

# MINISTRY CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

DR. TIMOTHY KELLER

---

Ministry places enormous pressures on one's integrity and character, pressures which require extra vigilance and a deeper understanding of one's need for God.

---

It is always gratifying to see Christians become active in church ministry rather than remain mere consumers of spiritual services. There is nothing so fulfilling as to see lives touched and changed through your service, whether you are a volunteer, lay leader, church officer, or staff member.

But the Bible sounds a cautionary note. By its very nature, Christian leadership involves extolling the glory and beauty of God above all else. It means pointing others to God's worth and beauty even when your own heart is numb to any sense of divine love and glory. As someone who ministers to others, how will you survive when that happens? Following are two things to remember.

## THE RIGHT THING TO DO

The first—and right—thing to do is to watch your heart with far more diligence than you would have otherwise, and to be very disciplined in observing regular times of daily prayer. In these times you may find your heart warming to God's reality. Prayer can fan the flame of that reality, allowing you to speak to others out of your daily sustenance from God.

Even so, your heart may continue to feel spiritually dry or dead for an extended period. Such a condition requires that you keep your regular

times of prayer even more diligently. Humbly acknowledge your dryness to God and set your heart to trust him and seek him despite it and during it. This deliberate act is itself a great step of spiritual growth and maturity. When you speak to God about your dryness, rather than avoiding prayer times, it reminds you of your weakness and dependence upon his grace for absolutely everything. It drives home the importance and preciousness of your standing in Christ.

## THE WRONG THING TO DO

The second—and wrong—thing is to rely not on prayer and your relationship with God but on the excitement of ministry activity and effectiveness. In this way you can begin to lean more on your spiritual gifts than on spiritual grace. In fact, you may mistake the operation of spiritual gifts for the operation of spiritual grace in your life. *Gifts* are abilities God gives us to meet the needs of others in Christ's name—speaking, encouraging, serving, evangelizing, teaching, leading, administering, counseling, discipling, organizing. *Graces*, often called spiritual fruit, are beauties of character—love, joy, peace, humility, gentleness, self-control. Spiritual gifts are what we *do*; spiritual fruit is what we *are*. Unless you understand the greater importance of grace and gospel-character for ministry effectiveness, the discernment and use of spiritual gifts may actually become a liability in your ministry. The terrible danger is that we can look to our ministry activity as evidence that God is with us or as a way to earn God's favor and prove ourselves.

If our hearts remember the gospel and are rejoicing in our justification and adoption, then our min-

istry is done as a sacrifice of thanksgiving—and the result will be that our ministry is done in love, humility, patience, and tenderness. But if our hearts are seeking self-justification and desiring to control God and others by proving our worth through our ministry performance, we will identify too closely with our ministry and make it an extension of ourselves. The telltale signs of impatience, irritability, pride, hurt feelings, jealousy, and boasting will appear. We will be driven, scared, and either too timid or too brash. And perhaps, away from the public glare, we will indulge in secret sins. These signs reveal that ministry as a performance is exhausting us and serves as a cover for pride in either one of its two forms, self-aggrandizement or self-hatred.

Here's how this danger can begin. Your prayer life may be nonexistent, or you may have an unforgiving spirit toward someone, or sexual desires may be out of control. But you get involved in some ministry activity, which draws out your spiritual gifts. You begin to serve and help others, and soon you are affirmed by others and told what great things you are doing. You see the effects of your ministry and conclude that God is with you. But actually God was helping someone through your gifts *even though* your heart was far from him. Eventually, if you don't do something about your lack of spiritual fruit and instead build your identity on your spiritual gifts and ministry activity, there will be some kind of collapse. You will blow up at someone or lapse into some sin that

destroys your credibility. And everyone, including you, will be surprised. But you should not be. Spiritual gifts without spiritual fruit is like a tire slowly losing air.

So let's examine ourselves. Is our prayer life dead even though we're effective in ministry? Do we struggle with feeling slighted? Are our feelings always being hurt? Do we experience anxiety and joylessness in our work? Do we find ourselves being highly critical of other churches or ministers or coworkers? Do we engage in self-pity? If these things are true, then our ministry may be skillful and successful, but it is hollow, and we are probably either headed for a breakdown or doomed to produce superficial results. Abraham Kuyper wrote that Phariseeism is like a shadow—it can be deepest and sharpest closest to the light.

Christian ministry changes people. It can make us far better or far worse Christians than we would have been otherwise, but it will not leave us unchanged.

**Copyright © 2007, by Timothy Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, © 2010 by Redeemer City to City. This article first appeared in the Redeemer Report, March 2007.**

*We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don't charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.*

---

Chapter Six: Directions for Dealing with Sins

We have looked at the remedy for sin and the power of the Holy Spirit working in our favor. We've also seen that we must play an active role in dealing with sin. The apostle Paul wrote that we are to "put to death" the various expressions of sin in our lives (see Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). This includes not only obvious sins we want to avoid but also the more subtle ones we tend to ignore. It's not enough to agree that we do tolerate at least some of them. Anyone except for the most self-righteous person will acknowledge that. "After all, no one is perfect," may be our attitude. But to honestly face those sins is another matter. For one thing, it is quite humbling. It also implies that we must do something about them. We can no longer continue to ignore them as we have in the past.

Before addressing some of the specific areas of acceptable sins among Christians, however, I want to give some directions for dealing with them. While there may be particular helps for certain ones, there are general directions that apply to all our subtle sins.

The *first* direction is that we should always address our sin in the context of the gospel. I have covered this truth already in chapter 4, but it needs repeating at this point. Our tendency is that as soon as we begin to work on an area of sin in our lives, we forget the gospel. We forget that God has already forgiven us our sin because of the death of Christ. As Paul wrote in Colossians 2:13-14, "[God has] forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."

Not only has God forgiven us our sins, He has also credited to us the perfect righteousness of Christ. In every area of life where we have been disobedient, Jesus was perfectly obedient. Are we prone to be anxious? Jesus always perfectly trusted His

heavenly Father. Do we have trouble with selfishness? Jesus was always completely self-giving. Are we guilty of unkind words, gossip, or sarcasm? Jesus spoke only those words that would be appropriate for each occasion. He never once sinned with His tongue.

For some thirty-three years, Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the moral will of God, and then He culminated that obedience by being obedient to the Father's specific will for Him—an obedience unto death, even death on the cross for our sins. In both His sinless life and His sin-bearing death, Jesus was perfectly obedient, perfectly righteous, and it is that righteousness that is credited to all who believe (see Romans 3:21-22; Philippians 3:9).

As we struggle to put to death our subtle sins, we must always keep in mind this twofold truth: Our sins are forgiven and we are accepted as righteous by God because of both the sinless life and sin-bearing death of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is no greater motivation for dealing with sin in our lives than the realization of these two glorious truths of the gospel.

The *second* direction is that we must learn to rely on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Remember, it is by the Spirit that we put to death the sins in our lives (see Romans 8:13). Again, we have already addressed this truth in detail in chapter 5, but as with the gospel, we tend to forget it and resort to our own willpower. It's what I call one of our "default settings." Regardless of how much we grow, however, we never get beyond our constant need of the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Our spiritual life may be compared to the motor of an electric appliance. The motor does the actual work, but it is constantly dependent upon the external power source of the electricity to enable it to work. Therefore, we should cultivate an attitude of continual dependence on the Holy Spirit.

The *third* direction is that, while depending on the Holy Spirit, we must at the same time recognize our responsibility to diligently pursue all practical steps for dealing with our sins. I

## Notes and Observations

know that keeping both these truths — that is, our dependence and our responsibility — equally in mind is difficult. Our tendency is to emphasize one to the neglect of the other. Here the wisdom of some of the older writers will help us: “Work as if it all depends on you, and yet trust as if you did not work at all.”

The *fourth* direction is that we must identify specific areas of acceptable sins. That is one of the purposes of the following sessions as we take up many of the subtle sins one by one. As you read each chapter, ask the Holy Spirit to help you see if there is a pattern of that sin in your life. This, of course, requires a humble attitude and a willingness to face that sin. As you identify a particular sin, give thought to what situations trigger it. Anticipating the circumstances or events that stimulate the sin can help in putting it to death.

The *fifth* direction is that we should bring to bear specific applicable Scriptures to each of our subtle sins. These Scriptures should be memorized, reflected on, and prayed over as we ask God to use them to enable us to deal with those sins. The psalmist wrote, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (119:11). To *store up* means to lay aside for future need.

In 1999, there was a tremendous wave of anxiety around the world as to what might happen when all the world’s computer clocks turned over to January 1, 2000. There were all kinds of dire predictions that the world’s commerce, which is now so heavily dependent on computers, would simply shut down. As a result, many people stored up extra food and emergency items. This event, known as Y2K, turned out to be a non-event, as the computers did not shut down. Nevertheless, that occasion powerfully illustrates the meaning of the phrase *stored up*. People were storing up against a time of future need.

That is what we do when we commit Scripture texts to our hearts. We store them up against future needs: the times when we are tempted to indulge our subtle (or even our not so subtle) sins.

Of course, memorizing specific Scripture verses is no magic bullet. They must be applied to our lives. But if we have memorized and prayed over Scriptures that address our subtle sins, the Holy Spirit will bring them to mind in particular situations to remind us of the will of God, to warn us, and to guide us in our response to the temptation. To help you in this, I will recommend certain Scriptures that might be helpful as we take up the individual acceptable sins.

The *sixth* direction is that we should cultivate the practice of prayer over the sins we tolerate. This is assumed in the second direction about relying on the Holy Spirit and in the fifth direction regarding praying over the Scriptures we memorize. But it is important to single out prayer as one of our major directions for dealing with sin, for it is through prayer that we consciously acknowledge our need of the Holy Spirit, and it is through prayer that we continually acknowledge the presence of those persistent sin patterns in our lives.

Prayers regarding our subtle sins should be of two types. First, we should pray over them in a planned, consistent manner, probably in our daily private time with God. Second, we should pray short, spontaneous prayers for the help of the Holy Spirit each time we encounter situations that might trigger one of our sins.

The *seventh* direction is that we should involve one or more other believers with us in our struggles against our subtle sins. This, of course, should be a mutual relationship as we seek to exhort, encourage, and pray for one another. The Scripture tells us that “two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). We need the mutual vulnerability with and accountability to one another, as well as the praying for one another and encouraging one another, if we want to make progress in dealing with sin.

Do all these directions seem overwhelming? If so, perhaps this summary will help:

Notes and Observations

- Apply the gospel.
- Depend on the Holy Spirit.
- Recognize your responsibility.
- Identify specific respectable sins.
- Memorize and apply appropriate Scriptures.
- Cultivate the practice of prayer.
- Involve one or a few other believers with you.

As you seek to apply these directions, remember that your heart is a battleground between the flesh and the Spirit (see Galatians 5:17). In this guerrilla warfare, the flesh will sometimes get the upper hand. And as you zero in on a particular sin to seek to put it to death, your situation may get worse before it gets better. Take heart: This is not unusual. The Holy Spirit will use these times of disobedience and defeat to help you see how deeply rooted your subtle sins are and how totally dependent you are on His power to help you.

Now as we turn to examine specific sins that we often tolerate, I will usually offer other practical suggestions that are appropriate to those sins. But the seven general directions will always apply, so I suggest you thoroughly digest this chapter before moving on.

### SESSION THREE

# Ungodliness and Unthankfulness

BEFORE GATHERING: Read the following portion of *Respectable Sins*. In the margins, record observations, illustrations, or questions that come to mind as you read. Then answer the “Think It Through” study questions that follow the reading.

---

## Chapter Seven: Ungodliness

## Notes and Observations

When I talk about specific areas of acceptable sins, one comment I often hear is that pride is the root cause of all of them. While I agree that pride does play a major role in the development and expression of our subtle sins, I believe there is another sin that is even more basic, more widespread, and more apt to be the root cause of our other sins. That is the sin of *ungodliness*, of which we are all guilty to some degree.

Does that statement surprise you, or maybe even offend you? We don't think of ourselves as ungodly. After all, we *are* Christians; we are not atheists or wicked people. We attend church, avoid scandalous sins, and lead respectable lives. In our minds, the ungodly folks are the ones who live truly wicked lives. How, then, can I say that we believers are all, to some extent, ungodly?

Contrary to what we normally think, ungodliness and wickedness are not the same. A person may be a nice, respectable citizen and still be an ungodly person. The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.” Note that Paul distinguishes ungodliness from unrighteousness. Ungodliness describes an attitude toward God, while unrighteousness refers to sinful actions in thought, word, or deed. An atheist



Notes and Observations

or avowed secularist is obviously an ungodly person, but so are a lot of morally decent people, even if they say they believe in God.

Ungodliness may be defined as living one's everyday life with little or no thought of God, or of God's will, or of God's glory, or of one's dependence on God. You can readily see, then, that someone can lead a respectable life and still be ungodly in the sense that God is essentially irrelevant in his or her life. We rub shoulders with such people every day in the course of our ordinary activities. They may be friendly, courteous, and helpful to other people, but God is not at all in their thoughts. They may even attend church for an hour or so each week but then live the remainder of the week as if God doesn't exist. They are not wicked people, but they are ungodly.

Now, the sad fact is that many of us who are believers tend to live our daily lives with little or no thought of God. We may even read our Bibles and pray for a few minutes at the beginning of each day, but then we go out into the day's activities and basically live as though God doesn't exist. We seldom think of our dependence on God or our responsibility to Him. We might go for hours with no thought of God at all. In that sense, we are hardly different from our nice, decent, but unbelieving neighbor. God is not at all in his thoughts and is seldom in ours.

One cannot carefully read the New Testament without recognizing how far short we come in living out a biblical standard of godliness. I referred above to our seldom thinking of our dependence on God. In that regard, consider these words from James:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" — yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.

Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (4:13-15)

Notes and Observations

James does not condemn these people for making plans or even planning to set up a business and make a profit. What he condemns is their planning that does not acknowledge their dependence on God. We make plans all the time. In fact, we couldn't live or accomplish the most mundane duties of life without some degree of planning. But so often we act like the people James addressed. We, too, make our plans without recognizing our utter dependence on God to carry them out. That is one expression of ungodliness.

In the same way, we seldom think of our accountability to God and our responsibility to live according to His moral will as revealed to us in Scripture. It's not that we are living obviously sinful lives; it's just that we seldom think about the will of God and, for the most part, are content to avoid obvious sins. Yet Paul wrote to the Colossian believers,

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (1:9-10)

Notice how God-centered that prayer is. Paul wanted his hearers to be full of the knowledge of God's will—that is, His moral will. He desired that they live lives worthy of God and fully pleasing to Him, and he prays to that end. That is God-centered praying. Paul wanted the Colossians to be godly people.

Remember, the Colossian believers were not super-Christians; they were ordinary folks like you and me, living ordinary lives in the midst of an ungodly culture far worse than

## Notes and Observations

ours today. Yet Paul expected them to live, and prayed that they would live, godly lives.

How does Paul's prayer for the Colossians compare with our prayers for ourselves, our families, and our friends? Do our prayers reflect a concern for God's will and God's glory and a desire that our lives will be pleasing to God? Or are our prayers more of a do-list we present to God, asking Him to intervene in the various health and financial needs of family and friends. Now, it is not wrong to bring these temporal needs to God. In fact, that's one way we can acknowledge our daily dependence on Him. But if that's all we pray about, we are merely treating God as a "divine bellhop." Our prayers are essentially human-centered, not God-centered, and in that sense we are ungodly to some degree.

For Paul, all of life is to be lived out in the presence of God with an eye to pleasing Him. For example, note how he instructed the slaves in the Colossian church (very likely a large part of the congregation) as to how to serve their masters in a godly fashion:

Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. (3:22-24)

His admonition to "work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" (verse 23) provides us a principle by which we are to seek to live godly lives in the context of our vocations or professions. Yet how many believers seek to live by this principle in their daily lives? Do we not rather approach our vocations much like our unbelieving and ungodly coworkers who work purely for themselves, their promotions, and their pay raises, with no thought of pleasing God?

Or consider the Corinthian church, which, as we have already noted, was so messed up. Yet Paul wrote to them, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). The *all* of that sentence includes every activity of our days. We are not only to eat to the glory of God, we are to drive to the glory of God, we are to shop to the glory of God, and we are to engage in our social relationships to the glory of God. Everything we do is to be done to the glory of God. That is the mark of a godly person.

What, then, does it mean to do all to the glory of God? It means that I eat and drive and shop and engage in my social relationships with a twofold goal. First, I desire that all that I do be pleasing to God. I want God to be pleased with the way I go about the ordinary activities of my day. So I pray prospectively over the day before me, asking that the Holy Spirit will so direct my thoughts, words, and actions that they will be pleasing to God.

Second, to do all to the glory of God means that I desire that all my activities of an ordinary day will honor God before other people. Jesus said, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). By contrast, Paul wrote to the self-righteous Jews in Rome, “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Romans 2:23-24). Think of it this way: If everyone you interact with in the course of an ordinary day knows that you trust in Christ as Savior and Lord, would your words and actions glorify God before them? Or would you perhaps be like the father of whom one of his children said, “If God is like my father, I want nothing to do with God”?

Hopefully not many of us would be like the father whose harsh treatment of his children blasphemed God. But how far do we go in a positive direction to seek to glorify God before

## Notes and Observations

others? Do we consciously and prayerfully seek His glory in all we say and do in our most ordinary activities of the day? Or do we actually go about those activities with little or no thought of God?

An even more telling indicator of our tendency toward ungodliness is our meager desire to develop an intimate relationship with God. The psalmist wrote, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (42:1-2).

This is not an isolated text. In Psalm 63:1, David speaks of thirsting for God and earnestly seeking Him. In Psalm 27:4, he wants to dwell in the presence of the Lord so as to gaze upon His beauty. These are the desires of godly men of old. Yet few of us claim those desires as our own today. A person may be moral and upright, or even busy in Christian service, yet have little or no desire to develop an intimate relationship with God. This is a mark of ungodliness.

For the godly person, God is the center and focal point of his or her life. Every circumstance and every activity of life, whether in the temporal or spiritual realms, is viewed through the lens of this God-centeredness. However, such a God-centeredness can be developed only in the context of an ever-growing intimate relationship with God. No one can genuinely desire to please God or glorify Him apart from such a relationship.

If you have followed my reasoning this far, you can see that no Christian is totally godly, and to the extent we are not, there is still some degree of ungodliness in us. The question we should honestly and humbly ask is, *How ungodly am I?* How much of my life do I live without any regard for God? How much of my daily activities do I go through without any reference to God?

Total godliness and utter ungodliness are the opposite ends of a continuum. All of us are somewhere between those two extremes. The only person who ever lived a totally godly life

was Jesus. And probably no true believer lives a totally ungodly life. But where are we on the spectrum? As you think about your own life, remember that we are not talking about righteous versus wicked behavior. We are talking about living all of life as if God is relevant or irrelevant. Survey after survey continues to inform us that there is little difference between the values and behavior patterns of Christians and non-Christians. Why is this true? Surely it reflects the fact that we live so much of our ordinary lives with little or no thought of God, or of how we might please and glorify Him. It's not that we consciously or deliberately put God out of our minds. We just ignore Him. He is seldom in our thoughts.

I stated at the beginning of this chapter that I believe ungodliness is our most basic sin, even more basic than pride. Think how it would curb our pride, for example, if we consciously lived every day in the awareness that all we are, all we have, and all we accomplish is by the grace of God. My wife and I were lamenting over two otherwise nice, decent people who are living openly immoral lives and relishing it. And then I reminded my wife and myself that "there but for the grace of God go we." Self-righteous pride, one of the more common of our acceptable sins, is a direct product of our ungodly thinking.

Sins of the tongue, such as gossip, sarcasm, and other unkind words to or about another person, cannot thrive in an awareness that God hears every word we speak. The reason we do sin with our tongues is due to the fact that we are to some degree ungodly. We don't think of living every moment of our lives in the presence of an all-seeing, all-hearing God.

I believe that all our other acceptable sins can ultimately be traced to this root sin of ungodliness. To use a tree as an illustration, we can think of all our sins, big and small, growing out of the trunk of pride. But that which sustains the life of the tree is the root system, in this case the root of ungodliness. It is ungodliness that ultimately gives life to our more visible sins.

If ungodly habits of thinking, then, are so commonplace

## Notes and Observations

with us, how can we deal with this sin? How can we become more godly in our daily lives? Paul wrote to Timothy, “Train yourself for godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7). The word *train* comes from the athletic culture of that day and refers to the practice athletes went through daily to prepare themselves to compete in their athletic contests. It implies, among other things, commitment, consistency, and discipline in training.

Paul wanted Timothy, and all believers of every age, to be just as committed to growth in godliness, and just as intentional in pursuing it, as the athletes of that day who were competing for a temporal prize. But I suspect that most Christians seldom, if ever, think about how they can grow in godliness.

I could not help but contrast our anemic desire for godliness with the attitude of young men in our city who recently camped out all night in snow and cold at the entrance to a local electronics store. They wanted to be sure they would be able to buy one of a limited supply of a new video game system. One young man arrived at 9:30 Saturday morning to wait for the doors to open at 8 a.m. Sunday. Would any of us have that kind of zeal for godliness?

Our goal in the pursuit of godliness should be to grow more in our conscious awareness that every moment of our lives is lived in the presence of God; that we are responsible to Him and dependent on Him. This goal would include a growing desire to please Him and glorify Him in the most ordinary activities of life.

Of course, growth in godliness has to begin with the recognition that we need to grow in that most fundamental area of life. I hope I have made the case that all of us are to some degree ungodly, as we live our daily lives with little or no conscious regard for God. Again let me emphasize that you may be living a morally upright life and be a regular attendee at church but still be ungodly if God is seldom in your thoughts.

I realize mere words on a printed page will not convince anyone that he or she is guilty, to some degree, of ungodliness.

For one thing, living one's daily life without regard to God probably doesn't seem like sin to many people. I can ask only that you prayerfully consider the message of this chapter and honestly ask yourself how much of your life is lived with little or no thought of God. What would you do differently in your various activities of the day if you were seeking to do all to the glory of God?

Because ungodliness is so all-encompassing, it will help to identify specific areas of life where you tend to live without regard to God. These might include your work, your hobbies, your playing or watching sports, and even your driving. Scripture texts that might be helpful to memorize, ponder, and pray over include 1 Timothy 4:7-8; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 1:9-10 and 3:23; as well as Psalm 42:1-2; 63:1; and 27:4.

Above all, pray that God will make you more conscious of the fact that you live every moment of every day under His all-seeing eye. While you may not be mindful of Him, He is certainly aware of you and sees every deed you do, hears every word you say, and knows every thought you think (see Psalm 139:1-4). Beyond that, He even searches out your motives. Let us then seek to be as mindful of Him as He is of us.

---

## Chapter Eight: Unthankfulness

**I**n Bible times, leprosy was a loathsome disease that ostracized its victims from family and friends. In fact, the Mosaic Law required that anyone with leprosy must continually cry out, "Unclean, unclean," as he walked along the road, lest any passerby be contaminated by his disease (see Leviticus 13:45).

Luke records that Jesus was once met by ten lepers who stood at a distance and cried out to Him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." Jesus said to them, "Go and show yourselves to



## Notes and Observations

the priests” (who were the ones who could officially pronounce a leper cleansed from his disease), and as they went they were cleansed. Of the ten cleansed, one, a Samaritan, when he saw that he was healed, returned to Jesus, praising God and thanking Jesus. Jesus then exclaimed, “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except for this foreigner?” (see Luke 17:11-19).

We read this story and we think, “How could those nine men be so ungrateful as to not even turn back and say a word of thanks to Jesus?” And yet far too many of us are guilty of the same sin of unthankfulness.

Spiritually, our condition was once far worse than the physical disease of leprosy. We were not diseased; we were spiritually dead. We were slaves to the world, to Satan, and to the passions of our own sinful nature. We were by nature objects of God’s wrath. But God, in His great mercy and love, reached out to us and gave us spiritual life (see Ephesians 2:1-5). He forgave us our sins through the death of His Son and covered us with the spotless righteousness of Jesus Himself.

Christ’s giving us spiritual life is a far greater miracle, and its benefits are infinitely greater than healing from leprosy. Yet how often do we give thanks for our salvation? Have you stopped today to give thanks to God for delivering you from the domain of darkness and transferring you to the kingdom of His Son? And if you have given thanks, was it in a mere nominal way, much like some people give thanks at a meal, or was it an expression of heartfelt gratitude for what God has done for you in Christ?

The truth is, our whole lives should be lives of continual thanksgiving. Paul told his audience at Athens that “[God] himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). That means that every breath we draw is a gift from God. Everything we are and everything we have is a gift from Him. If you have intellectual or professional or technical skills, those skills are a gift from God. It’s true you probably studied dili-

gently in college and perhaps endured long hours of professional training, but where did the intellectual ability and innate talent that you have come from? They came from God, who created you with a built-in aptitude and then in His gracious providence directed you in the path of developing those skills.

We need to heed God's warning to the Israelites in Deuteronomy:

"Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God. . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.' You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day." (8:11-14,17-18)

Most people who read this book acknowledge that everything we have comes from God, but how often do we stop to give thanks to Him? At the end of a workday in your profession or job, do you ever take time to say, "Thank You, heavenly Father, for giving me the skill, ability, and health to do my work today"? Do you ever physically or mentally go through your house, look at your furnishings and various items of home decoration, and say to God, "Everything in the house and the food in the cupboard and the car (or cars) in the driveway are gifts from You. Thank You for Your gracious and generous provision"? And if you are still a student, do you ever give thanks to God for the intellectual ability and financial provision that enables you to prepare yourself for your future

## Notes and Observations

vocation? When you give thanks at mealtime, is it routine and perfunctory, or is it a heartfelt expression of your gratitude to God for His continual provision of all your physical needs?

Taking for granted all the temporal provisions and spiritual blessings that God has so richly bestowed on us, and so failing to continually give Him thanks, is one of our “acceptable” sins. In fact, far too many Christians wouldn’t think of it as sin. Yet Paul, in his description of a Spirit-filled person, said we are to “[give] thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20). Note the words *always* and *everything*. That means our whole lives should be ones of continually giving thanks.

Giving thanks to God for both His temporal and spiritual blessings in our lives is not just a nice thing to do—it is the moral will of God. Failure to give Him the thanks due Him is sin. It may seem like a benign sin to us because it doesn’t harm anyone else. But it is an affront and insult to the One who created us and sustains us every second of our lives. And if, as Jesus so clearly stated, loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind is the great and first commandment, then failure to give thanks to God as a habit of life is a violation of the greatest commandment.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul gives a vivid description of the downward moral spiral of pagan humanity of that day, as God gave them up more and more to the wicked inclinations of their evil hearts. Near the beginning of that description, Paul writes, “Although they knew God, they did not honor him as God *or give thanks to him*, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened” (verse 21, emphasis added).

So their ever-increasing wickedness actually began with their ungodliness (failure to honor God as God) and their unthankfulness to Him. Their actual moral degradation was a result of God’s judgment on them as He progressively gave them up to greater and greater perverse forms of immorality and other evil expressions. We can easily discern from this sec-

tion of Scripture that unthankfulness is a serious matter. It may seem like a small sin to us, but God takes it seriously.

Failure to honor God or give thanks to Him is obviously characteristic of present-day culture. And so is the increasing decadence of our age. In fact, the description of moral depravity (see Romans 1:24-32) could be applied to our age with hardly a change of words. One wonders if again it is God's judgment for failure to honor Him and give Him thanks. Surely, as believers we do not want to contribute to the occasion of God's judgment. But we do contribute if, along with society at large, we fail to give Him the thanks due Him. In fact, we may be more guilty because as believers we should know better. Jesus said, "Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Because we believe that the Bible is the Word of God, we are more responsible to obey it. And part of our obedience is giving thanks to God always and for everything.

There is no question that the increasing moral decadence around us is appalling and scary. We often wonder how bad it will get. But the next time we judge these people we need to ask ourselves if we have in some way contributed to their downward spiral into moral corruption through our own failure, along with theirs, to honor God and give Him thanks.

So we should give thanks always and for everything. We should especially give thanks when we have experienced an unusual provision from God or deliverance from some difficult circumstance. In session 4 I confess my temptation to anxiety when I face the possibility of missing a flight connection. A related air travel temptation to anxiety occurs at the baggage claim area when I wonder if my checked luggage arrived with me on my flight. I have had so many delayed-bag incidents that I never assume anymore that my bag has arrived with me. That's why the temptation to anxiety occurs. So I have to review the truths about anxiety in chapter 9 every time I go to baggage claim.

While working on this chapter, I flew to São Paulo, Brazil, for some ministry opportunities. Upon arrival, and after clearing

## Notes and Observations

immigration control, I went to the baggage claim area along with more than 150 other passengers from my flight, where once again I had to deal with my anxiety temptation. The pressure began to build as more and more bags came along the conveyor belt, and mine was not among them. (A delayed bag can especially become a problem in a foreign country.) After about two-thirds of the passengers had retrieved their luggage, mine finally appeared. As I pulled it off the conveyor belt, I lifted a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving to God. And then as I unpacked in my hotel room, I again thanked God that I had the bag there to unpack.

A delayed-bag incident may seem trivial to you, and, in the course of a lifetime, it is. But when you have to wear the same clothes for two or three days and have to buy replacement toilet articles, it doesn't seem so trivial at the time. But the truth is that life is full of events that delay us, inconvenience us, or obstruct or block some plan of ours. In the midst of these events, we should fight against anxiety and frustration. But when God does bring relief, or when we see Him deliver us from the possibility of such an event, we should make it a special point to give Him thanks.

## IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES?

Let's pursue the baggage claim scenario a bit further. Suppose my bag had not arrived with me on the flight, or even suppose it never arrived. Am I to still give God thanks? Before we look at the answer to that question, mentally insert into this story some predicament of your own, either an actual event or some imaginary one you hope never happens. This will help keep the following answer to the question from being theoretical; that is, in your own situation, whether real or theoretical, should you give God thanks?

So the question is, *Are we to give God thanks when the circumstances do not turn out as we had hoped?* The answer is yes, but for a differ-

ent reason. In 1 Thessalonians 5:18, Paul writes, “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

This command is different from the command in Ephesians 5:20, where we are to give thanks to God for everything. I believe, considering the context, that in Ephesians, Paul is exhorting us to develop a habit of continual thanksgiving for all the blessings God so graciously pours out on us; that is, one characteristic of a Spirit-filled life is a thankful heart.

In the Thessalonians passage, however, Paul is instructing us to give thanks *in* all circumstances, even those we would not *feel* thankful about. Is Paul asking us to give thanks through gritted teeth by sheer willpower when in our heart of hearts we are truly disappointed? The answer to the question lies in the promises of God found in Romans 8:28-29 and 38-39:

We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. . . . For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Verse 28 tells us that for those who love God, all things work together for good. The meaning is that *God causes* all things to work together for good; for “things” — that is, circumstances — do not work together for good themselves. Rather, God directs the outcome of those circumstances for our good. The “good,” however, is defined in verse 29 as our being conformed to the image of God’s Son. In other words, Paul is telling us that God intends all our circumstances, both good

## Notes and Observations

and bad (but in the context Paul has in mind, especially the bad ones), to be instruments of sanctification, of growing us more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

So in situations that do not turn out the way we hoped, we are to give God thanks that He will use the situation in some way to develop our Christian character. We don't need to speculate as to *how* He might use it, for His ways are often mysterious and beyond our understanding. So *by faith* in the promise of God in Romans 8:28-29, we obey the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:18 to give thanks in the circumstances.

Further, as we are in the midst of the difficult circumstance, we have the promise of verses 38-39 that nothing, including the situation we are in, can separate us from the love of God. Again we must cling to this promise by faith. So we have a dual assurance to enable us to give thanks in the circumstance. First, by faith we believe God is using or will use the particular difficulty to conform us more to Jesus. Second, we have the assurance that even in the midst of the difficulty we are enveloped in God's love.

So the giving of thanks in a disappointing or difficult situation is always to be done by faith in the promises of God. It is not a matter of doing it by sheer willpower. If we do that, we are giving thanks with our lips but not with our hearts. But as we cling to the promises of God, we can say, "Father, the circumstance I am in now is difficult and painful. I would not have chosen it, but You in Your love and wisdom chose it for me. You intend it for my good, and so by faith I thank You for the good You are going to do in my life through it. Help me to genuinely believe this and be able to thank You from my heart."

So in summary, we should seek to develop the habit of continually giving thanks to God. We should above all thank Him for our salvation and for the opportunities we have for spiritual growth and ministry. We should thank Him frequently for the abundance of material blessings He has provided. And then, when circumstances go awry and do not turn out the way we

had hoped, we should, by faith, thank Him for what He is doing in the circumstances to transform us more and more into the likeness of His Son.

As an application of this chapter — to develop the habit of giving thanks — I suggest memorizing Ephesians 5:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:18 and regularly praying over them, asking God to work them out in your life. This way you will grow more and more in the habit of giving thanks always and for everything. Then in your time with God each day, spend part of the time giving thanks for specific temporal and spiritual blessings.

Now let's return again to the primary purpose of this book. As the subtitle suggests, it's to help us honestly confront the subtle sins we tolerate in our own lives so that we will tend to walk more humbly before God and with respect to the unbelievers toward whom we may be so judgmental. This purpose will be met only to the extent that we all, including myself, prayerfully examine our hearts and lives before God, asking Him to show us our own subtle sins. In fact, I hope you did that earlier in this session at the end of chapter 7, and will continue to do so in the following sessions.

If by now you are already discouraged about your sins, remember the gospel. Though your obedience to God's law is defiled and imperfect, Christ's obedience is perfect and complete. And God has not only forgiven you your sins (both the subtle and the not-so-subtle) but has also credited to you that spotless obedience of Christ. God does want to work in you and with you to deal with your sins, but He does so as your Father, not your Judge.

If you've not been fazed by anything in this session, then you need to look back through it again. Are you sure you are not to some degree ungodly? Is your life entirely focused on God, so that you see all of life from that perspective? What about unthankfulness? Do you thank God always and for everything, and do you thank Him *in* the difficult circumstances you experience?



Notes and Observations

Hopefully by now all of us have realized we do have some “respectable” sins, perhaps attitudes and actions we’ve never regarded as sin or realized their seriousness. If you have been humbled to some degree and your heart made more tender, then you are in a good position to continue on, because the sins we look at from here on will probably be more “ugly” than the ones we’ve examined so far.

## TALK IT OVER FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think it's so easy for good people to be ungodly — to live most of the week as if God doesn't exist, as if they are not responsible to Him and dependent on Him?
2. If you feel comfortable doing so, share a time when you went through daily activities without even thinking of God. What impact did it have on your life or on those around you?
3. What practical things can we do each day to “train” ourselves “for godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7) so we please and glorify God during even ordinary activities?
4. What are some blessings God has given you? Why is it important for us to thank Him for these blessings and make such thankfulness a natural part of our lives?
5. Review Romans 1:18-32, in which Paul vividly describes the downward moral spiral of pagan humanity. In verse 21, what does he emphasize regarding thankfulness, and what conclusions might we draw from this regarding our lives? Our culture?
6. Where does the faith come from to believe and thank God even in the midst of difficult circumstances? Describe a challenging time when you were — or were not — able to give thanks. What did God teach you through that experience?

## GROUP PRAYER

As a group, ask God to kindle within each of you an even stronger desire to live a lifestyle of godliness and thankfulness.



FOR NEXT TIME: Read *Respectable Sins* chapters 9 and 10, and then answer the questions in the “Think It Through” personal-study section for session 4.