenever we are living in trespasses and sins.

When we have a name that we are alive but are really dead...we need to say what God sees...I was alive but now I am dead. I have sinned. It is only pride that makes it impossible to say those words. *Pride is destroyed when we speak it into oblivion in by humbling ourselves and acknowledging our sin before our loving Father!* This is the first step on the journey home.

Repentance is the theme of the message Jesus preached from the beginning of His earthly ministry to the end. At the beginning of His ministry Matthew 4:17 records, **“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’ ”**

And in Luke 24:46-48, at the end of His time on earth, He gives instructions for those who follow Him to go and preach the same message. **“Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’ ”** *Preach the message of repentance!*

Let’s look for a moment at Jesus’ introduction to the parable of the fig tree in Luke 13. **“There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.’ ”** Luke 13:1-9 (emphasis mine)

Twice Jesus says, **“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”** An incident of deliberate, cruel death has just been related. Then Jesus reminds them of another accident, which they were familiar with, where eighteen died. In both cases He tells them that **“unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”**

Jesus wants them to understand something. First, they didn’t die because of the amount of their sins. He did not come **“to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved.”** (John 3:17)

One of their problems was that they were sure that God was busy condemning everyone...that's why they were willing to do that job for Him any time. (Sounds like church today!) So, Jesus corrects their thinking, ***"I tell you, no..."*** No, they did not die because they were worse sinners. Then He begins to deal with *their* heart towards God. Unless *you* repent, *you will all die* also. The issue He is about to teach on is repentance.

So, as He is speaking about those who died so horribly, Jesus is preparing to teach on the familiar theme of repentance. He wants to teach a great truth, so He speaks a parable.

"A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'" Luke 13:6-9 (emphasis mine)

The owner of the fig tree had invested a great deal in the tree by the time He first came looking for fruit. He had paid his gardener to plant and care for it for three years while it grew and matured into a tree capable of bearing fruit. So in the fourth year when the first fruit could be expected, with great anticipation the owner came to taste some. The first fruit that a tree produces is always the sweetest and the biggest!

He came...but there was nothing. So, he says "I guess this tree is just a little slow in maturing...I'll have to wait another year." The gardener faithfully cares for the tree for another year and the owner comes with anticipation the second time expecting to taste the sweet first fruit...again he is disappointed...there is no fruit. He checks with the gardener and they discuss the possibilities. More water, more fertilizer, more light, (cut down the old tree beside it) whatever the tree needs the gardener is instructed to provide. Now after another year the owner comes, surely now the tree will be productive? Surely now he will get to taste that precious, sweet first fruit? The tree has been well tended for six years now, three while it was growing and three while they have been expecting fruit. All the other trees planted at the same time have been producing fruit for years. The tree is now fully grown. Everyone comments on its beauty as they walk by the garden. What impressive foliage! Beautifully pruned, situated in the best part of the garden where it has had the most sunlight, the most water, the best nutrients. Surely there will be fruit this year. No one has ever seen such a big, beautiful tree!

The owner's anticipation has increased over the year and now he approaches the tree for a third time!

NOTHING! The disappointment is extreme! CUT IT DOWN! Enough is enough! Enough wasted time. Enough wasted effort. Enough disappointment. Enough wasted space. CUT IT DOWN!

Ahh, but the gardener loves the tree. He has been doing his best to get it to produce. Please, just one more year, he pleads with the owner. Give me one more chance! I'll try everything again, just give me one more year, then if there is no fruit...do what you will.

FIRST FRUIT

The owner of the tree is coming looking for the 'first fruit' that this tree will produce. So let's look and see what the Lord has to say about first fruit.

In the Old Testament there are three feasts set before the people as feasts of celebration to the Lord. In Exodus 23:14-16 these feasts are identified. First the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a celebration of Israel's freedom from the slavery and bondage of Egypt. Then when the first pickings of green grain were ready, the Feast of Harvests also known as the Feast of Firstfruits, a celebration of the promise of plenty in the coming harvest. Finally, when the harvest was in the barns at the end of the year, the Feast of Ingathering, a celebration of God's provision.

During the Feast of Harvest the 'firstfruit' was picked. This was when the wheat had just begun the process of maturing. It was the promise of the harvest to come. The wheat was green, that is, the kernels were formed but not yet ripened with a hard golden shell that would be impervious to everything except water. The farmer would go into his field and pick the first stalks of grain that had formed full kernels and bring the green, sweet grain to God as an offering. The 'firstfruit', sweet, green, soft and pliable, promised the coming harvest of mature grain.

“ ‘For on My holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve Me; there I will accept them, and there I will require your offerings and the firstfruits of your sacrifices, together with all your holy things.’ ” Ezekiel 20:40-42 (emphasis mine)

There is a firstfruit that the Lord requires of His people. It is the fruit that the gardener desired to bring forth on the fig tree for the satisfaction of the owner. Remember twice Jesus said, **“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”**, then He told them the parable about the owner, the gardener and the fig tree that bore no fruit.

Not just any fruit but the 'firstfruit'! The fruit of 'repentance'!

Jesus is saying that the owner, coming to look for the firstfruit on the tree is a picture of Father coming to look for repentance in our lives. The tree is in the garden, being cared for by the gardener. The soul is in the church, being ministered to by the Spirit...but there is no firstfruit of repentance being produced! The time comes when the owner of the garden says...“CUT IT DOWN”!

No, God is not judging us because of our sins right now. The time of judgement will come when the harvest will be gathered in. At that time the bad fruit will be gathered and burned and the good fruit will be taken into the presence of the Father...then will be the time of judgement. Now is the time of repentance! God is ***“not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance”***.

But the day comes when the opportunity for repentance passes!

A whole generation has come into the church, been well fed and cared for by the Gardener, but whenever the Owner comes and looks for the first fruit of repentance, He can find none! *Soon...after the Gardener has pleaded for more time, has dug around the roots and fertilized yet again and still there is no fruit, the order will be, CUT IT DOWN!*

It was not too late for the prodigal. He repented and returned to the father! It is not too late for the church! Repentance is still available. The prodigal repented and a generation of prodigals can repent!

Death in the pigpen can be exchanged for life with Father!

When the exchange is made Father has a ring, a robe, a pair of sandals...what a party there will be!

THE RING

In the story of Joseph in Genesis 41, we gain some understanding into the meaning of the ring. The ring, or “signet ring” as it was called, was the sign of authority. Pharaoh gave it to Joseph when he made him Prime Minister.

“Then Pharaoh took his signet ring from his finger and put it on Joseph's finger. He dressed him in robes of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. He had him ride in a chariot as his second-in-command, and men shouted before him, ‘Make way!’ Thus he put him in charge of the whole land of Egypt.” Genesis 41:42-43 (NIV). Whatever Joseph decreed and sealed with the impression of the ring was Pharaoh’s decree.

In Haggai 2:20-22, the prophet Haggai is prophesying to Zerubbabel the governor of Judah that the blessings of God are going to pour out over the nation. **“The word of the LORD came to Haggai a second time on the twenty-fourth day of the month: ‘Tell Zerubbabel governor of Judah that I will shake the heavens and the earth. I will overturn royal thrones and shatter the power of the foreign kingdoms. I will overthrow chariots and their drivers; horses and their riders will fall, each by the sword of his brother.’ ”** (from NIV)

God is saying that the authority of the kingdoms oppressing Judah is going to be shattered. And then He continues saying “ **‘I will take you, my servant Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel’, declares the LORD, ‘and I will make you like my signet ring, for I have chosen you,’ declares the LORD Almighty.**” (from NIV) God is going to put His authority on Zerubbabel to enable him to accomplish the divine purposes for the nation.

In the parable, the son returns, telling his father that he is willing to become one of the servants. The father puts a ring on the finger of the returning son, the father restores him fully as his son, and more. A son is restored...and upon him is placed the father's authority! The purposes of the father now become the purposes of the son and the son is enabled to carry out those purposes in the name and with the authority of the father.

So also our heavenly Father sets His authority upon His repentant sons that He might enable them to accomplish all that He has planned!

THE ROBE

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him. And the LORD said to Satan, ‘The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?’ Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel. Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, ‘Take away the filthy garments from him.’ And to him He said, ‘See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes.’ And I said, ‘Let them put a clean turban on his head.’ So they put a clean turban on his head, and they put the clothes on him.” Zechariah 3:1-5

Cleansed from sin! The filthy garments stained with the sins of pride, rebellion and self-righteousness removed! Now, once again standing in Father's presence wearing pure white robes!

David wrote by the Spirit in Psalm 32:1-2 **“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”**

The incredible blessing of sins washed away. Clothed with the robes of righteousness supplied by the Father! Filthy robes, stained with the stuff of this world picked up in a life of trading...thrown away! Cleansed from the smell of the pigpen.

THE SANDALS

In Acts 7:31-34, the apostle Paul is recounting the call of Moses to go and set God's people free of bondage to Pharaoh. To get his attention He lights up a bush, but doesn't let it burn up.

“When Moses saw it, he marveled at the sight; and as he drew near to observe, the voice of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘I am the God of your fathers -- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses trembled and dared not look. Then the LORD said to him, ‘Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to deliver them. And now come, I will send you to Egypt.’ ”

“Take your sandals off your feet”...sandals that have been in the pigpen won't do if you are going to stand on holy ground! I am about to put something under you that will carry you into the ways of the kingdom of heaven. It is a message of deliverance and freedom! It will break the bondage of Pharaoh off the necks of my people and set my people free! I want you to walk in my ways...wearing my message so that wherever your feet touch the ground freedom will rise!

Jesus, **“rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.”** John 13:4-5

Jesus knelt...washed the feet of His disciples and then declared that they were clean, after washing only their feet. The residue of the stuff of this world picked up by the journey of life had been removed. Then He said to them that they would be witnesses for Him and take His message to the whole earth!

The message of peace and freedom is put on clean feet washed by the power of His grace! Things that hinder us...washed away. Cleansed to wear His message and fulfill His purposes!

In Ephesians we are told how the feet of all disciples of Jesus are covered. Freed of the caked on stuff of this world's system they have **“their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace”** (Ephesians 6:15-16).

When we repent, Father says to us, “you have come away from the pigpen and returned to Me...now I have new sandals for you. Sandals that will carry you in the world but keep you separate from its dirt. I only give these sandals to those who walk in the ways of My kingdom. I put these sandals on your feet today, the day you became alive again!”

We have sandals of peace with God to wear on the path of righteousness. Sandals that we must wear as we go with the message of freedom. As Jesus sent out his disciples, He said **“take nothing for the journey except a staff -- no bag, no bread, no copper in their money belts -- but to wear sandals, and not to put on two tunics.”** Mark 6:8-9 (emphasis mine)

Don't forget your sandals!

THE PARTY

Oh the party! We love the party!

For returned sons, it's the singing in the jail that brings the earthquake and breaks the chains. It's the peace in the middle of the storm. It's the freedom from offense. It's joy in trials and freedom from bitterness. It's victory over the enemy. It's power to heal and deliver.

It's a celebration of freedom from slavery in the serpent's system. Freed from loving this world and all its stuff! Freed from coveting things that rust and fade away! Freed from filling our lives with false pleasures! Freed from pride in fading earthly glory!

Freedom to die and yet be alive in the kingdom of heaven!

But it's not our party!

It's Father's party!

It's His celebration at our return!

It's all about His joy over the treasure!

The longings of His heart are realized as bursting with relief and pleasure He runs towards His returning sons! Tears of anguish He had wept over us in the pigpen are replaced by joy and dancing!

It's party time! Father's party time!

It's His satisfaction in the tasty firstfruits of repentance!

It's His joy over the treasure of souls alive again in the kingdom!

It's His pleasure in the fruits of the Spirit now displayed in our lives!

It's everything that satisfies Father...it's His party...His time to display each jewel for all to see...our repentance just provides the opportunity!!

Is it time we give Father an excuse to party?

What do you think?

EPILOGUE

We the church of North America are an army that refused to go to war. When we heard the trumpet call to battle in our youth we said, “we will not come”. Not content with objecting to the call of God to join the fray, we fled across the battle lines and became friends with the enemy. We are a generation of middle aged traders, lost to the battle, immobilized by friendship with the world, opposing those Father sends to warn us of the approaching loss.

Refusing to war against the enemy we accepted his deceptions and warred against our own souls...until we became convinced that we should only accept pleasure, demanding from Father the right to enjoy everything this world offers! We deliberately seared our consciences, insisting that guilt was wrong...refusing to allow it to chase us into the arms of our loving Father.

We rejected Jesus’ call to defeat the enemy...by dying to sin, self and the stuff of this world! In refusing to die we’ve not lived. We traded Father’s call and His gifts for the things of this world and become spiritually impotent!

Powerless in prayer, we have become political activists, waving petitions, instead of praying down the power of God and scattering our enemies. Not trusting God to be our defense, unwilling to walk in the freedom of the Spirit and the power of the cross, we defend the constitution hoping it will keep us free.

We used the serpent’s system and built churches based on education and success rather than prayer and fasting. We brought our children into our merchant churches, and watched, while the serpent taught them to trade...just like we do. We forgot that our heavenly Father said everything produces after its own kind.

Too busy with merchandise to come and feast at Father's banquet table, we barred the doors to our children. We stood up for our rights to health, happiness and opportunity and now watch as the serpent calls our children to eat in the piggens of this world. Choosing the merchant system for ourselves we encouraged our children to also go for the gold which tarnishes. Now with no resistance to the serpent's enticements, many follow our example, accepting whatever he offers. We decided we could borrow from the serpent and still be free. We mortgaged our future to him and now are appalled, as he demands his payments in full from our children!

A generation of prodigals, religiously sitting in a pigpen of our own making...are we willing yet...to see ourselves as Father sees us...willing yet to repent...to return?

Will we hear the love throb of our Father's heart?

Will we return home, accept His ring, wear His robe, and walk in His sandals?

Will we join the battle at last?

Some are! Some are hearing! Some are returning! Some are entering the battle!

The irresistible love of Father is reaching into the darkness and calling those whose hearts are starved for His presence. He is filling their hearts with His joy, as led by their children they are answering His call. Returning to Him, receiving the power of His love to war on the enemy, they are ministering to the poor, healing the sick and setting the captives free! Carrying their crosses, deaf to the enemy's voice they are reforming the ranks of an army that was lost!

Your road back is clear...your place is not taken...your purpose not lost...your victory still to be won! Let Father's love call you home...He is waiting with a ring, a robe and shoes to wear, the table is set, the party prepared.

Today is another time, this is another call. How will you answer...this time?