

CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE

Do Christians Have to Obey the Commandments of Jesus Christ?

Faith Obeys God

Grace and Works

Continuing in Heavenly Grace

Obedience in the End Times



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A collection of articles by John Edmiston addressing the need for Christians to obey God, by faith, especially in the End Times. Two of the articles are from his book [Downloading Grace from Heaven](#), the others are from his website [GlobalChristians.Org](#)

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Do Christians Have to Obey the Commandments of Jesus Christ In the Gospels?

By John Edmiston, johned@cybermissions.org



The traditional theological position has been that Jesus Christ is both Lord and God, that He has all authority in Heaven and on earth, and that his commandments are binding upon Christians and that we are to follow them; and that the Holy Spirit is given to all believers to remind them of these commandments and to empower them to live them out in daily life.

Lately, however, I have been hearing both on social media and in a Bible study I once attended (I won't say where) that obedience

to Christ's commandments is *completely unnecessary*. Their extremely mixed up arguments seem to go along these lines.

1. God loves us just as we are, and nothing we can do can make Him love us any more, or any less.
2. Therefore, obedience to Christ's commands does not increase God's love for us by even the tiniest fraction.
3. Therefore, we do not have to obey God.
4. Obedience is just legalism and is the sign of an orphan spirit trying to please the Heavenly Father and such pleasing of God is totally unnecessary because He already loves us with infinite love.
5. We are saved by faith, not works and so works are unnecessary and obedience to God is just works salvation.
6. The commandments of Jesus Christ were primarily or exclusively for the first-century Jews and do not apply to us Gentiles in the 21st Century.

7. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and so we follow Paul not Christ.

These views are a mixture of New Age mysticism, some forms of Dispensationalism which make a difference between Israel and the Church, and the extreme Radical Free Grace teaching of Zane Hodges.

Hodges taught that: Salvation is received simply by believing in Jesus for eternal life (John 3:16, John 6:47). Repentance (turning from sin) is not necessary for salvation, as he believed it was a separate issue related to discipleship, not eternal life. There is no requirement for obedience to Christ's commandments to be saved. A person who believes in Jesus even for a moment is eternally secure, even if they later reject the faith or live in sin. Someone could live an entirely sinful, unrepentant life after believing and still be saved. According to Hodges, if a person sincerely believes in Christ today but later becomes an atheist or commits grave sins without repentance, they would still have eternal life. (I think this is flat-out heresy!)

This came to a head for me in a Bible study when the issue of forgiveness was raised and the proponent of this view said loudly and with great force: "We don't have to forgive anyone, if someone murders your wife, you don't have to forgive them, we don't have to do anything for God, because God loves us just as we are." He then went on long tirade about how Matthew 6:14-15 did not apply to Christians today:

Matthew 6:14-15 *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, (15) but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

I was startled and tried to argue, however I was shouted down. What I should have said is this: "Is Jesus Lord? If Jesus IS Lord, then obey His commandments! If Jesus is not Lord, then why are you a Christian?"

Let's examine some Bible verses about obeying God's commandments:

John 14:15 *If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

John 14:21 *Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.*

John 15:9-10 *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. (10) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have*

kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

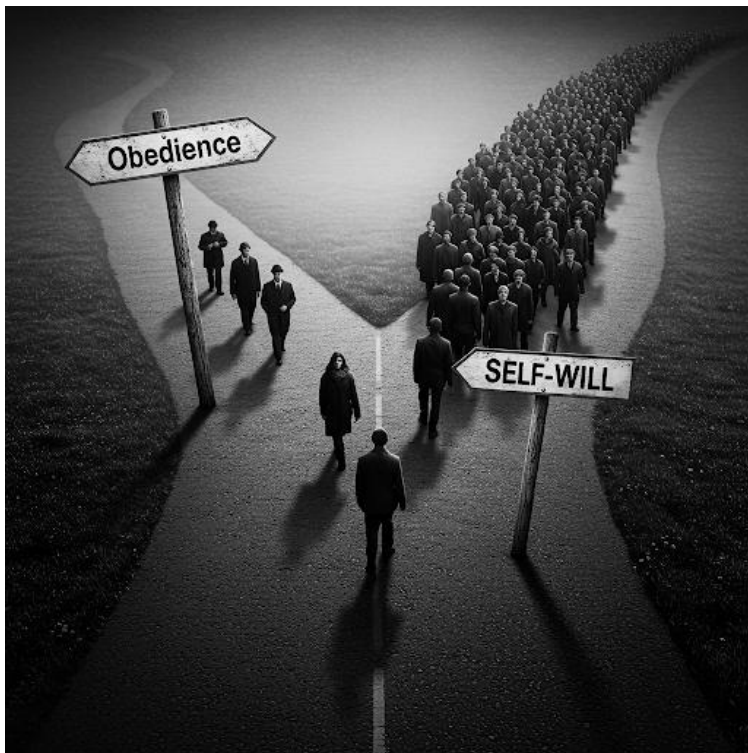
John 15:14 *You are my friends if you do what I command you.*

1 John 5:2-3 *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (3) For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.*

1 John 2:17 *And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*

1 Corinthians 7:19 *For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.*

Romans 13:8-10 *Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (9) For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (10) Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*



To summarize the verses above:

- If believers love God they will keep His commandments and we demonstrate our love of God by keeping His commandments. (John 14:15, 15:9-10, 1 John 5:2,3)
- Those who keep Christ's commandments are the ones who truly love God and in turn they are the ones who are loved by the Father (John 14:21)
- We are friends of Jesus IF we keep His commandments (John 15:14). We

will abide in His love, IF we keep His commandments. (John 15:10)

- Keeping God's commandments is the most important thing in the Christian life (1 Corinthians 7:19) especially the commandment to love one's neighbour which

fulfills all of God's expectations of us (the whole law).

- The result of doing God's will is that we abide forever. (1 John 2:17)

So, do we have to forgive our neighbor? Yes!! That is the royal law of love and the commandment of Jesus Christ and we must obey it.

Colossians 3:12-13 *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, (13) bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; **as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.***

There is a deeper issue here and it is the question of the authority of God in the life of the believer. Can God tell us what to do? Can God reward us for being good and punish us for being evil? Is Jesus God? If Jesus is God, then can He tell us how to live our lives?

Jesus often referred to Himself as the Son of Man, so let's look at the relevant passage from Daniel chapter seven:

Daniel 7:9-14 *"As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. (10) A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. (11) "I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. (12) As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. (13) "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. (14) And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.*

There is absolutely no question of the authority of God, the recording of our lives in the books of Heaven, the judgment of the wicked, or the powerful reign and rule of Jesus Christ in that, *"all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."*

God has the last word. We cannot flick God away. We must not invent theology that minimizes the authority of God in the life of the Christian. Jesus is God, Jesus issues

commandments, and we must obey them!

Apostasy is a falling away from Christian thought and practice. The apostle John was trying to deal with an apostasy of Christians in Ephesus who were leaving the faith for a philosophical belief called Gnosticism (similar to New Age beliefs). The church was now a mixture of false believers who had fallen way and true believers who were still keeping the faith:



1 John 2:3-6 *And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. (4) Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, (5) but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: (6) whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.*

For the apostle those who obeyed the commandments of Jesus were the true

Christians who authentically knew God, but those who did not obey were false Christians and liars, and the truth was not in them. We are to walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6), which means that we are to live an obedient Jesus lifestyle of agape love!

Grace applies, but grace is there to help us become holy! Yes, our sins are forgiven. The apostle John makes that very clear. However, they are forgiven so we can walk in the light (that is, in obedience).

1 John 1:5-10 *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (6) If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. (8) If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say we*

have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

One of the signs of a true Christian is that they walk the talk, they actually practice righteousness of a consistent daily basis:

1 John 2:29 *If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.*

Therefore, the practice of righteousness and obedience to the commandments of Jesus Christ is compulsory for the true authentic Christian, who is actually born of God. Zane Hodges is wrong!

For those who say that the Gentiles are to follow Paul, and not Jesus Christ, did Paul die for you? Paul confronted this very error in the city of Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:12-13 *What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." (13) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

Paul was writing to Corinth, a Gentile city, and he told them to follow Jesus Christ, not Paul! I am utterly sure that if Paul was to hear people say "We don't obey Jesus, we obey Paul, because we are Gentiles!" he would rend his garments, pull out his hair and cry "Anathema!".

We are true Christians if we follow Jesus and walk as Jesus walked, if we practice righteousness, if we obey His commandments, and if we live in love, as He loved us. Yes, Christians MUST obey the commandments of Jesus Christ!

Faith Obeys God

Hebrews 11:8 *By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out into a place which he was afterward going to receive for an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he went.*

Acts 6:7 *And the Word of God was increasing. And the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was multiplying exceedingly; even a great crowd of the priests obeyed the faith.*

Romans 16:26 *but now has been made plain, and by the prophetic Scriptures, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith;*

Faith obeys God. Faith hears God and then acts on what God has said! For instance, Noah heard the word of the Lord, and obeyed God by building the Ark, and saved his entire household. Abraham's faith caused him to obey God by leaving Ur of the Chaldees and going to the Promised Land. Hebrews chapter 11 shows us example after example of people having faith, and in each and every case they expressed their faith in some tangible act of obedience, such as setting out for a land they knew nothing about. We know that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had faith in God because they obeyed God by refusing to bow down to the golden statue of King Nebuchadnezzar. Their faith in God enabled them to obey under stress and to even take a life-and-death risk for God.

The apostle Peter learned about the obedience of faith when he walked on the water. Jesus commanded Peter, Peter believed and stepped out of the boat, Peter then walked on the water. The obedience of faith obeys Jesus and gets out of the boat!

Matthew 14:28-29 *And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." (29) He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus.*

Faith and obedience are not separate, they are part of the same cloth because anyone who truly believes God, also truly obeys God. When we try to part faith from obedience we always end up in a spiritual mess. We find ourselves in bad spiritual states such as hypocrisy, disobedience, doubt and rebellion. Here below is a quick list of the various configurations of faith and obedience. Which one do you want to be in?

- A. *Living faith* believes God and then goes out and obeys God (Hebrews 11:24-26)
- B. *Dead faith* believes God but does not produce any good works (James 2:20)
- C. *Doubt* has insufficient faith and receives nothing from the Lord (James 1:5-8)
- D. *Unbelief* refuses to believe God and cannot be blessed (Hebrews 3:18,19)
- E. *Hypocrisy* claims to believe God but blatantly disobeys God (Matthew 23:25)
- F. *Disobedience* believes God, but is willful, and fails to obey God (Matthew 21:28-32)
- G. *Rebellion* deliberately defies God, and deliberately disobeys God (Deuteronomy 31:27)

Jesus fully expected His disciples to obey Him and to abide in Him. He was their Master and Lord and they were His disciples. Abiding in Christ still entails obeying His commandments. Notice the word “if” below:

John 15:10-14 *If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in My love, even as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (11) I have spoken these things to you so that My joy might remain in you and your joy might be full. (12) This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) No one has greater love than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are My friends **if** you do whatever I command you.*

If we obey His commandments we are His friends, *if* we obey His commandments we abide in His love. Favor is conditional upon obedience! Even Jesus was subject to the law of obedience. He kept His Father’s commandments and so abided in His love (John 15:10). In fact Jesus learned this obedience through suffering:

Hebrews 5:8-10 *Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. (9) And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, (10) being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

If even Jesus had to obey God, then surely Christians must also obey Him! We are to obey the commandments of Jesus, and thus to abide in His love (John 15:10,14)!

James the brother of Jesus wrote an entire epistle about the dangers of separating faith from action. His audience seems to have been relatively wealthy Jewish Christians in the Dispersion. They were businessmen who travelled extensively (James 4:13-17), but who were stingy and cold-hearted and treated the poorer members of

the church with utter contempt (James 2:1-26). James pens a very strongly worded correction to their attempted justification of their materialistic status-seeking lifestyle:

James 2:14-26 *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (17) So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (18) But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (20) Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (25) And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? (26) For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

James accuses them of having the same morality as demons (James 2:19). Demons believe, demons tremble, but demons are selfish and nasty and disobey God. James was ordering these Christians to obey Christ by: a) not despising poorer Christians (James 2:1-13) and b) not sending thoughts and prayers instead of practical help (James 2:14-16) .

There are seven key points about faith in these verses:

- 1) Faith is insufficient for salvation unless it results in works (James 2:14-17)
- 2) Faith without works is useless faith (James 2:20)
- 3) Faith is completed by works (James 2:21,22)
- 4) Faith is inseparably active along with our works (James 2:22)
- 5) Faith is demonstrated by works (James 2:18)
- 6) The demons have faith without works and are not saved (James 2:19)
- 7) Faith without works is dead faith (James 2:17, 26)

It is very clear from the rest of the New Testament that we are saved by faith, not by our works lest any man should boast (Ephesians 2:8,9). However, those verses go on to say that we are made for good works and that is our whole purpose in life (Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:14). So, we cannot surgically separate faith from works. Saving faith leads to a new creation, and the new creation eventually does good works.

Let's be clear, our works do not create merit on some heavenly scoreboard so that we are saved when we are "good enough". Many a sinner has been gloriously saved without doing any good works at first, the good works come later as proof of faith!

An oft-quoted example of saving faith, without works, is the thief on the Cross. However, James was not writing to the thief on the Cross! Instead, James was writing to selfish materialists who thought they had their ticket to Heaven and could lead scornful and abusive lifestyles without penalty and who wanted to play power games in church. Their faith had died. They were serving their money and their egos and not God.

It is spiritual anarchy to believe that once you have prayed the Sinner's Prayer that you now have your ticket to Heaven and can go on living your life without any reference to the commandments of Jesus Christ. If you do that, your heart will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, your faith will die, you will become an unbeliever, and you will perish.

Hebrews 3:12-13 *Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (13) But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*

What is an "evil unbelieving heart" that leads Christians to fall away from God? It is a heart that desires to sin, so it conveniently separates doctrine from lifestyle! It is a heart that can worship God on Sunday, and be cold, cruel and ruthless on Monday.

Obedience purifies our hearts and strengthens us spiritually so we can be righteous Christians in a very unrighteous world:

Romans 6:16 *Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of **obedience, which leads to righteousness?***

1 Peter 1:22 *Having **purified your souls** by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart,*

When we put our faith into action we start receiving large doses of the love of God because our heart has been purified in the truth and the love of God can abide in us:

1 John 3:14-18 *We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. ...By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (17) But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? (18) Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.*

The test of genuine spiritual life is in displaying practical sacrificial agape love to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are to lay down our lives for them, just as Christ lay down His life for us. This includes parting with the world's goods in order to assist those in need.

Faith involves being a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 2:3). A good soldier has faith in the Commander. The soldier trusts the wisdom, judgement, and access to superior intelligence that the Commander has, even if the order seems strange. Like a good soldier, a person of faith is prepared to suffer hardship for the gospel in order to carry out the will of the Commander, just as Paul, Silas and Timothy did.

Faith obeys God. Obedience completes and fulfills faith. Faith working through love produces good works, which prove that the love of God and the life of God dwells in our hearts. As a result our hearts are being purified unto righteousness.

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Grace and Works

This chapter looks at the tension between God's grace and our good works and how we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in order to bear spiritual fruit and to do good works.

Grace is the free unmerited favor of God. You cannot purchase grace with money as Simon Magus tried to do in Acts 8, and neither can you earn God's grace by being a very good boy or girl. In fact, grace is sometimes shown to wicked people. Saul the persecutor of the Church was not a good person, yet he found grace and was saved on the Damascus Road. Grace did not come when Saul was good. Grace arrived when Saul was being a very bad person. Grace then transformed the bad person into a good person who went out and did good works as the apostle Paul.

Grace creates the spiritual condition and spiritual power in us that makes good works possible. Good works do not create grace, rather grace creates good works. Grace forms the New Creature and it is this new person who does the good works. Grace precedes good works and leads us to do them, not the other way around. Good works are still good, they just do not earn grace.

Ephesians 2:8-10 *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (10) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

We are saved by grace through faith. Salvation is God's work and God's initiative. We do not earn our salvation. No one can boast that they were so good and so enlightened that they got saved.

This new creation was none of our own doing. It was done to us. Grace was made effective by faith when we believed and we were then transformed by the power of God. Grace saved a sinner and made that sinner into a new creation of God.

We are God's workmanship. God made us new for a reason. We were created for good works (Ephesians 2:10). Good works are the reason why we exist. God created us as new creations because the spirit of Christ in us wants to do good works. Jesus even wants us to do more than He did (John 14:12). We will still be doing good works in eternity. Good works are not bad. Good works are still good. Love does good works. Love does not sin. Love does no harm to a neighbor. We should be active in the work of God.

As we saw in the previous chapter, we are God's land, God's soil. Grace is like rain, and like rain, grace is free and comes from Heaven. The soil does not earn the rain. The soil receives the rain. Then after receiving the rain the soil is expected to produce good fruit (Hebrews 6:7,8).

The purpose of the soil is to produce good fruit and the purpose of the Christian is to produce good works. However, we cannot produce any good works at all without grace, any more than soil can produce good fruit without rain. This biblical analogy helps us to understand the connection between grace and works.

Let's try to sort this topic out:

"I can earn my salvation by being good" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:9)

"I am saved by grace and that is it. I do not need to do any good works at all" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:10)

"Grace means that I can sin as much as I like" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:10, Romans 6:1-14)

"Grace operates completely sovereignly, I do not need to have faith" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:8)

"If I give a lot of money to the church I will get more grace from God" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:8,9)

"Grace just applies to my salvation, my lifestyle is just my own business" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:10)

"Grace is a Get Out Of Hell Free card. It does not turn me into a new person" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:10)

"God saved me because I have incredible talents that He needed" – FALSE (Ephesians 2:8,9)

God has not given up on the idea of making people holy! We are to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15,16) and without holiness we cannot see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). However, the Old Testament proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that human nature cannot achieve holiness on its own. We are fallen, we are sabotaged by the weakness of the flesh (Romans 7:1-8:8) and there is no hope for our unregenerate nature. Grace working in our spirit is essential to the pursuit of holiness. Grace is given so that we might become holy.

Grace is not a license for sin (Romans 6;1-14), lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23) or selfishness (Matthew 21:31-46, 1 John 2:10-20). Grace is given to us so that we might be holy, righteous and good, that is full of good works and pure agape love that fulfills the law (Romans 13:8-10).

This might sound legalistic to some. However, we are dead to the law (Romans 7:4). Those who live by the Spirit are not under the Law (Galatians 5:18). We are under grace and we live by the Spirit.

What is God doing? He is producing a people for Himself, a holy people, a sanctified spiritual Church capable of dwelling with Him (1 Peter 2:9-11). He is not producing a bunch of drunken slobs with Get-Out-of-Hell-Free cards! The hypergrace movement is flat-out wrong. We do not get a ticket to sin!

Grace is a free heavenly resource that enables us to get back on the bicycle when we fall over and continue the journey of sanctification. Grace is God pouring out His love upon us and in us so that we find the strength, wisdom and inner transformation to become all that He has called us to be (Ephesians 4:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:11, 2 Timothy 1:9, Hebrews 3:1, 2 Peter 1:10).

This high and heavenly calling to holiness was not given to us because we were good. It did not come about because we were special. It was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began:

2 Timothy 1:9-10 *who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, (10) and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,*

You did not receive God's grace because of anything in you at all. Grace is not a wage. Grace is a gift, an amazing free gift:

Romans 3:23-24 *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,*

Romans 4:4-8 *Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. (5) And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, (6) just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: (7) "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; (8) blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."*

Romans 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

These three Bible passages together tell us that:

We have all sinned, there is no one who is worthy of the grace of God.

Yet grace and eternal life is given to us as a free gift, even though we are totally unworthy of it.

Grace is not a wage.

God justifies the ungodly, not counting their sins against them.

Praise be to God! So we learn that God graciously justifies the ungodly so that they may become godly. God saved wicked Saul so that he might become the apostle Paul. The New Testament tell us that Paul is our example of how the grace of God works out:

1 Timothy 1:12-17 *I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, (13) though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, (14) and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. (15) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (16) But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. (17) To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.*

Christ came into this world to save sinners, by grace, through faith, and turn them into saints and apostles, so that they might do good works to the glory of God.

Let's go to one of the most debated passages in the Bible about grace and works and we will find it in in James chapter 2:

James 2:14-26 *What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? (15) If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (17) So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. (18) But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (19) You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! (20) Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? (21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? (22) You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; (23) and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. (24) You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (25) And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? (26) For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.*

To fully understand this we need to get a bit of the social context from the epistle. This church was a church of rich Jewish businessmen who had become Christians but who were going about trading here and there (James 4:13-17), were underpaying their laborers (James 5:1-6), and fighting, competing and squabbling (James 3;1-18). As well as that they were even murdering one another (James 4:2). They had a huge problem with hearing the word but never doing it (James 1:22-27) and in forgetting about the poor and needy (James 2:1-13), the widows and orphans (James 1:27). They were nominal Christians who wanted a nice cozy religion that did not mess with their lifestyle or with their business interests. They wanted faith completely *without* works. James is telling them that they cannot get away with that!

These were incredibly selfish and toxic people! They had Christian beliefs, without any spiritual fruit! They were just playing games with God. James counters this selfish approach by challenging if they were even saved to begin with! Good works are a test of spiritual life, they are an indicator that a born-again new nature exists and is alive and well.

Faith is meant to produce works. Faith is demonstrated by good works. Faith is proved by the presence of good works. If you are not doing any good works, then you are probably not a good person. If you claim to be saved, and yet you murder people, then your claim to salvation may well be false.

Even the demons believe in one God (James 2:19), so intellectual belief is not sufficient to be saving faith. When Abraham offered up Isaac, his actions were proof that faith existed. When Rahab took a risk and helped the messengers, her works proved that her faith was real.

We are saved by faith, in order to do good works, and saving faith always produces good works, so if there is no sign of good works, then there is also no sign of saving faith! Our works “justify us” in the sense that they clearly indicate that justifying faith is present in the heart of the believer.

Nominal “Christians”, who just attend church, and who have no good works, are self-deceived. They believe in an intellectual sense, not in the deeper sense of true faith that produces good works. A true Christian faith must eventually produce a true Christian lifestyle.

Continuing in Heavenly Grace

This rather long chapter explains how to stay spiritually on-track in the life of grace by: avoiding temptation, abiding in Christ, dealing with stress and hurry, and avoiding emotional hijacking in times of threat.

Life is fast, distracting, and tempting. Downloading grace requires time, presence and attention. It seems that everything is designed to throw us off-course and to keep us away from God. In addition, life is sometimes unfair, rough and dangerous which can cause us to doubt God. This chapter will deal with abiding in Christ, remaining in grace, fleeing temptation, overcoming doubt, and dealing with being hurried and anxious.

The starting point is our own human weakness:

Matthew 26:40,41 *And He came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And He said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

If ever the disciples needed to be close to God it was in the Garden of Gethsemane, however it was late at night, they had eaten well, and were frightened. Jesus, their Lord, was falling apart in front of their eyes. There were His loud cries and tears (Hebrews 5:7), also Jesus' sweat turned to blood and fell to the ground in large droplets (Luke 22:44) and an angel from Heaven had to be sent to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). The always-calm Jesus was calling on them to pray with Him and they could not do it, they just fell asleep. Their systems seemed to have short-circuited on them. Later the fight-or-flight reaction set in and they either fought (Peter) or ran (everyone else). It was total spiritual failure!

What should have they done? It is right there in verse 42 – *"watch and pray so that you may not enter into temptation"*.

To *watch* is to be observant, alert, vigilant, and awake and all of those meanings are included here. The spirit is quick, sharp, alive, and perceptive. Spiritual people have extra knowledge, they are intuitive and can pick up on what is going on. They are like the men of Issachar who knew the times.

One of the best ways to avoid temptation is to be alive, awake, switched on and perceptive. You will know when someone is a seducer or a con-artist. You will sense dishonesty, fraud and the setting of traps. You will be sensitive and quick to hear the Holy Spirit when God says,

“Danger, you need to pray about this right now!” Grace comes to the spiritually alert and is far from the dull and obtuse.

The next strategy mentioned by Jesus is prayer. As the old saying goes, “The Devil wants to keep you from prayer because prayer will keep you from the Devil!”

The famous preacher Samuel Chadwick said, *“Satan dreads nothing but prayer. His one concern is to keep the saints from praying. He fears nothing from prayerless studies, prayerless work, prayerless religion. He laughs at our toil, he mocks our wisdom, but he trembles when we pray.”*

Jesus even includes praying against temptation in the Lord’s Prayer:

Matthew 6:13 *“And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.* I find it very useful to pray this line of the Lord’s Prayer, especially when I am travelling alone.

When I do this, God organizes my agenda so I am in spiritually safe conditions, for instance so that my hosts do not accidentally book me into the wrong kind of cheap hotel. It is good to ask God to keep you from temptation at all times.

Prayer also strengthens us inwardly, renews our mind and nullifies the foolish desires of the heart. Through prayer, the Holy Spirit inside us can defeat Satan:

1 John 4:4 *You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.*

Sometimes we have to flee a temptation such as idolatry or immorality (1 Corinthians 10:14) and God will give us the way of escape:

1 Corinthians 10:13 *No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

2 Peter 2:9 *then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment,*

These are promises that you can latch on to during times of suffering, temptation and great spiritual pressure to deny or blaspheme God. The word temptation, as used in the Bible, is very broad and covers practically everything that could affect your relationship with God such as going through so much pressure that you are “tempted to give up”.

Many of the temptations in biblical times were social pressure issues such as having to bow down to family idols or to eat food sacrificed to local gods. These were difficult to avoid because the whole city might be involved during a festival. God promises that even in these very high pressure situations that He would provide a way or escape and means of deliverance.

Abiding in Christ

Remaining in grace, is also known as abiding in Christ. Jesus teaches us extensively on that topic in John chapter 15 showing us the intimate relationship between our spiritual life and the spiritual life of Christ. God is the Father and source of all spiritual life (Hebrews 12:9, James 1:17) and is the “vinedresser” or gardener, while Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches:

John 15:1-17 *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (2) Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (3) Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. (4) Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (5) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (6) If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (7) If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (8) By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (9) As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. (10) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. (11) These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (12) "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (13) Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. (14) You are my friends if you do what I command you. (15) No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. (16) You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. (17) These things I command you, so that you will love one another.*

It is very intriguing how these seemingly simple statements weave themselves together as one, so that abiding in Christ involves obeying His commandments, which is also tied to abiding

in His love, and abiding in His Word. The Father loves Jesus, who in turn loves us with the same love, and we are to abide in His love and love one another. Abiding in His Word leads to fruitfulness that remains, and to joyous answered prayer; while not abiding leads to fruitless, dry withered living and ultimate destruction.

We remain in grace by remaining in Christ, His love, His Word and His commandments. The fruitful branches are those who remain in Christ, in His love and in His Word. They are the branches that continue to download the sustaining grace of God into their spirit, and who are thus filled with Christ!

The fruitful branches can ask in prayer and receive in prayer. Believing means receiving. They are receiving the living water, the life of Christ, the grace of God, and the goodness of God! The result is that their joy is made full!

Fruitfulness is relational. The whole of the Christian life is driven by our relationship with God, and our love for one another, which in turn is governed by His commandments and His Word. The quality of our spiritual relationship with God is not evaluated by how we feel about it, but rather how well we live it out according to Scripture.

There are many people who think they have a great relationship with God based on feelings, who are in fact disobedient to His commandments. They are self-deceived!

John 15:9 above tells us that the Father loved Jesus and that Jesus obeyed the Father perfectly in turn. Jesus now loves us in the same way, and that means we are to obey Jesus and His commandments and abide in His love. This goes straight back to the earlier chapter on Grace and Works. Grace-filled relationships with Jesus and one another are the transformational force, and obedience is the fruitful result.

Dealing With Hurry, Stress and Priorities

John Wesley once wrote, "*Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry.*" The late Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, penned, "*Hurry is not of the devil. It is the devil.*" And the great Reformer, Martin Luther, is quoted as having said, "*Work, work, from early to late. In fact, I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.*"

When we are in a hurry we start losing the fruit of the Spirit. First patience goes, then kindness, then love and peace and forbearance, and finally we lose self-control and blow up! Thus, "hurry is the Devil" because it completely destroys us spiritually!

Hurry is totally incompatible with agape love because agape love puts the emphasis on the person while hurry puts emphasis on the task ahead. Hurry can even make us abusive and neglectful of people. Some busy people pay cursory attention to their families or come home frustrated, angry and unpleasant to all!

The Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu observed: *“Nature is never in a hurry, yet everything is accomplished.”* Numerous people have noticed how Jesus never seemed to be in much of a hurry yet His ministry was fully accomplished! You do not have to be in a hurry in order to do everything that the Lord has called you to. Rather, hurry will subtract from your ministry by making you unable to love and unable to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. Well-known Christian author Warren W. Wiersbe puts it this way:

“God is not in a hurry. He kept Abraham and Sarah waiting twenty-five years before Isaac was born, and Isaac and Rebekah waited twenty years for Esau and Jacob, Jacob had to wait fourteen years to get the bride he really wanted, and then he had to serve six more years to build up his flocks so he could be independent, a total of twenty years. Twenty-two years passed between Joseph's betrayal by his brothers and the brothers' reconciliation in Egypt. God is not in a hurry because all His works are done in love. “Love is patient, love is kind” (1 Cor.13:4). Let's be grateful that God takes His time.”

The Message paraphrase uses the wonderful term “the unforced rhythms of grace” :

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to Me. Get away with Me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with Me and work with Me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.

I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with Me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG).

One of the most permanently damaging things that happened to me as a young Christian was a visit to our church by some “disciplers” from a certain ministry who emphasized time management and doing a lot of things for God. Their motto was “your time is your lifetime” and they taught us how to cram as many possible good Christian activities into a single day in a very rationalistic way. I took to this immediately.

After a while I had my life planned out for the next five years in fifteen minute time intervals! Well that didn't work! However, I still felt compelled to “do” more and more for God. This just made me narrow, boring, and harsh. Even after all this time, I occasionally still feel guilty if I have an unproductive day.

We need to be led by the Spirit and not by the wristwatch! There are seven different kinds of time in the Bible and only one of them is clock time. The seven kinds of time are: spiritual times and seasons (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11), the sudden and immediate moment (Mark's Gospel), eternity, religious times and festivals, prophetic time for instance a prophet using the past tense for a future event such as "Babylon is fallen", clock time, and salvation time (now is the day of salvation).

The emphasis is entering into salvation time by the Spirit, so that we can be aware of the prophetic times and seasons of grace, and produce fruit for eternity by knowing how to act in the immediate moment. For instance Phillip is in the midst of the Samaritan revival in Acts 8.

The Holy Ghost sends him down to the deserted Gaza road to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and lead that person to Christ, baptizing him in water and later church history tells us that the eunuch went on to found the Ethiopian Orthodox church.

Obedience to the Spirit's leading, prompting and timing, and to the sense of grace in all we do, leads to fruitful ministry.

Now I am not against time-management, there are many in ministry who sorely need it! However, I am against time-management taking over from the fruit of the Spirit! The first priority should be love. You need to move at the pace of love. If you are moving so fast in ministry that you have no real friends and people see you as abrupt or even rude then you are not obeying God! Love is never rude!

If you are so hurried that you are alone, and have no friends, then you are dwelling in serious sin. The New Testament emphasizes "one another" ministry 36 times with commands such as: love one another, pray for one another, encourage one another, instruct one another, be at peace with one another, offer hospitality to one another, wash each other's feet, and accept one another. If you obey these commandments, you will have friends. People will love you for doing these things, you will be in community, you will be in relationship. If you are not doing these things then you are disobeying God and far from where He wants you to be! You must slow down enough to obey the "one another" commands!

Continuing in the grace of God, means continuing in Christ, which means continuing in the agape love of God, which means obeying His commandments including the new and great commandment to love one another. Which leads us to the next section on how to remain in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ during times of threat and stress.

Serving Christ Despite Threat and Stress

If you are feeling overwhelmed by life you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. Am I trying to do too much?
2. Is what I am doing too complicated?
3. Is what I am doing too urgent? Am I trying to do too many things in too short a space of time?
4. Is what I am doing “too important” am I telling myself that virtually everything is important?

Your brain can only handle so much at one time. If you keep on pushing yourself, it can result in burnout, anxiety, depression or even physical illness. I understand that life throws curve balls at us and there is no avoiding being overwhelmed from time to time. However, if you are constantly overwhelmed, then you need to find a way out of that state of mind.

If you are trying to do too much ask yourself: What may I delay, delegate or even drop entirely?

If what you are doing is too complicated ask yourself: How can I simplify this, break it down into small tasks that I can understand or get good advice on this?

If what you are doing is too urgent: Write down your tasks in a big list and do the most urgent and important ones first then schedule the rest.

If you are classifying everything in your life as “important” and stressing yourself out, then you need to get perspective back through prayer, worship, wise counsel and reading the Scriptures. Will it matter in five years’ time?

Fight, Flight or Mastery

You may have heard of the “fight or flight response” that humans and animals have in response to threat. It does not take high level thinking to engage in the fight or flight response.

Even the most unthinking of creatures such as an ant can make the decision whether to avoid an intruder or whether to stand their ground and fight. The fight or flight response is fast, rough, instinctual, and sometimes quite inaccurate. It is a useful instinctive response with high survival value but it is not the stuff of wisdom, ethics, or the Spirit. When societies give in to their instinctive fight or flight responses we see factions, disputes, wars and vendettas breaking out. Survival may seem to depend on the fight or flight response, but true civilization depends on taming and mastering it. Why is the fight or flight response so destructive, and if so why do we have it? Why is it almost the exact opposite of being Christian? I suppose initially it was not a bad thing. The fight or flight response was meant to operate in a human being who was connected to God. This connection would have moderated and altered the response. But now it isn't so well connected and it has become one part of us that has been most affected by the Fall.

Cain was the first person in Scripture who was faced with the task of managing murderous rage (Genesis 4:7) – and he chose to fight instead. His descendant Lamech boasted of murder (Genesis 4:23,24) and by the time of the Flood his descendants had “filled the earth with violence” (Genesis 6:11). Trusting fallen human beings to choose self-mastery rather than fight or flight was a total failure.

Eventually Moses came along with the Law which pointed the way to what was right and wrong and gave very reasonable and agreeable limits for human conduct. The Law also failed. Finally God sent His Son and the laws of God were written on our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:16) that we might become spiritual overcomers (Revelation 21:7). This has worked but even so it has been no easy task. Only re-establishing the connection with God has brought any measure of control to the fight-or flight response.

The problem with the fight-or-flight response in fallen humanity is that it eliminates choice and when you eliminate choice you eliminate all sorts of things like freedom, morality, love and decency. When the fight-or-flight response occurs blood flows to the hands and feet and away from the brain and huge shots of adrenalin and other hormones take over and the fast action control centers of the brain come into play and suddenly you are exploding at people, or running, or fighting. In common parlance your “buttons have been pressed” and you are just reacting at an entirely visceral and instinctual level.

This is not a bad thing when you are running away from a charging rhinoceros. Speedy reactions may be a very good thing. However in modern life the provocation that sets off the response may be a cutting remark or a threat to our ego in the office.

The feeling of threat is enough to set off the entire chemical cascade that is known as the fight-or-flight response. Road rage involves people reacting to rudeness as if it were the proverbial charging rhinoceros. A minor incident becomes a matter of life and death.

The perception of threat and the impact of adrenalin cause us to react without choosing our reactions. Startled people have accidentally shot their family members thinking they were burglars and soldiers have fired on their own troops through the sheer speed and inaccuracy of this response. You cannot be Christ-like and filled with rage and gut-level fight or flight responses. Neither can you be a timid, always retreating wimp soaring into anxiety attacks like a frightened bird at every alarming news item. The fight or flight response removes our ability to make wise, free and balanced moral choices and is not the stuff on which Christian character is built.

Mastery

The alternative to the fight or flight response is to achieve mastery of the situation. Jesus always demonstrated mastery of any and every situation He was presented with. He neither fought the soldiers who arrested him or fled them but rather throughout His entire trial demonstrated an amazing degree of personal mastery. At no point in His life did Jesus give in to the adrenalin-filled panic of a fight or flight response. He could have gathered an army but He did not. Perhaps He could have fled hostile Israel and gone to Greece and been welcomed as a philosopher, but He did not. There were times when He avoided Jerusalem because of the hostility and because His time was not yet come yet at no point did He react from instinct alone.

His actions were masterful, strong, wise and spiritual. His Spirit-filled Mind had total mastery over His flesh and His instincts. This gave Him power, poise and a degree of personal authority that seems to have been the main aspect of His personality that people admired and commented on.

The following verses are just some of the verses that show how other people saw Jesus as having authority and how Jesus saw His own authority being used to master situations.

It is a good exercise to go over the following Bible passages on the authority of Jesus: Matthew 7:29, 8:9, 21:23-27, 28:18-20, Mark 1:27, Luke 4:32, Luke 9:1, 10;19, John 5:27, 7:17, 12:49, 14:10, 16:13, 17:2

Jesus was not thrown even by encountering the Devil in person. During the temptation in the wilderness Jesus met the Devil in a face-to-face spiritual encounter that must have been of incredible intensity. The Devil was out to destroy Jesus, he was malice incarnate, and he was beguiling, tempting, and pushing Jesus into a wrong response. Jesus neither fled nor fought. Jesus mastered the situation, resisted the temptations and used His authority to deal with the problem. Jesus mastered the temptation to flee and preserve himself from spiritual harm; He faced the dangers of the Devil. He stood His ground against pure evil. On the other hand Jesus did not launch into an aggressive tirade against Satan. He defeated Satan not through a raw and red-necked stream of spiritual vitriol but through the calm use of God's authority based on God's Word.

This biblical example shows us that even if we think a situation is utterly evil and threatens our health, identity and success (as the wilderness temptations did for Jesus) that we do not need to get upset and become reactionary. Nor do we need to pack our bags and run. We just need to calmly and authoritatively expose that situation to the truth of Scripture and the authority of God. We want to end up moving through life as Jesus moved through Israel and cope with our pressures and threats as he coped with His.

When I speak of mastery, I am not speaking of sinless perfection. Mastery is more like a combination of faith, courage, decisiveness and balance. It is having spiritual authority, poise and power in all situations. It asks questions such as: How can we tackle every situation in life as if it were the perfect golf shot? How can we master every threat and every frustration with grace, power and poise?

How can we move through a grossly unjust trial without losing our cool? How can we forgive those that nail us to the cross? Of course these reactions are the supreme achievements of a Perfect Life. They are what made Jesus the spotless Lamb of God. While we may not achieve them we can aspire to them and discipline our minds toward them.

Let's move from the cosmic to the comical and consider my attempts at playing golf. As an under-funded missionary, I do not own golf clubs or have a golf membership, but once every few years I am dragged out onto a golf course by a friend. When the ball lands in the rough, as it often does, I have three possible responses – fight, flight or mastery. I can give up on the shot and pay the penalty – that is the flight response. I can hit wildly with all my might and try and blast it out of there – that is the fight response.

Or I can call up my considerable golf prowess, concentrate carefully, keep my eye on the ball, visualize the wonderful trajectory it will take and get it out of there with just the right touch. This is the mastery response and as you may well guess it is the most difficult response and the hardest to perfect. I rarely get it right, but it is the one I wish to practice and reinforce. There is really no other possible choice since the other two responses just lead to failure. Mastery is the hardest choice but it is the only choice that goes anywhere.

The Mind

I need to spend a few paragraphs defining what I mean by “Mind” before we go too far and get confused. By the Mind I do not mean various individual thoughts or a set of intellectual abstractions. I mean mind as the entire mental framework of the person. We use the word Mind this way in the phrases “single-minded” or “open-minded”. Mind in this sense is an inner state of consciousness that has certain properties.

The mind is controllable and can be focused by the believer. Paul asks us to set our mind on various things such as the Spirit, things above, and the pursuit of maturity so the mind is something we can focus on God. [*For those of you who enjoy Greek the phren word family phroneo, phronema and phronesis, phronimos is in view here.*] Thus it is that part of our total consciousness and awareness that we have some control over. It does not include dreams or the sub-conscious. The sub-conscious is part of our mind in a larger sense but not part of it in this narrow sense we are using it here because we have no real control over it and cannot discipline it or focus it. Neither is mind in this sense the scattered thoughts that drift in and out of a person who is daydreaming or watching TV. Of such people we sometimes say “their mind was switched off when they watched the movie”. Their inner consciousness was inactive. The mind is what thinks when you do some real thinking. The mind is where you receive and mull over wisdom and where you make real choices about your actions. That's your mind. It is that part of your consciousness that you can control and exert and which bears a close relationship to the “real you”.

The mind in the sense of the *phren* word family generally means the wisdom and understanding especially of the righteous (Luke 1:17, Ephesians 1:8).

The mind can be set on various things.

When Jesus rebuked Peter he said he was “not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33), the legalistic Romans nit-picking about food and drink were literally “rules-minded” in the Greek (Romans 14:6).

The mind can be set on the flesh or the Spirit (Romans 8:5,6) and things above (Colossians 3:2) or on earthly things (Philippians 3:19) which caused Paul to weep.

Due to the renewing and infilling of the Holy Spirit we can even have “the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:14-16) and when we are humble servants we have a mind like Christ’s (Philippians 2:5).

On the other hand we can have a childish mind (1 Corinthians 13:11, 14:20) Unity of mind is important and Christians are to be one-minded and like-minded. (Romans 12:16, 15:5, 2 Corinthians 13:11) This word family can also mean the careful, prudent mind, that which thinks of others, the mindful and thoughtful person (Philippians 1:7, 4:10) though the word “mind” is rarely used in English translations of this aspect.

Thus it is clear from the New Testament that the sort of mind we end up with is entirely our choice. We can focus or mind on God’s interests or man’s interests, the Spirit or the flesh, the things above or earthly things. We can choose to be humble, like-minded, unified and thoughtful of others or we can choose to be puffed up, childish, contentious, worldly and carnal.

Mastery and The Mind

Mastery is a product of the focused and disciplined mind bringing the whole person into submission to an over-riding ethic or ethos. Throughout history everyone from Zen monks to Spartan warriors and corporate traders have discovered this.

People have become masterful human beings by disciplining themselves in all sorts of pursuits from archery to fencing to philosophy. That is why competitive sports, while trivial in themselves, have shaped many a person for the better. The somersaults of a champion gymnast are in themselves quite pointless. They don’t feed the hungry or make any great philosophical point.

It is not doing somersaults that makes the gymnast great but the discipline he or she puts in. The sport builds mastery and mental strength into the gymnast so that when the days of gymnastics are over the character remains. Another point, the focus must be external to self. The gymnast does not find self-mastery by focusing on self-mastery. He or she finds self-mastery by focusing on somersaults.

The mind is the only part of our consciousness that we can focus and direct therefore it is the only part of us that can give us mastery. A million dollars will not give you personal mastery. People who win the lottery often end up poor because of their lack of personal mastery. The money has not made them masterful. A strong body will not give you mastery except of certain physical skills. Athletes can be enslaved to alcohol or drugs. Education will not give you personal mastery, there are many well educated people who are small-minded and weak-willed. Willpower won't give you mastery as the will can simply become stubborn and inflexible unable to adapt to changing situations and thus lead to inevitable defeat. Even religion won't give you mastery. Many people are enslaved by cults, caught up in bondage to religious guilt or overtaken by idolatry and superstition. Only the adaptable, flexible, trained, focused and disciplined mind can bring mastery.

I would like to clarify this, I am not advocating mentalist philosophies, mind science, Christian Science, or "think and grow rich" kinds of mental mastery. They are half-truths. The mind is not a terribly significant force in itself. The mind does not have the ability to create Heaven or hell as Blake thought. God creates Heaven and Hell. Reality is His creation, not ours. The mind does not create the world but it does enable us to move through it with poise and power.

The mind is not God. The mind works best when it is set on God. In biblical terms personal and emotional mastery is a product of the mind set on God and imbued with His Word and authority. The unaided mind operating alone by itself cannot produce mastery of the kind we see in the life of Jesus Christ. For that kind of mastery we need more than positive thinking. We need a direct connection to God and the mind must be resolutely set on God, on the Spirit, on things above, on the Kingdom, and the righteousness thereof.

So we see that we are faced with three universal truths: Firstly that personal mastery is the only wise option. Secondly that such mastery is solely a product of the mind. Thirdly that the mind becomes masterful as it is disciplined and focused on something outside itself. This book maintains that the highest degree of mastery can only be attained when the ‘something outside itself’ is God. You can achieve a sense of mastery by focusing your mind on fencing or gymnastics or horse-riding but you won’t end up like Jesus just by focusing on those things. The mind must be directed onto Christ. That is its proper place.

Directing The Christian Mind

This directing of the mind is a forceful and decisive activity. It is hard to put into words. It is not concentrating on Christ, neither is it speculating about Christ or studying or daydreaming about Christ.

It is not even thinking about Jesus as such. It is not an internal, reflective or meditative process. It’s similar to standing outside yourself and directing yourself onto Christ. It is like standing at the top of a high-dive tower and looking down and plunging in with total commitment. It’s choosing where your life energies will be focused and your mental processes directed.

It’s like going outside yourself but towards Christ at the same time. I suppose you could call it faith, or at least faith is very much involved in it. I am stuck for an analogy. It’s a little like those missiles that lock onto their target or a cat focused on a mouse. The whole of the mind is fixed on Christ and directs the total life energies of the believer in that direction. As this focus is attained everything else is entrained, the emotions, the will and the responses. Just as someone absorbed in a video game entrains all their concentration, emotions and will into the game so a Christian absorbed in Christ with their mind set on the Spirit inevitably brings their whole life into conformity with Jesus.

It may not be immediately obvious but when we direct our mind to a purpose it means that we commit ourselves to the rules and techniques that the particular purpose requires. For instance in writing this book I must follow the rules of the English language. I am hardly conscious of that because I have internalized many of the rules.

Now and then the spell-checker or grammar checker on this computer alerts me to where I am going wrong. Then I correct it. That is part of writing, part of the project, and part of being focused on writing a book. Following the rules of English grammar is not bad or awful. It’s not a restriction on my freedom or a legalism or a lack of grace.

It's just required. Mastery means sticking to the rules. Similarly, following Jesus has rules.

Submission to the commandments of Jesus Christ is not optional if we are to stay focused on Christ and know life and peace. Obeying these commandments is not the whole of the Christian life but they are part of the discipline of the Christian life. They make it flow and if you are to have mastery in the Christian life you must decide to obey the rules. You cannot just make up the spiritual life as you go along any more than you can decide to reinvent English grammar every time you write.

Deciding to totally set your mind on Christ and achieve total life mastery is the very hardest thing you will ever do. But what are the alternatives? To potter along lamely is not much of a life. To refuse it totally is to go into eternal darkness. But the effort seems tremendous, the focus too narrow and the rules too hard. The focus must be kept and we are unruly. We are prone to distraction. We are far too easy on ourselves. We don't want to get up and practice. We want Heaven from our armchairs. So we make a commitment to Christ, then that fades, then another one, then a spiritual breakthrough, and then a slack patch. We are all over the place. Our minds are set on ourselves, or on our finances, or on the opinions of the Christian community or on the success of our ministry. We find easier goals and substitute foci. We become anxious, stressed, harried and spiritually weak. We need to come to a point of final decision where we look at the mess, pull ourselves together and decide with all that is within us to focus ourselves totally on Christ alone and pursue single-minded, focused, disciplined mastery.

I will tell a brief, but to my mind tragic, story. I went to a fairly large seminary in Australia of around 120 students and we would have chapel every morning where two or three students would testify.

One day my testimony went like this "I used to get angry when people talked about having a personal relationship with God. I knew I was saved, I knew I loved God but He was distant from me, not at all close until just recently when I broke through. Now I can say I have a real and personal relationship with God."

Because I went into seminary shortly after my conversion I thought I was the only person in the seminary with that particular problem. At morning tea I was besieged with people asking me how I had made that breakthrough.

These students were pastors and preaching on having a personal relationship with God while they had not got one themselves. I said the same thing to every person “I just made God absolutely number one, more important than money, reputation, everything. I just decided to stake everything on Him”. They went “Oh..” and the look on their faces said “That’s too hard.” People are drifting around in ministry without a real and solid connection to God because the cost of staking everything on God is too high. You must come to that decision. The Christian life is unliveable without it. You cannot dabble in the eternal. You must commit totally to it and direct your mind to it.

Prerequisites For Self-Mastery

The absolute prerequisites of spiritual progress are that you are born-again with a new nature from God, that you have the filling of the Holy Spirit and that you are single-mindedly devoted to God in obedience to His word. Without these three things, you do not stand a chance. Unless you are born-again, you do not have a new nature. Without the new nature, it’s an impossible job. If you are not Spirit-filled and led by the Spirit in your daily life then you will not have power over the flesh (see Galatians 5:16-18) and you will struggle continually and lose continually. If you are not single-minded, you will be double-minded and double-minded people receive nothing from the Lord (James 1:5-8). You will be left wallowing in your doubt and indecision. These three things are the basics. Before I go on to talk about techniques in self-mastery you must have these three things in your life or be prepared to have these three things in your life as soon as possible.

Practical Techniques For Emotional Self-Mastery

It is fine to talk about the need for a personal relationship with God and having one’s mind set on things above but how will that keep someone from exploding next time someone cuts them off on the highway?

There are thus two levels to emotional self-mastery. Firstly we must set up the foundations of the new self and the God-focused mind. That renews our connection with God and sets up some spiritual lines of control over the fight or flight response. Then we must learn the practical details of responding to life intelligently and wisely.

Pay attention to your physical state. If you realize that your fists are clenched and your neck is rigid and you are physically tensed up and alerted for danger then try to undo those physical states. Unclench your fists, rub your neck, relax your posture. The fight or flight response is

partly a physical response and as we undo its physical correlates it will lose much of its power. Perhaps try and relax or use deep breathing if you are tense, guarded or explosive.

Be aware of the magnitude of your emotional responses and the quick “zoom” to anger or anxiety that the fight or flight response produces. Learn to recognize when you are zooming to disaster and practice keeping a lid on it. Ask Jesus to be with you when you are like this!

Take time to think. Use your God-given right to choose your response. Do not just respond on auto-pilot. Once you stop and think you are far more likely to choose a good and much more optimal solution.

Disengage. If you have started to move into attack mode pull back the troops! Go for a walk, cool down. Have a pray about it.

If you are going into a situation that you know aggravates you (such as dealing with an annoying person) try to make a conscious decision about how you are going to react in that situation. Then rehearse your balanced and biblical reaction over and over in your mind. Perhaps seven times or seventy times seven? (see Matthew 18) Train yourself mentally to react rightly just like professional golfers ‘see the ball going in the hole’ even before they make the shot. Use mental rehearsal to disarm potential conflict situations.

In the converse of this - don’t mentally rehearse the wrong response. Don’t see in your mind’s eye a picture of yourself strangling the boss of the phone company. It may be very satisfying but it is not helpful. It is educating yourself in the wrong direction.

Use the ‘what would Jesus do?’ question as a quick reference.

Question your perceptions of threat. Is this really a life or death issue? Am I getting tensed up over nothing? What does it say about me if I am so easily riled? Or on the flight response: Is it really that bad? Is the world going to end over this? Is this fear, anxiety and emotional reactivity helping me? Has running away from things helped or hindered my life?

Learn correct responses by modelling mature Christians and by studying the heroes of the faith.

Make a personal commitment to grow in this area.

Have some friends keep you accountable for your reactions and encourage you to maturity.

Enjoy the feeling of grace rather than the feeling of explosive emotional power.

Learn to find your emotional center, and to live from it and to know when it is in balance and out of balance. This is quite difficult for many people.

Some people will push you wanting you to explode so they can take advantage of your immature reaction. Be alert to this and deliberately react the opposite way they are pushing you. (1 Corinthians 4:12) For instance when they revile you greet them with a blessing. (1 Peter 2:23 NKJV) who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;

Remember that when you react rightly to unjust treatment that “great is your reward in Heaven”. So rejoice and give yourself a pat on the back when you keep your cool. Positive reinforcement for good behavior. (Matthew 5:11)

Do not return evil for evil. (Romans 12:17) Keep a lid on your desire to retaliate. Leave retaliation to the Lord. (Romans 12:19) If we return a blessing instead we will inherit blessing. . (1 Peter 3:9).

If people rip you off and insult you don't escalate it into a life or death struggle over honor and pride. This is what Jesus means when He says “do not resist him who is evil”. (He does not mean that the police should not arrest robbers!) Rather it means “don't let the evil person push you into a full-scale, adrenalin packed, fight or flight response”. Deny the natural man's urge to strike back. If he slaps you, turn the other cheek, if he takes your cloak, let him, if he makes you walk a mile, go two. If he says “give me money” let him have some. (Matthew 5:38-42). Deny your reactivity and show you are made of different stuff.

Do not let unkind, ungrateful, stingy, mean or small-minded people get to you. God is merciful to the unkind and ungrateful and we have a great reward in Heaven when we do likewise. (Luke 6:35) Brush their meanness to one side without taking it too personally and treat them as well as you can with reasonable safety (because some are quite toxic).

Do not get your ego hooked into the game of “Christian comparisons”, my church is bigger than your church etc. This only leads to fuming and fighting.

Do not let theology push you into fight or flight mode. For instance “I won't study the Second Coming its too contentious” (flight response) or “You are a heretic and I will torch you verbally since the law won't allow me to burn you at the stake” (fight response). The mastery response is to learn about the Second Coming and other aspects of theology and grow in God and only debate under circumstances that are harmless to the hearers (such as with good friends in the ministry) unless of course there is an urgent apologetic reason. Even then, your speech should be seasoned with salt.

Conclusion

This chapter has been about how to remain in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ by avoiding and escaping temptation, abiding in Christ, slowing down and not being in a hurry, dealing wisely with stress and coping with feelings and perceptions of threat due to the fight or flight reaction by mastering our minds. We need to make sure that our spiritual tanks are fully topped up with the grace of God. If we focus on downloading grace from Heaven, then we will be fine.



END TIMES OBEDIENCE



These are commands given in relation to the End Times, or in the hope of Christ's appearing and the resurrection. I have put them into categories for convenience.

BE ALERT, AWAKE AND SPIRITUALLY DISCERNING

1. Take heed that no man deceive you or lead you astray (Matthew 24:4, Mark 13:5, Luke 21:8)
2. Beware of false prophets who are like wolves in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7;15-24)
3. Do not believe reports of false Messiahs (Matthew 24:23-26)
4. Do not believe false signs and miracles (Matthew 24:24)
5. Don't go anywhere to meet the Messiah (Matthew 24:26) he is coming in the air!
6. When you see the signs, know that He is near (Matthew 24:33)
7. Watch, for you do not know the hour when the Lord comes (Matthew 24:42, 25:13)
8. Be ready and be wise! (Matthew 24:44, 25:1-13)
9. Be on your guard and spiritually awake (Mark 13:9,23,33-37)
10. Know the time of your Visitation (Luke 19:44)
11. When you see the signs of the End, be encouraged for your redemption is nigh (Luke 21:28)
12. When you see the signs know that the Kingdom of God is near (Luke 21:31)
13. Do not get weighed down with drunkenness, dissipation and the cares of this life, which are a trap (Luke 21:34)
14. Stay awake at all times (Luke 21:36)
15. Be awake and sin not! (1 Corinthians 15:34)
16. Do not be ignorant about the End Times (1 Thessalonians 4:13)
17. Be alert to signs of judgment as in Noah's day and Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:26-30)
18. Be filled with the Spirit and alert to God's timing like the five wise virgins (Matthew 25:1-13)
19. Be alert because you do not know the day or the hour when Jesus returns (Matthew 24:50, 25:13, Luke 12:40)
20. Be always awake for the Master and you will be blessed. (Luke 12:36-38)
21. Do not be spiritually "asleep" and unaware (1 Thessalonians 5:6,7)
22. Put on spiritual armor (1 Thessalonians 5:8, Ephesians 6:10-18)
23. Let not anyone deceive you by any means (2 Thessalonians 2:3)
24. Beware of "men" (natural men) because they will be treacherous and betray you. (Matthew 10:17)
25. Listen to the two final prophetic witnesses (Revelation 11:3)
26. Know about the mark of the Beast (Revelation 13:18)
27. Test the antichrist spirits (1 John 4:1-3)
28. Discern the spirit of truth from the spirit of error (1 John 4:6)



HAVE REPENTANCE AND SPIRITUAL ZEAL

29. Return to your first love (Revelation 2:4)
 30. Do the works that you did at first (Revelation 2:5)
 31. Work/toil - labor for the Lord (Revelation 2:2)
 32. Wake up and strengthen what remains (Revelation 3:2)
 33. Repent of false doctrine and practices (Rev. 2:14-16)
 34. Be zealous and repent (Revelation 3:19)
35. Buy gold refined by fire (spiritual knowledge) and white garments (righteousness) and eye salve (spiritual perception) (Revelation 3:18)
 36. Open up to Christ's entrance, receive Him, do not shut God out (Revelation 3:20)
 37. Repent of immorality / soiled garments (Revelation 3:4)
 38. Stay awake and keep your garments white (Revelation 16:15)

ATTITUDE TOWARD TRIALS

39. Do not fear what you are about to suffer (Revelation 2:10)
40. Overcome (Revelation 2:7, 11 etc)
41. See that you are not troubled (Matthew 24:6)
42. Flee from the abomination of desolation, to the mountains (Matthew 24:15,16 Mark 13:14)
43. Don't hesitate, flee at once, don't go back for anything at all (Matthew 24:17,18)
44. Pray that your flight is not in winter or on a Sabbath day (Matthew 24:20)
45. Flee into the wilderness for 1260 days (Revelation 12:6)
46. Do not settle beforehand how to answer (Luke 21:13-15)
47. Pray for the strength to escape all these things and stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36)
48. Do not be anxious about what you will say under trial, just rely on the Holy Spirit (Mark 13:11)
49. Long for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13)
50. Remember that your citizenship is in Heaven (Philippians 3:20,21)
51. Give courageous testimony (Revelation 12:11)
52. Do not love your life, even unto death (Revelation 12:11)
53. Conquer the Beast, his image and the number of His Name (Revelation 15:2)
54. Rejoice for great is your reward in Heaven (Matthew 5:11,12, Luke 6:22,23)
55. Give thanks to God that death has no sting because of the resurrection victory in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)



PERSISTENCE, PATIENCE AND ENDURANCE

56. Deny yourself, take up your Cross and follow Christ (Matthew 16:24-28)
 57. Be patient until the coming of the Lord (James 5:7-11)
 58. Hold fast to what you have until Jesus comes (Rev 2:25)
 59. Keep "my works" until the end (Revelation 2:26)
 60. Hold fast what you have (Revelation 3:11)
61. Endure to the end so that you will be saved (Matthew 24:13, Mark 13:13)
 62. By your endurance you will gain your lives (Luke 21:19)
 63. Wait 1,335 days from the setting up of the abomination of desolation (Daniel 12:12)
 64. Wait for His Son from Heaven (1 Thessalonians 1:10)
 65. The saints are to have great endurance (Revelation 14:12)
 66. Remember that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day (2 Peter 3:8-10)

DOCTRINE AND TRUTH

67. Love the truth so as to be saved (2 Thessalonians 2:10)
68. Remember the teaching of the apostles (2 Peter 3:2, Jude 1:17)
69. Pray in the Holy Spirit (Jude 1:20)
70. Keep yourselves in the love of God (Jude 1:21)
71. Have mercy on some, but flee from the grossly immoral (Jude 1:22,23)
72. Beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15-20)
73. Don't try and figure out God's times and seasons (Acts 1:7)
74. Do not try and figure out the day and the hour (Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32)
75. Test the false apostles which appear as "angels of light" (2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Revelation 2:2)
76. Reject the teaching of Balaam (Revelation 2:14)
77. Reject the teaching of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15)
78. Listen to the Holy Spirit (Revelation 2:29)
79. Remember what you received and heard (Revelation 3:3)
80. Do not deny the Name of Jesus (Revelation 3:8)
81. Stand fast and hold the teachings (2Thessalonians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 15:2)
82. Keep the commandments of God and faith in Jesus (Revelation 14:12)
83. Do not worship even a mighty messenger angel (Revelation 19:10, 22:9)
84. Keep the words of the prophecy in Revelation (Revelation 22:7)
85. Do not alter the book of Revelation (Revelation 22:18,19)



SEPARATION FROM EVIL AND IMMORALITY

- 86. Hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6)
- 87. Don't tolerate Jezebel (Revelation 2:20)
- 88. Do not get involved in the sexual immorality of the Babylonian system (Revelation 14:8)
- 89. Do not worship the image of the Beast (Revelation 14:9)
- 90. Do not take the mark of the Beast (Revelation 14:9-11)
- 91. Come out of Babylon, lest you partake in her sins and share in her plagues! (Revelation 18:4)
- 92. Rejoice over the destruction of Babylon (Revelation 18:20, 19:1-6)

LIFESTYLE

- 93. Be holy (1 Peter 1:15,16)
- 94. Pass the time of your earthly residence in holy fear (1 Peter 1:17)
- 95. Live as a holy pilgrim (1 Peter 2:11) fleeing fleshy lusts
- 96. Be diligent, spotless and without blemish (2 Peter 3:14)
- 97. Be faithful and you will be blessed (Matthew 24:45-47, 25:14-30)
- 98. Be compassionate showing Christ to the needy during the Tribulation (Matthew 25:31-46)
- 99. Walk worthily of God (1 Thessalonians 2:12)
- 100. Cast off the works of darkness and put on Christ (Romans 13:11-14)
- 101. Increase and abound in love toward one another and toward all... (1 Thessalonians 3:12)
- 102. Be quiet, mind your own business, work with your own hands (1 Thessalonians 4:11,12)
- 103. Be spiritually thirsty for the water of life which is freely given (Revelation 21:6,22:17)

WITNESS AND MINISTRY

- 104. Proclaim the gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 24:14)
- 105. Be a faithful and wise servant, diligent in ministry (Matthew 24:45-51)
- 106. Faithfully use your talents to get a return for God (Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 19:12-27)
- 107. Be diligent about doing the Father's will, especially if you know it well. (Luke 12:42-48)
- 108. Do high-quality teaching that is like gold, silver and precious stones (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)
- 109. Know God, be strong and do exploits (Daniel 11:32)
- 110. Teach many (Daniel 11:33)
- 111. Comfort and edify one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- 112. Turn away from those who have a form of godliness but lack the power thereof (2 Timothy 3:5)
- 113. Preach the Word, be instant in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. (2 Timothy 4:2)
- 114. But you watch in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fully carry out your ministry. (2 Timothy 4:5)
- 115. So that, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not without fruit in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 15:58)

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