



ALEJANDRO BULLÓN
ROBERTO HERRERA

Learn

from

Me

CHRIST'S
CHARACTER-TRANSFORMING
INVITATION



IADPA

“LEARN FROM ME”:
CHRIST’S CHARACTER-TRANSFORMING INVITATION



IADPA

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PROLOGUE





THE YEAR 2022 marks a milestone in the history of Adventism in Inter-America. This year we celebrate the first centennial since the Inter-American Division was organized. Within the framework of this great celebration, the Division Treasury joins Stewardship Ministries to make available to all our congregations and our membership in Inter-America this special study book you have in your hand, entitled “LEARN FROM ME”: CHRIST’S CHARACTER-TRANSFORMING INVITATION.

LEARN FROM ME is, first of all, our way of celebrating God’s direction by saying, “Thank You, Lord, for what You have done for us. A hundred years later, You are still our model and we will continue to learn from You.” However, in addition to celebrating the way the Lord has led us this far, this book is also part of the special program of study that we are conducting with all the congregations of our Division during the quinquennium 2020–2025, with the purpose of strengthening the spiritual life of all our members and encourage biblical and integral stewardship. By the grace of God, this is already the third study book we send to every pastor, congregation, and administrator at no cost, in addition to other resources such as a study guide, PowerPoint presentations, and videos. Each of these initiatives is intended to motivate us to continue to collaborate with the growth and development of our church through the study of God’s Word and our personal relationship with Christ.

In these pages we will immerse ourselves as a church in the study of the all-encompassing invitation made to us by our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and *learn from Me*, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (emphasis supplied).

Today, just as in the first century, we need to reflect as a church on the implications of this invitation. Why does Jesus have to tell us to “come to Me”? Are we not with Him? Or is it possible that, although we are in the church, we are far from Jesus? Could it be that we are physi-



cally and spiritually tired? If the answer is yes, what has caused us all that weariness? When Jesus speaks of gentleness and humility, is He saying that the cause of all our misfortune is our character? How can Christ take away our weariness at the same time He invites us to take His yoke upon us? Will that not be an additional burden? In what sense is the yoke of Christ “easy”? And perhaps what is most important: What does Christ want us to learn from Him? What does it mean for Christ to be our model? Is there any relationship between all of this and Christian stewardship?

During this year we will study these topics as we ask for God’s direction in prayer and read and study God’s Word. That is precisely the goal of *LEARN FROM ME*: to serve as a guide in Bible study as we seek to find answers and respond affirmatively to the Lord’s invitation to go to Him and follow Him as our model. To achieve this goal, we count first and foremost on the direction of the Holy Spirit. We have also invited Pastor Alejandro Bullón, who is the author of the first part of this book, entitled “Receiving the Invitation.” The second part, entitled “Imitating the Model,” was written by Pastor Roberto Herrera, our Stewardship Ministries Director for the Inter-American Division. We owe our gratitude to them for writing such didactic and instructive material on the biblical text and its application to our daily lives.

I would not want to end this prologue without thanking in advance all our unions and their local fields for the effort we are sure they will make so that this book reaches each of their congregations and is studied. I would also like to thank all our pastors, who feed and nourish the Lord’s flock every day. Finally, I thank you, dear reader, who have made the decision to study Christ and follow Him as a model of faithfulness. It is my wish that God will bless and keep you as you read the pages of this book and that the next special date we celebrate will not be an anniversary here on earth, but the return of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory to redeem His people.

With love for God’s people,

Pastor Filiberto Verduzco
Inter-American Division Treasurer

PART ONE:

RECEIVING THE INVITATION



“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”—**Matthew 11:28–30, NIV.**

“Whether they know it or not, all are weary and heavy-laden. All are weighed down with burdens that only Christ can remove. The heaviest burden that we bear is the burden of sin. If we were left to bear this burden, it would crush us. But the Sinless One has taken our place. . . . He has borne the burden of our guilt. He will take the load from our weary shoulders. He will give us rest”

—***The Desire of Ages*, p. 328.**



1

"Come to Me"





“Come to me, all you
who are weary
and burdened, and I
will give you rest”
(Matthew 11:28).



MARGARITA IS SUFFERING. Her constant defeats parade through her mind in an ominous caravan as if to mock her. The past returns to her memory, invades her world, and suffocates her. The wound that had apparently healed bleeds again. The young mestizo believes she is “unlucky.” She came to the United States holding onto the American dream, but the years have passed, and she feels that she has achieved nothing. She has repeatedly changed jobs and continues to earn little. None of her initiatives provide her with the anticipated results.

“Everyone succeeds in this country except me,” she tells her friends wistfully. “I just don’t have any luck.”

Margarita is a hardworking woman. She gets up at dawn, works fourteen hours a day at two different jobs, and returns home at night tired, with barely enough energy to take a bath and collapse into bed until the next day . . . and repeat the exhausting routine. What future awaits her? She looks in the mirror and begins to notice the lines that indicate

the undesirable passage of time and becomes frustrated. “I’m getting older and I’m not accomplishing anything,” she laments.

What Margarita is unaware of is that success or failure in life doesn’t depend on luck, or fate. The saying “You’re either born lucky or you’re not” is a big lie. However, regardless of our opinions, Margarita’s lament, “I’m not accomplishing anything,” seems to be the silent cry of many people. As much as they try to make things go well, nothing changes. They have the impression that others are moving ahead but they are stuck at the same point. Then, one day, they learn about the gospel and accept it in the hope that their life story will take another direction; however, the years pass, and everything remains the same, with the aggravating factor that they have now increased their duties. Before, they assumed their responsibilities to themselves and to their relatives, while now they have responsibilities to God and to the church, and sometimes, hard as they may try, they don’t manage to live up to what they consider their “Christian duties.”

Do you identify in any way with this picture? What is happening? Is the gospel just a pretty theory that doesn’t work in practice? Or do you feel that it barely works for others and not at all for you? This book aims to show you the liberating and transformative dimension of the message of salvation and move you from the mediocrity of a routine life to the sphere of a full and meaningful existence.

MISSING THE TARGET CAN BE FATAL

Throughout my life, I have known sincere people who decided to “follow Jesus,” but in reality, they followed only a body of doctrines or an institution called “the church.” They were far from following Jesus. Is that possible? Yes, it is. Doctrine and religion have a prominent place in the Christian experience. The congregation of the faithful is the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:12–17) and the fundamental beliefs are its teachings (see Matthew 7:28; John 7:16). It would be illogical to place God at the opposite end of His church or against His doctrinal principles. However, it would be fatal to believe that we are “following Jesus” simply because we get


together every Sabbath and accept what the Bible teaches. Following the Savior involves a loving relationship, a personal relationship that has the power to change your life. Jesus is not only God made man, but also the most extraordinary being who has ever set foot in this world—a guide par excellence, a loyal friend, a compassionate and merciful father.

How would you feel if the Queen of England invited you to spend a whole day with her? Wouldn't you hold onto that experience as something extraordinary, worthy of being told to your descendants? However, that experience would be nothing compared to what it means to live with the Lord, not just one day, but your whole life. Then why is it that the gospel doesn't make the hearts of many burst with joy? Why are there so many Christians who don't wake up in the morning wanting to shout that they love Jesus and that they are happy since they met Him?

The truth is that regardless of what you believe or feel, Jesus loves you infinitely. To Him, you are the most precious thing that exists in this world. He rejoices with your joys and is saddened by your moments of difficulty. He is always by your side, ready to participate in your daily decisions and activities if you allow Him to. He does not turn away from His children. It is you and I who move away from Him, and when the difficult circumstances of life come, we feel alone and abandoned.

The other day, someone who was going through a painful moment asked me, "Where is God? Why did He abandon me?"

God never abandons you! He has always been in the same place: by your side. The problem is that when you choose your own path and turn away from Him, you feel alone and, when the first difficulty comes, you ask yourself, "Where is He?" The Lord is by your side, but you don't see Him because your eyes have become accustomed to seeing only the things of this life. But the Lord never forgets you. He asked through the prophet Isaiah, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you" (Isaiah 49:15).



t would be absurd to ask someone who is beside you to come to you. Therefore, if Jesus’s invitation is a call to go to Him, it is because we are somehow far away.

JESUS’S INVITATION

This is why Jesus calls you over and over again. He wants to live a daily experience of communion and fellowship with you and He gives you the greatest invitation you could ever receive: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28–30).

In this book, we will meditate on this wonderful invitation from Jesus. If we come to understand and accept it, our spiritual life will take a 180-degree turn. We will be “like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers” (Psalm 1:3).

“Come” is said to the one who has drifted apart and is far away. It would be absurd to ask someone who is beside you to come to you. Therefore, if Jesus’s invitation is a call to go to Him, it is because we are somehow far away. We can even be in the church, but far from Him. We can be defenders of the doctrine, yet not remain close to the Savior. Otherwise, He would not say to us, “Come.”

The reason for the invitation “Come to Me” is that we human beings have turned away from our Creator. He didn’t create us to go around like aimless asteroids, lost in the universe. He brought us into existence so that we may live the most beautiful experience of

fellowship and communion with Him. The longing to walk with His children is the essence of the God-man relationship. The idea has existed since Eden, where the Lord was “walking” at dusk. The Hebrew verb *halak*, which is translated as “walk” in Genesis 3:8, can also be translated as “move about.” The Hebrew root *halak* describes the divine desire not to be separated from His creatures.

Sin, on the other hand, is the selfish behavior of human beings who voluntarily draw away from their Creator to begin a sad pilgrimage of death. One of the Hebrew words that describes human rebellion implies this concept. The root *awon* indicates straying from the right path. The Spirit of Prophecy says this: “In his sinless state, man held joyful communion with Him ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3). But after his sin, he could no longer find joy in holiness, and he sought to hide from the presence of God. Such is still the condition of the unrenewed heart. It is not in harmony with God, and finds no joy in communion with Him.”¹

Since that tragic day, human beings are constantly hiding from God. In Eden, they hid among the trees of the garden. Today they hide under different “trees” that they invent: the lack of time, many responsibilities, and even good things like the church or doctrine can become “trees” among which Christians prefer to hide in order to avoid the presence of the Creator. However, the Lord does not stop calling out to them. The first call was, “Adam, where are you?” Centuries later, Jesus came and made the invitation “Come to Me.”

The reason why Adam and Eve chose to abandon God and go along their own path to death is inexcusable. The Creator had placed them in the Garden of Eden so that they could live the most beautiful experience of love and companionship with Him, but they unfortunately decided to choose their own path. They forgot that “people’s lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps” (Jeremiah 10:23).

As a result of that sad decision, they would painfully learn that “those who trust in themselves are fools” (Proverbs 28:26). Sin makes us believe that we can trust our own ideas, but time has

ended up showing us that “there is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12).

A BETTER WAY

Man abandons God, but the Father of love never abandons His children. He pursues them, calls them, and invites them to renew the experience of communion with Him. Thus, in Malachi’s time, He warned them: “ ‘Return to me, and I will return to you,’ says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ ” (Malachi 3:7).

What a shame! God called them and they wondered why. Of course, they were at church every Sabbath; they fulfilled the rituals and the liturgy. Everything was apparently going well, but they were far from God. They were in the church, but far from their Creator! It wasn’t just once that the Lord called them. On another occasion, He said to them, “ ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it’ ” (Jeremiah 6:16).

Notice the promise: “You will find rest for your souls.” Compare this statement of Jeremiah with that of Christ: “Learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls.” It is the same call as always. God desires to live with human beings; to walk with them; to participate in their decisions, joys, and sorrows—but the creatures don’t seem to understand. That’s why the Lord describes the attitude of the rebellious children in the following way: “Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: ‘I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’ Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him” (Isaiah 1:2–4).

They have “rebelled against me,” says the Lord. They have estranged themselves from Me. According to these words, His people

are “children given to corruption; they have forsaken the Lord” and “have turned their backs on him.” God compares them to oxen and donkeys. He says His children are worse than beasts because even animals know their owner, but they do not.

THIS ISN'T THE ONLY TIME

The passage in Isaiah is not the first or the only time God compares His rebellious children to beasts. In the book of Psalms, God says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you” (Psalm 32:8, 9).

The Lord directed harsh words to His people in order to awaken them. On another occasion, He addressed Israel and lamented, “Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; filled with food, they became heavy and sleek. They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Savior” (Deuteronomy 32:15).

Israel was at that time the people God had chosen. Today, that title belongs to the church. Israel was a rebellious nation that, despite its rebellion, thought it served the Creator simply because it observed certain liturgies and ceremonies, but the people’s hearts were far from the Lord. Could we be living in the same situation today?

THE CONTEXT OF CHRIST’S INVITATION

Jesus’s invitation, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,” was addressed to God’s people of those days, but in order to understand it correctly, it’s necessary to know the context in which Jesus presented it. In the verses preceding the invitation, Jesus expressed His disappointment with three cities in which He had preached and performed many miracles. The Master referred especially to the inhabitants of Chorazin and Bethsaida. “Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed

in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes' ” (Matthew 11:20, 21).

These cities were inhabited mainly by people who tried to fulfill the religious rituals. Why, then, did Jesus reprimand them? Because they had not repented despite the miracles that had been performed there. He also added that if those same miracles had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, those pagan people might have repented, as happened with Nineveh after Jonah's preaching.

What is it about human beings? Why does it seem that “pagans” are more willing to repent than those who consider themselves to be “God's people”? Is it because those who are apparently religious are proud of their religiosity, or the fact that “their church is the true one”? Is it possible for religious people to become numb in the routine of a formal piety, devoid of deep roots? That kind of Christianity does not satisfy the shortcomings of the heart for the simple reason that men or women are not objects, but individuals with emotions and feelings. They need an experience of fellowship with Someone who truly knows them and is able to fill the emptiness of their souls.

Though we may deny it, despite the fact that we don't want to acknowledge it, even though we say that everything is fine with us, when we are far from Jesus, our hearts are like hollow drums: they make noise, but inside they are empty. That is why David said, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?” (Psalm 42:1, 2). David faithfully observed the ceremonial rites, but his religiosity did not fill the emptiness of his heart. He needed a “living God.” That was also the situation in Christ's time, and the reason why Jesus said to them, “Come unto Me.”

THE DANGER OF RELIGIOUS FORMALISM

Those who are concerned only with religious formalism miss out on a lot. Anxious about the outward form of religion, they forget the meaning of what Christ wants to do in them. Jesus performed



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miracles so that people would repent, but they didn't repent. They thought that the goal of those marvelous acts was the healing of the body and all they sought was healing. They didn't give up their evil ways. They didn't realize that Jesus performed wonders among them so that they would set their lives in order and enter His kingdom. They didn't understand that the gospel is not a set of theories, but a practical experience of daily communion with the Lord.

Capernaum was one such case. Jesus had initiated and developed part of His ministry in that city; however, its inhabitants rejected the gospel. They were faithful members of the church, but they did not follow the Master. Although they participated in the sacrifices prescribed in the Old Testament, they did not manage to understand that the little lamb they sacrificed for their sins was merely a symbol of the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and who was among them.

"He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). Jesus was forceful with them when He told them, "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed Sodom, it would have remained until this day" (Matthew 11:23). True, Capernaum was a city with a mixed population. There were a lot of Gentiles, but there were also Jews—many more than the ten people for whom God would have forgiven the

cities of Sodom and Gomorrah—but those members of the “people of God” were not contemplating Jesus. Their attention was focused only on fulfilling the ceremonies. They forgot that the ceremonies pointed to Christ and they had been left with only the empty forms, devoid of grace and life.

THE INVITATION

Matthew’s account, as a preamble to the Master’s great invitation, goes on to say, “At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do’ ” (Matthew 11:25, 26).

Jesus said this prayer among the lamentations He uttered for people concerned only with the externals of religion. The Master lifted His eyes to heaven and said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven.” This way of addressing God reminds us of the time when Melchizedek, after receiving Abraham’s tithes and before blessing him, referred to the Creator by this very name (see Genesis 14:19).

God is Lord of heaven and earth. What a shame that many fail to understand this simple truth! However, Jesus said that children can and do understand it. Sometimes children understand while adults don’t grasp the spiritual meaning of the message. It is even possible for a Christian to spend years and years in the church without realizing that the Lord of heaven manifested Himself to human beings in the simple person of Jesus, and that returning to Him and recognizing Him as the sovereign Being of our existence is both necessary and urgent.

IT TOOK HIM YEARS TO UNDERSTAND

Julian had extensive tattoos on his body. His back, chest, and arms exhibited strange drawings. His story was connected to the world of rock and drugs. One day, he became acquainted with the church. He accepted Jesus, and his life changed. At the beginning of his religious experience, everyone treated him well and received him with joy and affection, but then, because of his work, he had to move to another city and that’s when his pilgrimage of hurt and

lack of understanding began. From day one, the members of the new church looked at him with suspicion and indifference. One Sabbath morning, one of the leaders approached him and asked, “How come you are a Christian and have so many tattoos on your body?”

Those “sincere words” of that “good brother” hurt him deeply, but he continued to attend church faithfully. The years passed by and as hard as he tried to fulfill what everyone expected of him, it seemed he could not satisfy people. He sat on the last bench during the church services and at the end, he left, empty and sad.

In spite of everything, he stayed in the church. He considered that a commitment made to God through baptism should be respected to the end, but he wasn't happy. At night, lying on his bed, he felt big tears rolling down his cheeks. He remembered that years before, when he had almost died of a drug overdose, a friend led him to a group meeting in a house. That night, the church members formed a prayer circle around him, and the miracle took place. God answered the sincere prayer of those people and healed him for good. A few months later, he was baptized, and then suffered the hardest blow of his life. His spiritual mentor died in a traffic accident, but before he passed away, he said to him, “Lose everything in life, but never allow the flame of hope to go out in your heart.”

That is why he remained faithful to the church, in spite of everything and everyone. His greatest desire was to meet his friend again at Christ's second coming. One day, during a camp meeting, he approached me, embarrassed. His eyes were shining brightly. He wanted to say something, but didn't know how to begin. Within a few minutes, I realized that the cause of his distress was the tattoos. “Every time I see these horrible drawings, I remember my past. How I wish God would give me a new skin,” he lamented.

“Forget your skin,” I replied, “God has already given you a new heart. That's what matters.”

I often encounter people like Julian, who are tormented by the past. There was a time when they camped in enemy territory and carried the flag of destruction. They can do nothing today to erase the memories of that sad time. Those are part of their history. To live

in the present is to learn to live with the past. Conversion does not bring about amnesia. Memories are the roots of every human being.

That day, I sensed that Julian still did not know Jesus. He had known the church and doctrine, but the Savior was not the center of his experience. “Don’t look back,” I said. “Don’t torment yourself over what happened when you didn’t know Jesus. What is really worthwhile is your present and the wonderful future God has for you. You are born again. You have new values, principles, and a new philosophy of life. You belong to God, so look for Him every day; make Him your great Friend and Savior.”

I say the same to you. Every day is a dawning of new opportunities. Yesterday’s mistakes are gone. If you have accepted your Savior and confessed your mistakes to Him, then you have already been forgiven. Now, live for Jesus! There are many people who died for Christ. They are the martyrs of Christian history. Today, He doesn’t expect you to be torn to pieces by the lions in defense of your faith. He doesn’t ask you to be burned alive for your principles. The only thing He longs for is for you to live each day with your Lord and Redeemer and be renewed.

A TIRED PEOPLE

The liturgy and ritual of the church are part of the Christian’s worship. There is nothing wrong with them, but when these outward details begin to become the center of your spiritual experience, you fall into a thorny abyss whose end is fanaticism. The external formalism can please the eyes; formalists feel satisfied in fulfilling a series of requirements that they consider important, but deep down, they are not happy.

Jesus is not only concerned with the things that are seen. He longs to see a happy and obedient people. That is why He suffered while developing His ministry on earth. He saw people too preoccupied with fulfilling the external requirements but forgetting about the inner life. Such a situation made Him uncomfortable, to the point that He told them one day, “You are like whitewashed tombs,

which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27).

These words may seem exaggerated. As we read them, our mind immediately turns to the Pharisees, but remember that they tithed even mint and rue, observed the Sabbath to the extreme, and had countless rules and guidelines of procedure that sought to please God and obtain His grace. I would say they were sincere people; it’s just that “sincerity” was not synonymous with being right. Despite all the sincere concern for the external part of religious life, their hearts were far from the Creator. The incarnate Son dwelt among them, and they were not able to see it.

He preached to them for three years. He repeated to them in many ways the invitation to go to Him. Sometimes He did so sweetly, with love and tender compassion; other times, firmly and forcefully, but they didn’t understand. Or they didn’t want to understand. Then, one afternoon, from the heights of the city, He mourned, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Luke 13:34, 35).

How often! It wasn’t once or twice—it was countless times. Jesus knows that without Him, the whole theory of the gospel you claim to know lacks meaning. That is why He calls you; He doesn’t get tired of calling you. The people of Israel, God’s church in those days, did not accept the invitation. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. What will you do? He is at the door of your heart, waiting for you to open it for Him. Will you do it or will you let Him leave?

1. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1892), ch. 2, p. 17.

2

“Weary and Burdened”





"I will put my dwelling place among you . . . I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" (Leviticus 26: 11, 12).



MARINA IS THE TYPICAL WOMAN who is unable to control her temperament. She has just reached the end of her third marriage and has two children from different fathers. She is a pretty lady, but . . . she is difficult. She explodes easily and, in the heat of the moment, says things that she later regrets. People who know her say she has all the qualities to be happy, but she considers herself the most unfortunate of all women.

Mario is a mechanical engineer who just lost his second job within the past year. He is an intelligent, capable, and efficient man, but he loses his patience easily. He is honest and becomes incensed by injustice. Things go well with him as long as people conduct themselves as he believes they should; however, when someone acts differently than he considers is the right way to act, failing to fit into his view of life, he raises his voice, challenges authority, yells, and offends. Then, when he calms down, he reflects and comes to the conclusion that there is an unknown character, a stranger inside of him, who reveals himself in those

moments of anger. Mario has visited therapists and counselors, but no one has been able to give him the appropriate help.

The world is full of distraught and burdened people. Marina and Mario are just two examples I know. Their fatigue and distress are not the result of physical labor, nor are they the result of a lack of money. They may not be able to identify the root of their problem, but Jesus did so twenty-one centuries ago by saying, “Come to me, all you who weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The Master’s invitation is for those who feel “weary and burdened,” but we must understand that these words are not limited to physical exhaustion or to anxiety because of problems and difficulties. The underlying reason for human fatigue and brokenness is much deeper.

In order to understand the kind of weariness Jesus was speaking about, we need to analyze thoroughly the invitation of the Master. He said: “Come to Me . . . and I will give you rest.” How will He do it? The answer is this: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). Those who accept the call to go to Christ, take up His yoke, and learn to be gentle and humble like Him are the ones who will find the desired rest.

GENTLENESS AND HUMILITY

Gentleness and humility are aspects of one’s character. If the weary and burdened people the Master is inviting need to learn to be gentle and humble, it is because they are not. Consequently, we can assume that they are fierce, explosive, furious, proud, arrogant, and overbearing. That is the cause of their weariness and affliction.

What Jesus said centuries ago is the same thing that the science that studies human behavior confirms for us today: it affirms that most of the problems that afflict people today are related to their character. For many years, companies attached great importance to intellectual capacity before hiring a new employee. Today, what is taken much more into consideration is “emotional intelligence,” which is nothing more than the nature, the character, of the applicant for employment.

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THE ROOT OF MANY PROBLEMS

Many of us don't accept the fact that the source of our problems is our character. The other day, a lady claimed that the root of her difficulties was the lack of money and not the way she conducted herself. She had had three credit cards canceled for non-payment. To try to pay off one of the cards, she had borrowed money from three church members, whom she also could not repay. She was almost never faithful to God in returning to Him what belonged to Him and believed that the Lord would be able to "understand" her problem because after all, she was in no position to be faithful to Him in stewardship.

"I'm a good person," she said to herself. "My character is so sweet that people lend me money. If I were a horrible person, no one would sympathize with me or give me loans."

That noble lady is the typical woman who doesn't perceive the true root of her problems. She owns many pairs of shoes, some never worn. Her wardrobe is crammed with dresses, many of which she has only worn once. She is embarrassed to wear the same clothes several times and tells her friends jokingly, "I may be poor, but I have my pride." At the same time, she asserts with great conviction that her problem has nothing to do with her character.

HOMES DESTROYED

If we could conduct a survey in the church, we would be surprised at the number of households that are unhappy because of the character of one or both spouses. I met a lady whose husband claimed to be a Christian, yet she didn't know what to do about the constant physical attacks inflicted on her by her spouse. With the marks of a painful life reflected on her face, she stammered, "My husband is a man of God; he just loses his temper easily."

It is unacceptable for a man to assault his wife, but it is unimaginable that an attacker could be called a "Christian," and even worse for a violent individual to be considered a "man of God" just because he knows the doctrine and gives the impression of being a strict and efficient leader in the church.

The gentleman of the story resembles James and John, two apostles whom Jesus nicknamed "sons of thunder." He was a sincere man, but he was dominated by a character that ruined his best intentions. When confronted by his reality, all he did was lower his head and weep in recognition of his sad condition. His temperament was horrible. He had had a father who also attacked his wife and children. At first, that attitude seemed normal to him because he was in a country and a culture where men consider themselves to be outright owners and lords of their wives. However, one day he learned about the Word of God. He studied the Bible with a neighbor and discovered the spiritual truths that illuminated his life and gave him a new perspective. Soon after that, he was baptized and became an extremist in religious matters, strictly abiding by the rules. He bought several Christian books and boasted about living and teaching according "to the law and to the testimony." There was just one problem: he was never able to overcome the awful character that dominated him. At times he looked like a fierce bull. At church board meetings, he would get up, frown, and shout. Everyone was afraid of him and followed his recommendations, and poor, unfortunate pastor who did not submit to his will!

Why was this good brother not able to master his violent way of being? Coming out of the Creator's hands, Adam's and Eve's charac-

ters were perfect. They had been created in the image and likeness of their Maker (see Genesis 1:26). They formed a happy couple. There were no arguments or aggressions between them. There was no selfishness or the desire for supremacy. Both were gentle and humble of heart, just like Jesus was. That was the divine ideal for the human being and for families, and it remains the same today.

Referring to the first man, Ellen G. White stated that “face-to-face, heart-to-heart communion with his Maker was his high privilege. Had he remained loyal to God, all this would have been his forever. Throughout eternal ages he would have continued to gain new treasures of knowledge, to discover fresh springs of happiness, and to obtain clearer and yet clearer conceptions of the wisdom, the power, and the love of God. More and more fully would he have fulfilled the object of his creation, more and more fully have reflected the Creator’s glory.”¹

The secret to preserving that gentle and humble character was communion with the Creator. The character of the first couple would always be similar to that of their Maker as long as they maintained a life of constant companionship with Him. It was a dependent perfection. God had created them for the purpose of living an experience of daily relationship with Him. The Lord wanted to “be” with His children and “walk” with them. This idea is clear in the Old Testament: “I will put my dwelling place among you . . . I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people” (Leviticus 26:11, 12).

Isn’t this a wonderful message? What happened, then, that people could not maintain that gentle character with which God created them? “In his sinless state, man held joyful communion with Him ‘in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’ (Colossians 2:3). But after his sin, he could no longer find joy in holiness, and he sought to hide from the presence of God. Such is still the condition of the unrenewed heart. It is not in harmony with God, and finds no joy in communion with Him” (*Steps to Christ*, p. 17).

According to this inspired quotation, the tragedy began when our first parents turned away from the Creator and ceased to be gentle

and humble. They became selfish. Today we are a caricature of the divine character, a grotesque imitation of the God of love who created us, and no matter how hard we try to be unselfish, self-sacrificing, and generous, we do not succeed. “The human character is depraved, deformed by sin, and terribly unlike that of the first man as he came from the hands of the Creator.”²

How else could you understand that after the tsunami that hit Indonesia in 2004, there were insensitive people picking up abandoned children to sell their organs? How do you understand that a couple kills a young pregnant woman to keep the child she was going to deliver? Human beings, far from God, are capable of committing the worst atrocities, because their character is “depraved, deformed by sin, and terribly unlike that of the first man as he came from the hands of the Creator.”

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Worst of all is that human beings don't have even the slightest chance to change this situation. “It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above” (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 2, p. 18).

No one can change his or her own heart! It is an impossible task. Perhaps that's why our grandparents used to say, “A fox may turn gray, but never good.” History is carpeted with men and women who tried to reverse the pathetic plight of the human being and failed. One of those stories is that of Raul.

At just twenty years of age, this young man had come to the conclusion that his life was a failure. Why continue living? he wondered as he recalled his past of defeats and unfulfilled promises.

He had used drugs from the age of sixteen. At first, it was just to “try,” or perhaps so he wouldn't feel isolated from his group. Boys will

be boys! “I can give this up whenever I want to,” he said to those who advised him to get off that path.

That day came. He wanted to stop. He almost lost his life in a car accident. Then he tried to give up drugs, but found that he was no longer able to. He was a miserable slave to vice. From there, his path consisted of one failure after another. He abandoned his studies, left his parents’ home, began to commit petty thefts, and ended up spending time in prison. There, he took the life of another criminal. Then he remembered that the violence with which he tried to resolve his arguments was not just a consequence of the use of narcotics. He had always been like that. Having been born into the home of Christian parents had not done him much good. Neither did attending church as a child. When he reached adolescence, he noticed that he was selfish and cruel. He commanded a group of teenagers who looked for rats and stoned them to death. On one occasion, after the accident caused by drugs, he tried to change, but was unsuccessful. He then gave himself over permanently to a life of ruin and vice.

That was how one night, half drugged, he turned on the television in the hovel he shared with other drug addicts and saw me talking about the love of God and the countless opportunities the Lord gives to people. He also heard about the transforming power of Jesus, and the message touched his heart; he began to search again, not only for the church, but for God. He fell to his knees and said to the Lord, “I can’t do it. If it depends on me, I’m finished. There is no strength in me. I’m bad; I can’t do it. But You are my God, Lord; You can do it, so please work a miracle in me.”

And the miracle happened! The prayer had not finished coming out of his mouth and the divine answer had come. The Spirit of God touched him, and he felt like those dry bones that came alive in the vision in Ezekiel 36. However, Raul’s story does not end there. No story ends just with the moment of conversion. There is a long journey with Christ that all Christians need to walk to the day of final victory.

In his prayer, Raul declared the purest reality of the human being: “I can’t do it, but You can.” In this regard, Ellen G. White pointed out

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that "there may be marked defects in the character of an individual, yet when he becomes a true disciple of Christ, the power of divine grace transforms and sanctifies him."³

I want to invite you to read the preceding quotation again. Try to perceive the essence of this inspired statement. There may be "marked defects in the character of an individual." It doesn't matter which ones. Selfishness, pride, arrogance, violence, envy, greed . . . However, when the Christian "becomes a true disciple of Christ, the power of divine grace transforms and sanctifies him." What is the "power of divine grace"? How does someone become "a true disciple of Christ"? If we are able to answer these two questions, we will have found the secret to the transformation of character, no matter how deformed it may be.

Christ's first disciples were human beings like us. They bore the same flaws as you and I do, but notice what happened to them: "It was thus that the early disciples gained their likeness to the dear Saviour. . . . They were with Him in the house, at the table, in the closet, in the field. They were with Him as pupils with a teacher, daily receiving from His lips lessons of holy truth. They looked to Him, as servants to their master, to learn their duty" (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 8, p. 72).

Found within this quotation you just read is the reason why Jesus makes the invitation “Come to Me”: because only He is able to transform our hopeless reality into the crystal-clear dream we long for. No one needs to live weary and burdened, overwhelmed or distraught, trying to change the defects of character by their own strength. “God gives men opportunities to become one with Christ and one with Him. Those who walk in the fear of God, meditating upon His character, will daily become more and more like Christ.”⁴

THE CHARACTER OF THE REDEEMED

We read in Revelation 14 that John saw the redeemed under the figure of the 144 thousand: “Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads” (v. 1). In the Bible, a person’s name describes the character of that person. It means that the redeemed will one day be in heaven because they will have reached the point of reflecting, once again, the character of Jesus. How will they have achieved that wonder? Revelation 14:4 answers that “these are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes.” In order to follow Him in heaven, it is necessary to learn first to follow Him here on earth. That is why the Master invites us to go to Him. In the words of Ellen G. White, “Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.”⁵

Jesus loves you and doesn’t want you to be lost. He patiently waits for you to give Him the opportunity to act in your life and transform your character. The disciples became like Jesus in character because they walked with Him in constant companionship. The same can happen to you if you decide to go to the Lord and not separate yourself from the beloved Master of Galilee.

STRUGGLES AND CONFLICTS

The bus stop was packed with people that cold winter morning in the streets of the Chacarita neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires, but Max didn’t see the people. His body was there, but his mind

wandered aimlessly through the rugged minefields of family conflicts. He felt he couldn't take it anymore. He thought separation was perhaps the only way out. What made him uncomfortable and confused was the fact that he loved his wife and didn't understand why two beings who loved each other could not live in harmony. The quarrel that morning had begun because there was no milk for breakfast.

"I told you to buy it last night!" she shouted in anger.

"And why didn't you buy it yourself instead of asking me to do it?" he replied in the same tone.

From there, terrible things were said, past mistakes were dug up and thrown in the other's face, and he finally left the house slamming the door.

Many centuries ago, the apostle Peter wrote the following: "Finally, all of you, be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous" (1 Peter 3:8, NKJV). Peter said that spouses must be "of one mind" and be "compassionate and tenderhearted" with each other. It seems like a distant goal, impossible to achieve—at least for Max and his young wife.

What they were not aware of is that marriage is the only school in which you enroll and never graduate. Life as a couple is one of constant learning and can become very complicated if we have a character crippled by sin. Many people despair because they don't know how to distinguish problems from conflicts. Our daily lives consist of constant problem-solving. From the time you get up until you go to bed at night, you are solving problems. A life without difficulties simply does not exist. However, setbacks or differences are not ruinous disasters, but merely challenges that can help us grow—that is, unless they are poorly resolved, in which case they can grow into a conflict and become disastrous.

What about you? Do you feel tired and overwhelmed by difficulties and conflicts, like Max and his wife? Only Jesus can transform your character. Only in Him will you find the solution to the anxieties of your soul. Throughout history, God has constantly and frequently invited human beings: "Come to Me." However, our answer always

seems to be the same: “Yes, Lord, I will go, but wait a bit; first I have to get rid of what is bad in my life. I need to put everything in order. I must give up everything that binds me to the life of sin before I come to You.”

But Jesus continues to call, “Child, come to Me just as you are, half-naked like the adulterous woman, wearing fig leaves like Adam and Eve, smelling of pigs like the prodigal son, with your body destroyed like a leper, or dragging yourself along like the paralytic. Come to Me with your character deformed by sin, with your unclean thoughts or feelings, but please, come to Me.”

Going to Jesus means saying, “Lord, I don’t understand, but I’m going. I don’t feel anything, but I’m going. To be honest, Lord, I like the sinful life, but I am still going to You. I’m not repentant, and despite that, I’m going.” When you go to the Master just as you are, you discover something wonderful: He will give you the repentance that you did not feel. In His presence, you will feel sorrow for all the mistakes you have made and that hurt His heart. In the purity of the Savior, you will feel unworthy and fall to your knees at His feet, saying, “Lord, have mercy on me.” Then Jesus will lift you up in His arms, call the angels, and say, “These are My children who were far away. They have returned. Now dress them for the celebration party.”

This is the miracle of transformation. Jesus places in you a new nature, new motivations, a new direction for your life. New horizons! Endless horizons!

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1. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1903), ch. 1, p. 15.
 2. Ellen G. White, *Ye Shall Receive Power* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1995), p. 57.
 3. Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1911), ch. 55, p. 559.
 4. Ellen G. White, *This Day with God* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1979), p. 40.
 5. Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1900), ch. 3, p. 69.

3 "I Will Give You Rest"





"I have fought
the good fight,
I have finished the race,
I have kept the faith"
(2 Timothy 4:7).



THE HANDS OF THE CLOCK indicated five in the morning. Rosario opened the window and took a deep breath. The routine of her life was about to begin. She had long since lost the joy of living, and her existence had become monotonous, sad, and meaningless. "I'm tired of living," she bemoaned. "How long will I have to go on with the same routine?"

We have all felt that way at some point. Things seem to be upside down. You try, you strive, you take risks, but it seems like you're swimming against the current. You look up in the sky, you see a plane flying through the air, and you think that the people who are traveling inside that aircraft must be happy. After all, they are there, traveling, taking a ride, and enjoying great emotions. So what's the problem with you? Why does everything go wrong for you? Why does it seem that God gives a lot to some and nothing to others?

The human being is a weary being; that is why Jesus's invitation is this: "Come to me, all you who are weary

and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). And we really need rest in the midst of the daily hustle and bustle! The defining malaise of the twenty-first century is stress. If not properly managed, it can lead to depression. There is no time for anything; we rush around from dawn until dusk. The world we live in is competitive, and if you snooze, you run the risk of being left behind in any area of life.

In the midst of all the turmoil that characterizes our world, Jesus appears, offering you rest. And it is not just physical rest that Jesus offers, but calm for the whole human being: body, mind, and heart. There is no restfulness while we remain alienated from God. He is the source of peace; in Him, you find tranquility, your restlessness ends, your stress comes to an end, your mad chase ends, and you begin to find meaning in what you do.

REST FROM WHAT?

A quick reading of Jesus’s invitation could lead us to a mistaken conclusion of the nature of the weariness mentioned by the Master. In order to understand the kind of restlessness to which the divine invitation refers, we need to review the text correctly and understand it within its context.

In the previous chapter of this book, we saw that most human problems have their origin in their character. The moment sin entered the world, Adam and Eve’s likeness to God was distorted. As a result, our first parents hid from the Creator. Fear took hold of their hearts, and when the Lord confronted them with their reality, they accused each other, and the love that had united them until then vanished.

From that moment on, the gentle and humble beings who were similar to the Creator disappeared, and a sort of “fierce bull” emerged in their heart. Today, all human beings have within us that untamed animal. While things go as we wish, the beast sleeps calmly; however, when circumstances are unfavorable to us, or others don’t do what we want, the beast begins to awaken and is capable of causing the worst atrocities. That’s why two people who love each

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esus's invitation is that we go to Him so that He may be the One to change us.

other are at the same time capable of attacking each other as if they were bitter enemies. That's why, at a moment of emotional imbalance, we can utter words that we come to bitterly regret . . . too late. This world is full of people wounded by the words and attitudes of a neighbor who professes to love them.

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY CHARACTER?

There is not a single person in this world who is not a victim of lack of control. We all have something we regret. Remember that "the human character is depraved, deformed by sin, and terribly unlike that of the first man as he came from the hands of the Creator" (*Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 57). The word "depraved" can seem very harsh. It means "corrupt," which in turn, equates to "damaged," "perverse," and "crooked." In other words, as we were separated from the Creator, we slowly deteriorated and ended up being corrupt and depraved.

We are all aware of that sad situation. Sometimes we deny it, but in the silence of the night, we have to acknowledge that although the disguise we wear may allow us to portray a good external image, our inner reality is much more grotesque—even more than we imagine. However, one day, we come in contact with the gospel and biblical doctrines, and by studying the Word, we begin to understand that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control. Nevertheless,

no matter how hard we try to achieve that ideal of life, we discover that our inner beast is still alive and makes us do things that embarrass us. For example, have you seen two “men of God” at a church board meeting arguing so heatedly that they even come to blows? Don’t they preach wonderful sermons when they are in the pulpit? Aren’t they supposed to go to heaven with Christ at the time of His Second Coming? Of course! But . . . with that character? This inconsistency is only a small demonstration that the effort we can make, the theoretical knowledge we can acquire, and the good intentions we may have are not enough to change our character and make us like Jesus.

TIRED OF WANTING TO CHANGE

Jesus’s invitation is that we go to Him so that He may be the One to change us. Trying to bring about such a change on our own can lead us to spiritual impudence: pretending that we are wonderful children of God when in fact we are leading a double life—the one we live when we’re by ourselves and the one we show to society and the church. That was the tragedy of a certain gentleman. He planned everything, and was already clear about even the smallest details in his mind. He wanted to be alone. That’s why he asked his wife to go and visit her parents. He had made a radical decision and was determined to carry it out. In the gloom of his thoughts, death was the only solution to the turmoil in his life, and he did not want anything, or anyone, to prevent him from achieving the tragic goal he had set for himself.

Five days after his wife had left on her trip, neighbors called the authorities. A foul smell emanated from that lonely house with brown windows, from which no one had gone into or out of for several days. The police broke down the door and when they entered, they found the grotesque scene: a corpse already in a state of decomposition, hanging from a rafter.

What led that gentleman to make such a decision? What could his motives have been? I heard the news when I was about to board a plane and I was stunned. I trembled from head to toe. I knew the

possible reasons. I had spoken with him a week before his tragic death. His last words had been the cry of a wounded heart begging for help, and as much as I had tried to help him, I achieved nothing. On the plane, while I was traveling, I couldn't help but be disturbed by the memories. My gaze was lost in the infinite blue of space. I tried to look at the landscape from the window, but I could only see the anguished face of that gentleman, crying in his despair.

"Pastor," he had said to me the day we talked, "since I met Jesus, I have tried to be faithful to Him. I have made every effort; I have struggled. You can't even imagine the efforts I make to live up to the principles I preach, but the more I struggle, the more tempted I feel. My heart and head are a nest of impurities. There is so much garbage in my life that I don't know how to get rid of it. I don't know the taste of victory. I am a failure. I think the only solution for me is death."

I tried to encourage him that day. I explained to him that as long as he lived in this world, the sinful nature would always be present, making him uncomfortable, and that the inner beast that he felt dominated him was present in me, too—in everyone—and would remain present until the coming of the Lord. But it seems that I did not manage to get him to understand me because, a short time later, he committed suicide. When we talked, I had before me a dying being reaching out for help and I wasn't able to explain the reason for the apparent inconsistencies of the Christian life.

I was distressed for several days by the weight of guilt. I constantly asked myself, "What do I do so that the Christian life does not become a burden of obligations that suffocates?" I remembered the years of my youth. Despite being in the church, I did not know Jesus personally. I re-lived my sufferings and struggles, the nights of torment I had experienced when I felt lost, striving to be faithful.

ABUNDANT LIFE

What you are going to read next is what the Bible teaches about the abundant life. It is my answer to the question that man asked me, which at the time I didn't know how to answer in such a way

that it would provide a viable solution to his situation. As you read and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you individually, perhaps your inner conflicts will disappear and you will discover that being a Christian is the most extraordinary experience that human beings can live.

That gentleman said to me, “I think the only solution for me is death,” and he took his own life. Is death the solution to the problem of constant spiritual failure? At some point in his experience, the apostle Paul also thought of ceasing to exist as a possible solution to the problem of sin. He wanted to be good, but wasn’t able to. He wanted to walk in God’s paths and fulfill His will, and yet, he discovered that within him dwelt a monster that dragged him toward evil. “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me” (Romans 7:15, 17).

The struggle the apostle faced was so great that it ended with a cry of anguish: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject of death?” (verse 24). On another occasion, writing to the Corinthians about their inclinations, struggles, and difficulties, he said, “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8). In this last passage, Paul did not refer to external pressures or dangers from outside, but to an internal struggle that often led him to think that the only way out could be death: “Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death” (verse 9). The apostle had a “thorn” in his flesh (see 2 Corinthians 12:7–9), and it is quite possible that instead of a physical problem tormenting him, as many scholars believe, that “thorn in the flesh” was an allusion to the sinful nature that constantly tried to lead him to places he did not want to go.

Therefore, the gentleman who spoke to me was not the only one who, at some point, thought of death as the only way out of his spiritual defeats. However, Paul discovered the secret to victory and

can teach us to overcome the battle we face with the enemy every day. When all is said and done, he said that Jesus “loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, . . . to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:25–27). A radiant church is one that reflects the character of Jesus.

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS DEATH

Let’s look at Paul’s experience. He described his terrible struggle with the untamed bull, the beast he carried inside him. Theologians call it the sinful nature. The apostle was clear in saying, “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Romans 7:20). Who is that “sin living in me”? Who is the apostle talking about? Wasn’t he already converted? Of course! His conversion had occurred in the desert, on the way to Damascus. Why, then, does Paul say, the “sin living in me”? What was he referring to? Let him explain it himself: “For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (verses 22, 23, NKJV).

Paul was speaking here of two struggling natures within Christians. He calls one “the inward man,” and the other “the law in my members.” Each one wants to take control of our lives. The spiritual affliction he felt was a result of that struggle. There is within you a new nature that was born at the moment of your conversion. It wants to serve God; it weeps when you fail; it repents, suffers, and promises that it will never fall again. However, at the same time, there is in you a raging bull that constantly explodes, delights in practicing sin, is hypocritical, is a liar, likes to pretend, and loves to show its “holy” side to people.

Your heart is the arena where the conflict is taking place. There you are, not knowing where to go. You want to serve God and, at the same time, you want to please the desires of the flesh. What will you do? Is there hope? Can you be saved living like this? At the end



t is true: the only way out of the believer's problem is death, but not yours—that of Jesus, who two thousand years ago, hung on the cross to save you.

of his days, Paul said, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

What the apostle means is that, as hard as the battle was, he was able to achieve victory. If Paul achieved it, even though at one point in life he thought death might be the only way out, you can achieve it, too, if you discover the apostle's secret. And what was his key? He shared it: “Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and . . . put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22–24).

Do you realize how clear is in Paul's mind the existence of two persons within the Christian? He spoke of the “old self” and the “the new self.” It is true: the only way out of the believer's problem is death, but not yours—that of Jesus, who two thousand years ago, hung on the cross to save you. The one who needs to die today is the sinful nature, “the old self,” the “fierce bull.”

WHY SHOULD THE “FIERCE BULL” DIE?

The sinful nature has to die because it is the root of sinful thoughts, feelings, and actions. If a contaminated water source did not exist, there would also be no unclean water. If there was no orange tree in the orchard, no oranges would appear.

The worst thing that you can think of doing as a Christian is attempting to live an upright life while keeping the sinful nature alive within you. As much as you want to be good, you won't be able to. You can try hard, struggle, make promises, get up at five in the morning and punish your body, stop eating, and even lacerate your back until you bleed. Everything will be useless because the bad tree is still in you and will continue to bear its fruit; the fierce bull is alive, and at the slightest mistake, it will lead you to commit the worst acts. But . . . weren't you converted? Sure you were, just as Paul was.

Ah! How wonderful it would be if, when your conversion takes place, the Lord would tear away the sinful nature from you and remove it forever! If this were the case, from the moment of your surrender to Jesus you would no longer feel like sinning, because the source of sinful desires would have disappeared. However, the reality is different. At the time of your conversion, the sinful nature dies, and yet, it remains in you. It will be with you until the day Jesus returns. So, yes, "in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet . . . we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:52, 53). But until that day comes, the wretched, sinful nature will be there, troubling you, bringing conflict into your life, and generating the desires of the flesh. Only Jesus can defeat it. Therefore, you need to go to Him, remain in Him, and walk with your beloved Savior every day.

Jesus's promise extends to all those who are tired of struggling to overcome the tendencies of their sin-deformed character. The Savior promises spiritual rest. Does this mean that I go to the Master, abide with Him, and my problems are over? And the fruits? How about control of the temperament? And what of giving up the old way of living? Where is all that? Is the Christian life simply going to the Lord and not worrying about behavior? Wait a minute. Don't get ahead of yourself. Don't draw premature conclusions. Paul presented a crystal-clear and forceful truth when he asked: "For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Do you understand Paul's question? He was speaking about an impossibility. Light and darkness can never walk together. A room may be dominated by the densest darkness but, if the light shines, darkness disappears. If, on the other hand, you want darkness, you have to turn off the light. Brightness and darkness don't go together. There is no place for sin along with righteousness.

It is impossible to walk with Jesus and continue to sin, because He is righteousness. If we understood this, all efforts to overcome sin would be concentrated on going to the Savior and walking with Him in a constant experience of fellowship and communion, and in doing so, we would discover that the power of evil weakens and disappears. Darkness does not dwell beside light.

The drama of life is that one day someone studied the Bible with you, taught you what good Christians need to accomplish and what they should avoid, and since that moment, your experience has been a terrible struggle to do the right things and give up what you consider is sin. It is possible that at the beginning of your experience, you went to Jesus and remained with Him for a few months, but afterwards, the obligation of living an upright life led you to concentrate so much attention and strength to overcome the "fierce bull" that you had neither time nor strength to remain at the side of the only One who can make you righteous. Notice what Ellen G. White affirms: "Many have an idea that they must do some part of the work alone. They have trusted in Christ for the forgiveness of sin, but now they seek by their own efforts to live aright. But every such effort must fail. Jesus says, 'Without Me ye can do nothing.' Our growth in grace, our joy, our usefulness—all depend upon our union with Christ" (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 8, p. 69).

Pay attention to this sentence: "all depend upon our union with Christ." God wants you to live a life of obedience. He wants to reproduce His character in you but expects to do it His way, not yours. The Lord wants to see you achieve victory over sin because evil destroys you and makes you unhappy, but He will do it by using His methods, not yours. The Lord loves you and longs for you to be righteous in Him, rather than trying to live an upright life by yourself, in your own strength.

If you think that going to Jesus and remaining in Him is a “cheap gospel,” perhaps it is because you have never tasted what it means to live a life of permanent communion with Him. Otherwise, you would know that going to the Master and staying by His side is not an easy task; but in doing so, those habits and behaviors that you were trying so hard to forsake and could not will disappear from your life, because there is no room for unrighteousness next to righteousness.

4 "Take My Yoke"





“Come to me, all you
who are weary
and burdened, and I
will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you”
(Matthew 11:28, 29).



THAT YOUNG LADY must have been about twenty years old—too young to have lost her zest for life and destroy herself as she was doing. Within a few months, she had descended into the darkest depths of vice and decadence and was no longer even a shadow of the cheerful and enthusiastic girl I had met while serving as Youth Director in my country. I asked her why she was harming herself by using drugs, what the reason was for hurting herself mercilessly.

“It’s the only way I can forget who I am,” she stuttered. “I’m a bunch of garbage.”

Truth . . . and also a lie. It was true that her biological mother had abandoned her on the street as a newborn, wrapped in newspaper and put into a trash bin. But it was false that, because of the callous attitude of her mother, she was worthless to the point of choosing that sad life.

“I had no other option,” she continued, biting her lips until they almost bled.

Two rebellious tears rolled down her tormented face. I felt like hugging her and saying to her, “My dear, don’t suffer anymore; I’m here, I came to save you.”

But I realized that I was just a human being, unable to soothe the pains of the world. Then I wept. She didn’t even notice it. My tears rolled down within me, burned my insides, and brought on the terrible ache of human helplessness.

GOD HAS A PLAN FOR YOU

At times, battered by life, you come to the conclusion that you are the result of chance, and that your existence is a coincidence, a simple biological accident. However, God says that before you were born, when you were still in your mother’s womb, He already had a plan for you (see Jeremiah 1:5). Nothing in this world happens without divine consent. You are a result of your heavenly Father’s wonderful love. Despite the adverse circumstances around you, no matter what wounds people have opened up in you, the Father’s purpose for you stands firm. All you need is to discover and embrace it.

No one is able to understand what you feel. Your heartaches are your own, and so are your endless nights. You fear the coming of daylight. You prefer to live in the darkness, hiding your reality, but I’m also sure that there is an Almighty God waiting for you to say to Him, “Lord, I’m tired of suffering. That’s why I give You my life. Are you able to do for me what I can’t?”

The story of the young woman I told you about had a happy ending. The Holy Spirit touched her heart, and she went to Jesus, repentant, and recognized that she lacked the strength to get out of the pit into which she had fallen, and that only the Lord could get her out of there. She cried out for divine help, and God performed the miracle. She was baptized at a youth congress, and those who had known her as a child wept with emotion.

After her baptism, the young woman in our story discovered that she had a long way to go. Her Christian life was just beginning. Her sins had been forgiven; her past, erased; but the sinful nature continued within her, and on more than one occasion, she wondered how she could continue being victorious in the face of the enemy’s attacks.

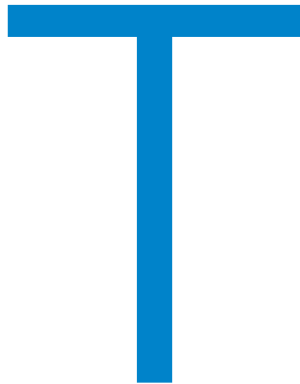
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esus knows the inner battle of each of His children, so the call He extends to you is not only to go to Him, but also to take His yoke.

Jesus knows the inner battle of each of His children, so the call He extends to you is not only to go to Him, but also to take His yoke: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you” (Matthew 11:28, 29). This invitation was easy for the disciples to understand. In those days, walking among fields sown with wheat and vegetables, it was common to see teams of oxen plowing the fields.

Farmers usually teamed up two oxen—one, young and inexperienced, tied to a mature and very experienced ox. At the beginning of the day, the young ox did not accept the yoke and did everything possible to rid itself of the heavy piece of wood. It wasn't used to plowing. It had lived free in the countryside, so it was difficult for it to adapt to the new life. In these circumstances, the yoke was a learning instrument for the ox. As long as it was tied to the adult ox, it would not be able to get away, and would finally learn to work.

Jesus, who was a teacher par excellence, took that figure from nature as an illustration of what He wishes to do in His children. We are fierce and untamed oxen by nature. We are used to running through the open fields of life, destroying ourselves and those around us. That kind of behavior, which at first seems fascinating, eventually becomes tiring and harmful. One day, after so many failures and frustrations, we realize that we are tired, burdened, upset, overwhelmed, and stressed. Then the Master appears, promises us rest for our souls, and invites us to go to Him, but His invitation implies “taking His yoke.”



he humble in heart,
who have daily felt
the importance of riveting
their souls to the eternal Rock,
will stand unmoved amid
the tempests of trial, because
they trusted not to themselves.

The steps of Jesus's invitation are as follows: First, you accept the invitation and the promise: "Come to me and I will give you rest." The invitation is addressed to the "weary and burdened." The promise is rest. Then, the process for finding the rest offered to us is presented: "Take my yoke upon you . . . and you will find rest for your souls."

WHAT IS THE YOKE ABOUT?

There is no rest without a yoke. Why is that? The process the Master presents for finding rest is incomprehensible to us because we assume that the "weary and burdened" can't even walk anymore, and that when they reach Jesus, they receive a heavy yoke. What kind of rest would that be? Instead, the yoke that Christ offers to those who come to Him is actually the instrument that unites us to the Master. In the Bible, we find the invitation to bear the yoke of Christ under different figures. The Lord Jesus Himself once said, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you" (John 15:4). How could anyone remain in Christ if he or she does not bear His yoke? The yoke is the piece of wood that binds the Master and the apprentice.

The yoke of Christ appears in the Bible in many ways. In the parable of the two foundations, Jesus spoke of the wise man who built his house on the rock (see Matthew 6:24–27). Building on the rock means bearing the yoke of Jesus. The Spirit of Prophecy says, "The humble in heart, who *have daily felt the importance of riveting their souls to the eternal Rock*, will stand unmoved amid the tempests of trial, because they trusted not to themselves,"¹ and adds, "Those who

LEARN FROM ME

live nearest to Jesus discern most clearly the frailty and sinfulness of humanity, and their only hope is in the merit of a crucified and risen Saviour.”² Notice that building on the Rock is synonymous with living near the Master, and no one can stay by His side unless bound by the yoke.

CONTEMPLATING JESUS

Another figure of the yoke is “contemplating” Jesus. Paul wrote, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18). To contemplate Jesus, or look at Him “with unveiled faces,” also means to remain united with the Lord. The result is transformation. “The Holy Spirit never leaves unassisted a soul who is looking to Jesus. . . . *And if the eye is kept fixed upon Jesus*, the work of the Spirit ceases not until the soul is conformed to His image. Through the gracious influence of the Spirit the sinner is changed in spirit and purpose, till he becomes one with Christ. His affection for God increases; he hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and by beholding Christ he is changed from glory to glory, from character to character, and becomes more and more like his Master” (*Ye Shall Receive Power*, p. 59; emphasis added).

WALKING WITH GOD

In the Old Testament, we find another expression that serves as a synonym for bearing the yoke of Christ: “Walking with God.” Enoch walked with the Lord and disappeared, “because God took him away” (Genesis 5:24); Noah was considered righteous among his contemporaries because “he walked faithfully with God” (Genesis 6:9). When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Creator appeared to him and asked him to walk in His presence “and be blameless” (Genesis 17:1). God considered David “a man after my own heart” (Acts 13:22) because, after his terrible fall, he asked for forgiveness and begged God not to cast him away from His presence (Psalm 51:11).

Although the biblical writers used many figures to refer to the experience of living in fellowship and communion with God, the truth is that the purpose of that “walking with God” or “bearing the yoke of Christ” is to take the human character, distorted by sin, and model it

in the likeness of the character of Jesus. “Without employing any compulsion, without using any violence, He [Christ] blends the will of the human subject to the will of God. This is the science of all true science, for by it a mighty change is wrought in mind and character.”³ The Master calls; He doesn’t force the will of anyone. Those who accept the invitation will do so only out of love. If someone decides to take the yoke of Christ, he or she will be motivated solely by the longing to be like his Master. This is “the science of all true science.” This is the secret of Christian victory.

CLOTHING OURSELVES WITH CHRIST

Another figure Paul used to explain what it means to “bear the yoke of Christ” is “to clothe ourselves with Christ”: “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh” (Romans 13:12–14).

The verb “to put on,” *ependyma* in Greek, expresses the full identification of believers with their Lord. It may not mean much for our culture, but in some societies, the clothing designates the human group to which someone belongs. The same is true for a football, basketball, or any other sports team: When you wear the jersey with the team colors, it means you belong to that team. “To clothe ourselves with Christ” means to belong to Christ and to bear His yoke.

THE FRAGRANT AROMA OF CHRIST

Paul is the biblical writer who used the most figures to express the idea of bearing the yoke of Jesus. Writing to the Corinthians, he used another figure: “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:14, 15).

Have you ever hugged a person wearing perfume and felt that their fragrance adhered to your clothes? That happens with those

who carry the divine yoke. Their proximity to the Master means that wherever people go, they know that these Christians live with Jesus and smell of their Master. That is the result of walking every day with Him. A person smells of Christ because they are united to Him by the yoke.

Meditate on these words: *“When we are united to Christ, we have the mind of Christ. Purity and love shine forth in the character, meekness and truth control the life. The very expression of the countenance is changed. Christ abiding in the soul exerts a transforming power, and the outward aspect bears witness to the peace and joy that reign within. We drink in the love of Christ, as the branch draws nourishment from the vine. If we are grafted in Christ, if fiber by fiber we have been united with the Living Vine, we shall give evidence of the fact by bearing rich clusters of living fruit. If we are connected with the Light, we shall be channels of light, and in our words and works we shall reflect light to the world. Those who are truly Christians are bound with the chain of love which links earth to heaven, which binds finite man to the infinite God. The light that shines in the face of Jesus Christ shines in the hearts of His followers, to the glory of God”* (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 104, emphasis added).

HIDING IN CHRIST

Speaking of those who accepted Christ’s invitation and also accepted the challenge of bearing his yoke, Paul declared, “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Colossians 3:1–4).

We need a life hidden in Jesus to face the dangers around us with faith, trust, and certainty. To hide in Him and to carry His yoke is to long for the likeness of the Master, to give Him first place; it is to live in contradiction to the things of this world for the sake of His name. It is to say, like Paul, “What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

FINDING THE WAY

Those who accept the invitation to carry the yoke of Christ find the right path (John 14:6). There is no confusion in their lives, nor darkness, nor doubts. Jesus is the Way and, at the same time, the light of men. In the lives of those who are bound to Jesus by the yoke, everything makes sense—even humanly incomprehensible things—because God’s ways are not like our ways.

To carry His yoke is to discover Jesus as the Way; to understand that “we all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6); to understand that human paths lead to death (Proverbs 14:12); to repent; and to follow Jesus. However, for this experience to be real, we must be willing to share the life, destiny, and suffering of the Master: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23).

People who carry the yoke of Christ or take up His cross are those who give up everything to follow their Master. Accepting the yoke implies leaving behind one’s previous situation. Jesus called His disciples, and they left everything: nets, boats, parents—things by which the success of life is measured on this earth. However, the disciples abandoned all that to carry the yoke of Christ and follow Him to the end.

Everyone who follows Christ, bound to His yoke, finally comes to where He is also headed: the throne. Jesus said, “No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NKJV). The followers of Jesus will ultimately come to the Father and live with Him. This was why John saw the redeemed in heaven following the Lamb wherever He went.

WHAT DOES BEARING THE YOKE OF CHRIST CONSIST IN?

The worst thing that could happen to us is to romanticize the Christian experience or limit it to a beautiful theory or a wonderful song. The Christian life is based on theory, but is lived through experience. The same thing is true of “carrying the yoke of Christ.”

The apostle Paul, who best describes the concept of the yoke, mentioned the instruments of communion with Christ as follows: “So

stand with the belt of *truth* around your waist, justice as your breastplate, and put shoes on your feet so that you are ready to *spread the good news of peace*. Above all, carry the shield of *faith* so that you can extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is *God's word*. Offer *prayers* and petitions in the Spirit all the time. Stay alert by hanging in there and praying for all believers" (Ephesians 6:14–18, CEB, emphasis added).

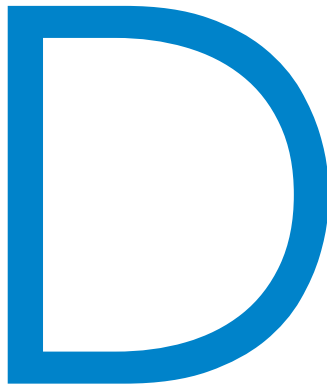
The instruments described here are truth, justice, faith, proclamation of the gospel, salvation, daily Bible study, and constant prayer. However, in this book, I am going to emphasize only three of them because they are the tools that demand active participation by Christians: daily Bible study, constant prayer, and proclamation of the gospel. Without the implementation of these three disciplines, the experience of carrying the yoke of Christ will not go beyond a romantic expression. Remember that the yoke is the block of wood that unites the Master with the apprentice. The yoke in the life of the believer is formed by the three disciplines mentioned here.

DAILY BIBLE STUDY

If a person cannot live physically without eating, how could they survive in the spiritual life without feeding daily on the Word of God? In this regard, the servant of God says the following: "Truth is delicate, refined, elevated. When it molds the character, the soul grows under its divine influence. *Every day the truth is to be received into the heart. Thus we eat Christ's words*, which He declares are spirit and life. The acceptance of truth will make every receiver a child of God, an heir of heaven. Truth that is cherished in the heart is not a cold, dead letter, but a living power" (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 111; emphasis added).

Daily study of the Scriptures is a habit we must put into practice even when we have no desire to do so. As long as you still bear the sinful nature, studying the Bible daily will take effort, but here is where the role of the human will comes in. That's why Paul wrote that if we want to receive an incorruptible crown, we need to discipline our bodies and bring them into subjection (see 1 Corinthians 9:27).

We can never reflect the character of Jesus if we don't learn to feed every day on the Word of God, which is why Ellen G. White wrote:



Daily study of the Scriptures is a habit we must put into practice even when we have no desire to do so.

“In the fear of God I tell you that the true exposition of the Scriptures is necessary for the correct moral development of our characters” (ibid.), and “the truth received into the heart will be the means of purifying the soul, and transforming the character, and of making its receiver like-minded with God” (ibid., p. 59).

CONSTANT PRAYER

The second discipline of daily communion with Jesus is constant prayer. Paul said, “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This means having a spirit of prayer twenty-four hours a day. How is this possible? When do we get to eat, sleep, or work? Meditate on the answer of the servant of God: “Pray in your closet, and as you go about your daily labor let your heart be often uplifted to God. It was thus that Enoch walked with God. These silent prayers rise like precious incense before the throne of grace. Satan cannot overcome him whose heart is thus stayed upon God. There is no time or place in which it is inappropriate to offer up a petition to God. There is nothing that can prevent us from lifting up our hearts in the spirit of earnest prayer” (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 11, pp. 98, 99).

There are two types of prayer. The first is formal or established prayer, for which you set a specific time to be alone with God; it can be in a place in your home. There you kneel and talk with your Father. However, the other type of prayer, and perhaps the most difficult to practice, is informal prayer. “In the crowds of the street, in the

midst of a business engagement, we may send up a petition to God and plead for divine guidance, as did Nehemiah when he made his request before King Artaxerxes. A closet of communion may be found wherever we are. We should have the door of the heart open continually and our invitation going up that Jesus may come and abide as a heavenly guest in the soul” (ibid., p. 99).

We need to learn to live in an attitude of prayer. You don’t need to kneel; it’s enough to link everything you do to God. Keep on living, but don’t live alone; connect all your thoughts with God. “We can have what Enoch had. We can have Christ as our constant companion. Enoch walked with God, and when assailed by the tempter, he could talk with God about it. He had no ‘It is written’ as we have, but he had a knowledge of his heavenly Companion. He made God his Counsellor, and was closely bound up with Jesus. And Enoch was honored in this course. He was translated to heaven without seeing death. And those who will be translated at the close of time will be those who commune with God on earth” (ibid.).

If there is one thing that constantly disturbs Christians, it is their defeats in the face of temptation. “I can’t resist,” “I’m too worldly,” “What do I do with my life? I’m too weak.” These and other statements are expressions of frustration that come out of the mouths of sincere Christians. I don’t think anyone, of their own free will, would want to be a failure. Everyone strives, contends, and tries to control their tendencies, but it seems that nothing works. What is the problem? Is there a solution?

The problem is that when temptation arrives, you concentrate all your efforts on not falling instead of concentrating them on not separating yourself from Jesus. By doing this, you fall—not because the temptation was too strong, but because you separated yourself from the Master. We cannot forget His words: “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” Nothing. Do you understand? Much less resist temptation.

Then how are we to deal with temptation? If your life is an experience of uninterrupted communion with Jesus, all you need to do when temptation arrives is to tell Jesus what you are feeling or thinking. It may seem strange to you at first. There are things you wouldn’t have the courage to tell Jesus. How do you tell Him, for example, that you are planning to do something morally horrible, or that you are

thinking of going to a place that is not compatible with the Christian life? “No, no, that doesn’t work,” you may think, but that is the key to the problem.

Since you don’t have the courage to tell Jesus what you’re feeling and since, at the same time, what you’re feeling seems very pleasant to you, you make the mistake of interrupting the relationship with Jesus. You go on alone. You hide. You disguise yourself. Whatever you do, you do it secretly. However, the truth is that you are already lost, because you separated yourself from Jesus. You’re already a sinner. Whether or not you do what you are planning to do, you are already a sinner because you severed the connection with Jesus. Committing sinful acts will only be the result.

The next time temptation appears, tell Jesus what you are feeling, even if it seems irreverent and daring to you. Tell Him about the steps you’re taking. Tell Him that deep down you want to do what you want, but don’t cut off communion with Him. Don’t separate yourself from Jesus. If you put this advice into practice, you will notice that while you dialogue with Jesus, the sinful desire begins to disappear naturally. You overcome—not because you try hard not to fall, but because you fight not to be separated from Jesus. You continue to be righteous, not because you avoid committing a sinful act, but because you do not separate yourself from the Source of righteousness that is Jesus. Christ overcame in you. Through you. And for you.

That is why Ellen G. White wrote that “if we would develop a character which God can accept, we must form correct habits in our religious life. Daily prayer is as essential to growth in grace, and even to spiritual life itself, as is temporal food to physical well-being. We should accustom ourselves to lift the thoughts often to God in prayer. If the mind wanders, we must bring it back; by persevering effort, habit will finally make it easy. We cannot for one moment separate ourselves from Christ with safety. We may have His presence to attend us at every step, but only by observing the conditions which He Himself has laid down” (*Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, ch. 59, p. 546).

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

The third discipline that is part of the yoke of Christ is the proclamation of the gospel, missionary work, or whatever you want to call

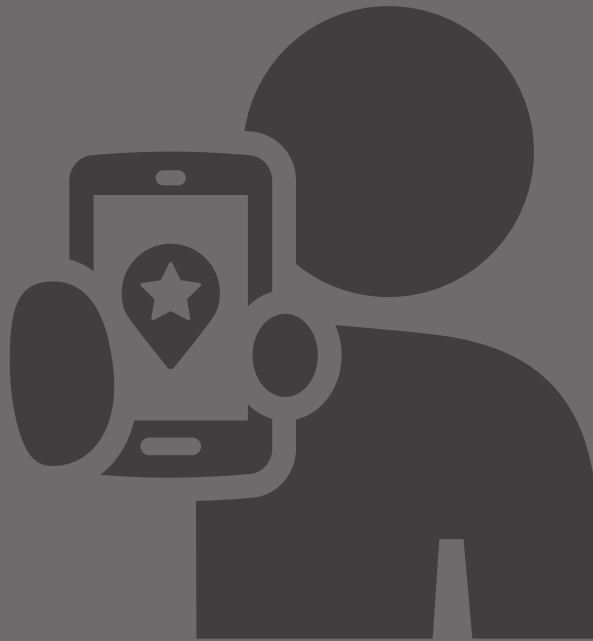
going out, looking for a person who does not know the gospel, and leading him or her to Jesus. God didn't entrust you with the mission of preaching the gospel because He's unable to do it. "God could have reached His object in saving sinners without our aid; but in order for us to develop a character like Christ's, we must share in His work" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 142).

A Christian who spends years in the church and is unaware of the importance of going out and evangelizing those who are still dying in a world without Christ has not understood that we don't carry the yoke of Christ if we don't assume our missionary responsibility. "As we seek to win others to Christ, bearing the burden of souls in our prayers, our own hearts will throb with the quickening influence of God's grace; our own affections will glow with more divine fervor; our whole Christian life will be more of a reality, more earnest, more prayerful" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, ch. 25, p. 354).

Daily Bible study, constant prayer, and witnessing are spiritual disciplines that need to be part of the Christian experience. Without the implementation of these three disciplines, no one takes the yoke of Christ, builds on the Rock, contemplates Jesus, walks with God, or remains in Christ. All these expressions frequently used in our hymns and poetry don't go beyond dead letters if they don't leave the realm of theory and are integrated into the reality of practical life. In the next chapter, we will look at what the reason is for carrying the yoke of Christ and what that has to do with the victorious life that Christians long for.

1. Ellen G. White, *Reflecting Christ* (Hagerstown, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1985), p. 83; emphasis added.
2. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1911), ch. 27, p. 471; emphasis added.
3. Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), vol. 2, ch. 82, p. 741.
4. Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, California: Pacific Press, 1898), ch. 14, p. 142.

5 "Learn from Me"





"This is what the Lord says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.' But you said, 'We will not walk in it.' (Jeremiah 6:16).



IT WAS SIX in the morning. The faint rays of the sun filtered through the broken glass of the restaurant. His dramatic encounter with Jesus the night before had changed him. It had made him a new man—old, perhaps, but free from the torments of his terrible past. He looked happy, his eyes shining.

He knew what he had to do. He paid for the hot chocolate and toast he had eaten and went to the train station. He got a ticket to the city center and walked through its congested streets. A bit past noon, he arrived at his destination. He slowly climbed the steps of the police station and confessed to his crime. He didn't get out of there again. He would remain in prison for eight long years, but his spirit was free. He had found salvation in Christ.

I met him in Pennsylvania one rainy night while conducting an evangelistic campaign. There, he told me his story. He told me of his nights of guilt, of his days of remorse, of his evenings and mornings of anguish.

“What touched my heart,” he said, smiling, “was knowing that my sins had already been paid on the cross of Calvary. When I understood what Jesus did for me, I felt like going out and shouting to everyone that I had been forgiven.”

Then he told me the struggles he had faced to live his new experience. He was in prison and could not appear to be weak. He needed to survive in the midst of violent people. How could he do it without being violent? His life became a daily battle against the tendencies of his own being, but one visitation day, a good church member gave him the book *Steps to Christ* and reading it opened his eyes to discover the secret of victory in Christ.

LEARNING FROM CHRIST

The first thing Christians need to understand is that we go to Jesus to learn from Him. It is not simple theoretical learning, but the learning of something practical, like being gentle and humble in heart. “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,” says the invitation. If new Christians live their lives together with Jesus, the people next to them will notice that there is something different about them. “If Christ is in the heart, He will appear in the home, in the workshop, in the marketplace, in the church. The power of the truth will be felt in elevating, ennobling the mind, and softening and subduing the heart, bringing the whole man into harmony with God. He who is transformed by the truth will shed a light upon the world” (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 59).

There is only one way to learn from the Master: by spending time each day with Him through prayer, studying His Word, and telling others what Jesus has done in our lives. You speak to God through prayer; God speaks to you through the Bible; and you and God, together, tell others about the wonderful experience of love and fellowship you both live.

Jesus was very clear in saying that if we do not remain in Him, we are doomed to failure. “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can

you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4, 5).

THE GOOD FRUITS

There are two clear ideas in the text you just read. The first has to do with fruits, the fruits of the Spirit, which are all those wonderful virtues that you would like to have in your new life. Why don't they appear in you no matter how hard you try? Jesus's answer is this: “The branch cannot bear fruit of itself.” You and I are branches. We can try, desperately want to, and exert ourselves, but we will never achieve it because the branch cannot bear fruit of itself. “Apart from me you can do nothing,” said the Master. Your only way out is to “remain” in Jesus, seek Him every day, pray, study the Bible, and tell others what He has done for you.

Here is the key to the victorious Christian life, and here is also the reason why many fail. If you limit your relationship with God to church services, or, at best, to morning and evening devotional worship, you will not achieve victory. What is the point of an hour of daily meditation if you go through the rest of the day on your own, lose your communion with God, and distance yourself from Him? Sure, you didn't leave the church. Maybe you didn't even do something morally wrong. But you forgot about Jesus.

Later, when temptation appears, you try to resist. You use all the human methods of self-discipline and self-control and by exerting some willpower, you can even seemingly win on the outside. You may not walk into a motel room with a strange woman, but what good is that if you brought the motel and the woman into your head? Now, of course, the church is not going to discipline you, your family is not going to abandon you, and your friends will continue to admire you. That kind of outward obedience has social and moral value, but not spiritual. You are lost—inside the church, apparently obeying everything, but lost. That is what Jesus affirmed by saying, “Apart from me you can do nothing.”

You can pretend, put on an act, make believe, but that is not the Christian life. “I am the vine,” said Jesus, “you are the branches.” You need to be attached to Him by the yoke. The branch cannot bear fruit of itself.

If Jesus is righteousness, and being righteous means remaining in Him, then the only way to continue to be righteous is to live all twenty-four hours a day with Jesus. How can that be possible? At what time do you go to work or when do you study if you have to think about Jesus twenty-four hours a day? You need to learn to live with Jesus. Allow Him to participate in your daily activities, your dreams, and your intimate thoughts. In that coexistence, you learn to be gentle and humble in heart.

I’m going to illustrate this matter to you in the following way. You get up early and have your devotional minutes with Jesus. You pray and study the Bible. Very good. You started the day the right way. And then? Why don’t you have a conversation with Him in your mind at breakfast? You can continue to think, as always, about your daily schedule or the various commitments you have, but do so by conversing with Jesus. You won’t lose anything, but you will feel that you’re not alone in facing the difficulties that life presents to you. After breakfast, you go to take the bus. Let’s say the bus is delayed. What do you think about while you wait? “Well, this is a problem; I’m going to be late for work,” or maybe, “When will I have the money to at least buy an old car?” At that moment, the bus appears. Someone tries to get on before you, and you can only think silently, “This guy. Does he think he is going to beat me? He doesn’t know who he’s messing with.” And then you run and push him and get on first. This is how things develop throughout the day. You don’t kill or steal, but you live an experience of constant failure.

But now let’s go back to the bus station. What would it have been like if you had thought everything you thought, but mentally carried on a conversation with Jesus? When the bus was delayed and you were almost losing your patience, you might have said, “Lord, what a problem it is not to have a car of my own.” But at that moment, something strange happened. At the moment you were about to utter some unpleasant phrase, if you had told Jesus, that expression would have

disappeared naturally. The bus would have arrived, and you would have run and noticed that someone wanted to get in before you. “This guy is not going to beat me,” you think, but by saying it to Jesus, you would have naturally lost the desire to push others, as you did on other occasions. Do you understand? Nothing is different in your normal life. Or maybe everything is different. Jesus is the difference. You continue to live, work, buy, and sell, but you don’t do things alone. Jesus accompanies you in everything; you talk to Him; you consult Him as if He were by your side, even though you can’t see Him.

If you put this into practice, you will see that the things that you used to try to do with a lot of effort—and couldn’t—will begin to appear in your life naturally. Thus, whatever victories you achieve will not be the result of your effort, but of your uninterrupted communion with Jesus. You learn from Jesus and with Him. Day after day, step by step, people who know you will begin to notice that something new and interesting is happening to you.

AUTHENTIC FRUITS

The fruit of the Spirit is not artificial, made of plastic or wax. It is an authentic fruit coming from a living relationship with Jesus. Now you are righteous, not because you stopped doing bad things. On the contrary, you don’t do bad things because you are righteous, and you are righteous because you are united with Jesus by His yoke. Ellen G. White put it this way: “As we meditate upon the perfections of the divine Model, we shall desire to become wholly transformed, and renewed in the image of His purity. It is by faith in the Son of God that transformation takes place in the character, and the child of wrath becomes the child of God. He passes from death unto life; he becomes spiritual and discerns spiritual things. The wisdom of God enlightens his mind, and he beholds wondrous things out of His law. . . . In becoming a man of obedience to God, he has the mind of Christ, and the will of God becomes his will” (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 104).

Jesus is the source of our teaching. We learn from Him every day. That is why Mrs. White also wrote: “Christ should never be out of the mind. . . . Jesus, precious Saviour! Assurance, helpfulness, security, and peace are all in Him. He is the dispeller of all our doubts, the

earnest of all our hopes. How precious is the thought that we may indeed become partakers of the divine nature, whereby we may overcome as Christ overcame! Jesus is the fullness of our expectation. He is the melody of our songs, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. He is living water to the thirsty soul. He is our refuge in the storm. He is our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption. When Christ is our personal Saviour, we shall show forth the praises of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light” (ibid., p. 21).

WHY AM I BAD?

Many people ask themselves, “Why am I bad? Why do I want to serve God and discover within myself another person who likes to walk outside of God’s will?” The man whose experience I told you at the beginning of this chapter had won many battles, but he still considered himself the worst of sinners. People generally think that a sinner is someone who kills, steals, lies, and commits adultery, while “righteous” is the one who manages to live without committing any sinful act. That is a very superficial view of the spiritual life. The truth is that people are not sinners because they kill, steal, or lie. We do all this because we are sinners.

I’m going to give you another illustration. Let’s imagine that you have an orchard and you don’t want it to produce oranges. However, in the middle of your orchard, there is an orange tree. What would you do? Would you watch day and night to cut every orange that appears, or would you cut the orange tree down to the ground? What would be the smartest thing?

Now let’s apply this illustration to the spiritual life. Do you know why we commit sinful acts? Because in our lives, there is a tree that produces these acts. Sinful acts are fruits. At least, that is what the apostle Paul said: “The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19–21). The “acts of the flesh.” Do you realize it now? All human beings are sinners. We don’t need to do anything wrong to be sinners. It is enough to be born. “And is it my fault that I was born?” you might ask. The

answer is, “Not at all.” You won’t be lost because you were born a sinner. God has already provided the remedy for that problem, and if you are lost, it will be just because you didn’t take advantage of the remedy. When streptomycin had not been discovered, people died of tuberculosis because there was no remedy, but today, with rare exceptions, only those who refuse to use the remedy die from that disease. Jesus is the remedy against sin. This is not just a theoretical statement; it is the most practical reality that exists. Let me explain.

Jesus is righteousness and there is no place for unrighteousness by His side (2 Corinthians 6:14). Therefore, if you want to be righteous, all you need to do is seek Jesus (righteousness personified), go to Him, remain united to His yoke, learn from Him at all times. People are righteous only when they are united to Jesus. If this is true, who, then, are unrighteous or sinners? Logic tells us that it is the ones who are separated from Jesus. Let me tell you John’s story.

JOHN LEARNED THROUGH LOVE

One day, Jesus came into the life of a man with a deformed personality. His explosive character and angry temperament had earned him the nickname “the son of thunder.” His name was John. He was tired of struggling with the tendencies of his natural heart. He promised to improve, he decided to change, he struggled not to be as he was, but his efforts were futile. The sinful beast was crouched inside him, and at the slightest mistake, pounced on him and controlled him.

I’m sure there were moments when John thought he would never reach the ideal God has for His children. However, one day he met Jesus, went to Him, and remained by His side. The result? Look at what Ellen G. White said:

John . . . did not naturally possess that loveliness of character. He was not only self-assertive and ambitious for honor, but impetuous, and resentful under injuries. But as the character of the Divine One was manifested to him, he saw his own deficiency and was humbled by the knowledge. The strength and patience, the power and tenderness, the majesty and meekness, that he beheld in the daily life of the Son of God, filled his soul with admiration and love. Day by day his heart was drawn out toward Christ, until he lost sight of self in love for his Master. His resentful, ambitious temper was yielded to the

molding power of Christ. The regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit renewed his heart. The power of the love of Christ wrought a transformation of character. *This is the sure result of union with Jesus.* When Christ abides in the heart, the whole nature is transformed. Christ's Spirit, His love, softens the heart, subdues the soul, and raises the thoughts and desires toward God and heaven (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 8, p. 73; emphasis added).

I want to emphasize the expression, "This is the sure result of union with Jesus." What is the quotation talking about? About victory over sin. The only solution to your struggles is Jesus. He is righteousness. Apart from Him, there is no way to be righteous. Separated from Jesus, even the good things we do are sinful. "It is true that there may be an outward correctness of deportment without the renewing power of Christ. The love of influence and the desire for the esteem of others may produce a well-ordered life. Self-respect may lead us to avoid the appearance of evil. A selfish heart may perform generous actions" (*ibid.*, p. 58).

These are all works of human effort. They can have social and moral value, but they have no spiritual value. Paul confirmed this thought by saying, "everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). Our concern should not only be to stop doing evil, but to stop being sinners. And we stop being sinners when we go to Jesus and don't separate ourselves from Him. That's why Jesus calls you, offers you His yoke, and wants to teach you to live the authentic, fruit-filled life. And the fruits of the spirit are "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23).

PAIN, A SOURCE OF LEARNING

A pretty smile appeared on Julia's face when she received her gift. It was her birthday, and she had dreamed of that gift for a long time. She spoke about it day and night, all the time, everywhere. Her dad went up to her and said, "Honey, let me assemble it. I can help you."

"No, Dad! I can do it alone," replied the girl excitedly.

Twenty minutes later came the weeping. The longed-for toy was lying on the ground, broken beyond any repair. Her eyes full of tears, the girl looked at her father and said, "Dad, can you help me? Can you fix my toy?"

We are all like Julia. We go through life wanting to do things on our own and we hurt, suffer, and cry. This is how it is today, this is how it happened in the past, and this is how it will continue to happen until Jesus returns. That was the sad experience of the people of Israel. They walked along paths of death while claiming to serve God. It was then that Jeremiah presented the following admonition in the name of the Lord: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, ‘We will not walk in it’ ” (Jeremiah 6:16).

The divine counsel was uncomplicated: “Stop walking in your ways and return to Me. Walk in My ways and you will find rest for your weary souls.” Simple. It was enough to walk in the divine path and life would be happy, without pain or tears; but as simple as it seemed, the people of Israel insisted on going their own way. They got involved with the idolatry of the peoples around them. They brushed God aside. On many occasions, the Lord called them back, invited them to His arms, sought them out like a lost flock, but the people simply said, “No!”

The consequence of their rebellion was inevitable. The mighty enemy army came in full force, defeated the nation, enslaved its people, and humiliated them. There was plenty of pain, shame, and suffering; and then, the people remembered God. The good news is that the Lord always hears the cry of His children, but let us ask ourselves, did the people have to wait for that moment? So many invitations, messages, calls, and nothing . . . but when the pain, sadness, and shame came, Israel remembered God.

There are options in life. One of them is to accept the divine invitation and go to Jesus. The other is to seek God when everything is in ruins. God hears you in both cases, saves you from the pain, and does for you what you can't do for yourself, but in what situation do you think it is better to seek Him?



6

“I Am Gentle
and Humble”



“Take my yoke
upon you and learn
from me, for I am gentle
and humble in heart,
and you will find
rest for your souls”
(Matthew 11:29).



THEY CALLED HER “CINNAMON” because of her skin color. When she smiled, her teeth appeared like a flock of white sheep lined up. She was beautiful, intelligent, and insightful. She dreamed of becoming a lawyer and had no difficulty realizing her dream. In college, she met a professor, owner of a renowned law firm. She married him after graduation and within a few years, had transformed herself into a brilliant, well-known, and wealthy professional.

Looking at the past, she remembered her parents, simple people who took her to church and told her Bible stories at bedtime. Now all that seemed so distant and naïve to her. She considered those times to be a phase of her life, and she was over it. Her faith had disappeared along with the limitations of her childhood. She didn’t need God. At least, that’s what she believed. Her parents passed away sad to see her turn away from the paths of Jesus. She had never wanted to hurt them. She was always a good daughter; she just didn’t need God.

The years passed and one day tragedy touched her life. A traffic accident took her husband's life and left her confined to a bed for the rest of her life. You can imagine what came next. Almost without financial resources, without health, without friends, surrounded by people who had only taken advantage of her money, she became a bitter woman. Bitterness flowed out of her with every word and she was dying little by little, drowned in a pit of resentment and hatred.

It was in those circumstances that she remembered the God of her parents. They had been humble, gentle, and tender. The people in the neighborhood had given her father the nickname of "Transformed." The stories of this gentleman's past life went from mouth to mouth. Before meeting Jesus, he was the most feared resident in the neighborhood. He lived in bars, fighting with everyone, and when he got home, he beat his wife. Cinnamon did not remember any of that because when she was born, her father was already a Christian, a man who was gentle and humble and who, consumed by cancer, died without complaining about anything and praising the name of God.

CHRISTIANITY IS TRANSFORMATION

Cinnamon's story opens a window into the way many think today: they consider God to be a merely expendable detail. Atheism denies the existence of God, but it has almost gone out of style. Being "modern" today means believing in God and even attending church, while at the same time believing that God has nothing to do with our life. For many, being a Christian is the same as being a fan of a football team: it doesn't affect their decisions at all.

However, when we read the Bible, we realize that the true gospel is not only forgiving, but also transformative. No one meets Jesus and continues to be the same person. The proud and arrogant become gentle and humble, like their Master. That is what happened to Enoch. "[Enoch] was ever under the influence of Jesus. He reflected Christ's character, exhibiting the same qualities in goodness, mercy, tender compassion, sympathy, forbearance, meekness, humility and love. His association with Christ day by day transformed him into the image of Him with whom he was so intimately connected" (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 20).

An extremely important detail that needs to be mentioned at this point is that the work of transformation is not your responsibility. It is not up to you to carry it out. Your task is to go to Jesus, accept His invitation, take His yoke, and not separate yourself from Him. Walking with Jesus means walking with the Father and also with the Spirit. “It is the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, which Jesus said He would send into the world, that changes our character into the image of Christ; and when this is accomplished, we reflect, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord. That is, the character of the one who thus beholds Christ is so like His, that one looking at him sees Christ’s own character shining out as from a mirror. Imperceptibly to ourselves, we are changed day by day from our ways and will into the ways and will of Christ, into the loveliness of His character. Thus we grow up into Christ, and unconsciously reflect His image” (ibid.).

THE EXAMPLE OF ZACCHAEUS

Have you ever felt rejected, condemned, and without the right to approach someone you admire? Have you ever felt that, despite the material things you have managed to amass in life, that inner emptiness that makes you uncomfortable and prevents you from being happy kept growing within your heart? If so, your life looks a lot like Zacchaeus’s story.

The Bible presents Zacchaeus as a model of the sinful human being. History says he was rich. The rich usually wear fine, expensive clothes. I don’t know if you have noticed yet, but sometimes the Bible depicts the sinner as a poorly dressed, almost-naked person, such as the prodigal son, the adulterous woman of John 8, the leper, or the paralytic. However, at other times, the sinner appears under the mantle of wealth and elegance, as in the case of Naaman or Zacchaeus.

What Jesus meant by these different ways of representing our condition is that no matter how society or the church see you, they only see what is before their eyes, but the Lord sees the heart and knows that we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. He was on the right path. He understood that Christianity is not the same as morality. He knew that the first question should never be, “What should I do?” but “Who is Jesus?” and “How can I love and serve Him?” On the way to Damascus, Paul met Jesus and his first question was not, “What do you want me to do?” but “Who are you, Lord?” The Christian life consists not only in the fulfillment of the “whats” of the Bible, but in faithfulness to the One who loved us, found us, forgave us, and transformed us. Zacchaeus was right. He sought to know who Jesus was, and Jesus found him and accepted him as he was. “When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today’ ” (Luke 19:5).

That day, there were many people with Jesus, hundreds of men and women pushing each other to see who could be closest to Him. Each felt more entitled than the other and, suddenly, the Master looked at someone who felt unworthy, someone insignificant, lost among the branches of a sycamore; a man whose money and influence were of no use to him, and He called him by his name: “Zacchaeus.”

This is how Jesus works. For Him, there are no multitudes, but individuals. You. He doesn’t see numbers or statistics. He looks at people. He looks at you. He cares about your feelings, your dreams, your joys and sorrows. He cries with your suffering and rejoices with your smile. You are so important to Him that He left everything in heaven one day and came to find you. He knows your name and your address. He knows your anxieties and your struggles. He sees you striving alone, trying to be a good Christian, and struggling to overcome your temptations, abandon your habits, and change your character—all without success. Ah! How Jesus wants to run to meet you and say, “Son, daughter, come to Me. Don’t fight this battle alone. I am righteousness, salvation, and life. Come to Me without making promises. Just come. In Me, you will discover the secret of eternal life!”

I will never find enough words in the universe to thank Jesus, because one day, He found me, stopped me on the path of life, and looked at me. He didn’t find me at the top of a tree. No, He saw me

behind a pulpit, with a ruler in my hand to “measure” the Christianity of my church; unafraid to “call sin by its name,” and preaching about God’s love without ever having known it; wearing the image of a young pastor very concerned with discovering “the hidden sins of the church” in order to lead it to reform. However, the Lord Jesus, with His gentle voice, said to me, “Son, come down from that tree of preaching reformation. I want to stay with you. I want you to truly know Me and understand that things are not as you imagine. I long for you to know that it is not with the ruler in one hand and the rod in the other that lives are transformed.”

Jesus wants to lead His church today to true revival and true reformation the same way He did in Zacchaeus’s life. How? Let’s meditate on the following: Jesus didn’t look at Zacchaeus and say to him, “Zacchaeus, you are a thief, and what you do does not please God. I’m willing to stay in your house, but first I want you to confess publicly that you are a dishonest man and promise not to continue stealing.” That was probably what the crowds expected. That’s what I would have expected when I was a young, inexperienced minister, But Jesus didn’t do that. There was something wonderful in Him. Sinners felt loved in His presence. Does this mean that Jesus supported the sinful life that sinners led? Of course not! However, when the Savior met people, something strange happened that caused their lives to change completely. Jesus didn’t make them feel more sinful than they already were. He didn’t need to attack them to inspire a desire to change their lives.

ZACCHAEUS’S RESPONSE

Let’s now look at the attitude Zacchaeus had after meeting Jesus. What did he do? Did he leave Jesus waiting while he went to clean and fix up the house? No. Why not? Because if you could fix your life alone, why would you need Jesus? Here we find the wonderful principle of justification by faith, and also of sanctification: Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He cleanses and fixes our lives; He puts things in order. Never be so naïve as to thank God for forgiveness and then try to fix your life on your own.



Jesus's gentleness
and humility can be yours
to the extent that you
take up Jesus's yoke
and learn to walk with Him.

What did Zacchaeus do? I imagine he placed his fragile hand on Jesus's mighty arm. He was a lonely and rejected man. He needed someone to restore his sense of humanity. In front of him was an outstretched hand, and he held on to it despite being a publican, thief, and sinner. There was not a word between Jesus and Zacchaeus as they made their way to the house, at least none that the biblical account mentions. They just walked together, and the love of Christ permeated every cell of the publican. As they walked together, the Master's life, power, and victory were transmitted to the poor sinner, generating in him the will to change his life.

Then he stood up and said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8). This is the inevitable result of being with Jesus and walking with Him. It is impossible to maintain communion with Jesus and live alongside sin. The two don't mix. There is no place for unrighteousness next to righteousness. In Him we are made "the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21); in Him we are free; we become victorious, and what once seemed difficult now becomes natural.

DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE CHALLENGE OF BEING LIKE JESUS

Jesus's gentleness and humility can be yours to the extent that you take up Jesus's yoke and learn to walk with Him. However, remember

that we saw in a previous chapter that taking the yoke of Christ is a real experience that involves the practice of the three disciplines of communion: daily Bible study, prayer, and personal witnessing. Without these tools, there is no communion with Christ and being in the church is simply rhetorical and lifeless.

However, as you learn to live with the Lord, you will be amazed at the heights you can reach: “How glorious are the possibilities set before the fallen race! Through His Son, God has revealed the excellency to which man is capable of attaining. Through the merits of Christ, man is lifted from his depraved state, purified, and made more precious than the golden wedge of Ophir. It is possible for him to become a companion of the angels in glory, and to reflect the image of Jesus Christ, shining even in the bright splendor of the eternal throne. It is his privilege to have faith that through the power of Christ he shall be made immortal. Yet how seldom he realizes to what heights he could attain if he would allow God to direct his every step!” (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 35).

FOLLOW JESUS, NOT PEOPLE

We live in the age of celebrities. Crowds today run after their idols in search of a photo, an autograph, or even a simple “like.” That way of looking at life can also infiltrate the church. It is possible to find people in our congregations who attend services, not to meet God, but to film and search for celebrities. And worst of all, human beings, no matter how holy they are or seem, also love to be famous and look for the spotlight to shine on them for a few moments.

History shows that over the years, many stars have shone for a little while, to then become extinct forever. Only Jesus has shone throughout human history with a brilliance that will never be extinguished. The mission of preachers is to lift Jesus up rather than trying to put us in His place. No human being can transform your character. Only Jesus can do that. “God permits every human being to exercise his individuality. He desires no one to submerge his mind in the mind of a fellow mortal. Those who desire to be transformed in mind and character are not to look to men, but to the divine Example. . . . By conversion and transformation, men are to receive the mind of Christ.

Every one is to stand before God with an individual faith, an individual experience, knowing for himself that Christ is formed within, the hope of glory. For us to imitate the example of any man—even one whom we might regard as nearly perfect in character—would be to put our trust in a defective human being, one who is unable to impart a jot or tittle of perfection” (ibid.).

Abelardo stared at the reflection of his face and once more felt like breaking the mirror. He felt sadness and revulsion at the same time. Pain from seeing where he had ended up. Disgust for being the pathetic figure he was. Where would he go? Who could help him? He wasn't sure he wanted to see himself again, at least not like that, in that deplorable state. The sad figure he saw in the mirror was the result of years of slavery. He now considered himself a human wreck, unable to resist, without the strength to break the chains that subjected him to a life of promiscuity and failure.

One day, desperate, he dared to open the Bible for the first time and read chapter one of Genesis. Reading it made him think. He had been created in the image and likeness of God. The figure he saw in the mirror was evidently not even a grotesque imitation of the human being who had come out of God's hands. Something had happened along the way—a strange, evil, and destructive phenomenon.

The worst thing that sin does in people is to disfigure the image of the Creator. This is not a physical matter, for human beings also had a character similar to that of God, centered on love. However, sin made them selfish, cynical, cruel, and ruthless. Thus, the purpose of the plan of redemption is to restore in fallen individuals the lost image of their Maker. That transformation happens through living daily with Jesus. That is what happened to the disciples and that is what will happen to you if you seek Him every day.

Frequent defeats led Abelardo to seek the Savior. In the midst of his despair, he fell one day at the feet of Jesus and said to Him, “Lord, until today I have fought alone and achieved nothing. Can You do something for me?” The prayer had not yet left his lips when Jesus's answer came. In the gloom of his vice-darkened mind, he felt the divine touch of love and the desire to get up from the dust.

I **t isn't** about "seeming pious," but about studying the Bible every day, living in constant prayer, and leading more people to Jesus.

I met Abelardo a short time later. His eyes shone with emotion as he told me his story and told me about his struggle to contemplate Jesus every day. Mrs. White advised: "We should be continually looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; for by beholding Him we shall be changed into His image, our character will be made like His" (ibid., p. 20).

Reflect on this again: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" and "beholding Him" doesn't mean entering into a mystical experience. It isn't about "seeming pious," but about studying the Bible every day, living in constant prayer, and leading more people to Jesus. Those who live this practical reality of Christianity will understand that "to be sanctified is to become a partaker of the divine nature, catching the spirit and mind of Jesus, ever learning in the school of Christ" (ibid.).

HOW THE DISCIPLES LEARNED TO BE GENTLE AND HUMBLE

The disciples lived with Jesus for three and a half years. During all that time, they achieved many victories and learned to be gentle and humble like their Master. However, it was not easy learning, and they finally understood that the only way to be like Jesus was not to separate themselves from Him. Let's look at the incident told by Mark. "They came to Capernaum. When He was in the house, he asked

them, ‘What were you arguing about on the road?’ But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:33, 34).

Jesus and His disciples were on their way to Capernaum and on the way, they voluntarily distanced themselves from Him. The Master looked back and saw them talking very enthusiastically. He started walking slowly to see if they would catch up with Him, but He realized they didn’t want His company. When they arrived at the house, Jesus asked them what they were discussing along the way. They couldn’t answer. They remained silent. They had argued along the way about which of them should be the greatest. There is a powerful lesson in this incident. The disciples had a hidden sin, a spiritual weakness that troubled them. They were not happy as they kept selfishness and pride in their hearts, but despite that, they practiced it often.

I imagine they promised on many occasions to give it up. They knew that this sin destroyed them, and yet they kept practicing it. Sin is like that. It takes control of your life and leads you to do what you don’t want to do. Then you repent, you weep, you ask for forgiveness . . . but after the slightest slip-up, everything returns to the way it was before.

The disciples’ sin was the root of all sins. They were proud, arrogant, and overbearing. In the months of living with Jesus, they had discovered a crystal-clear truth: Next to Jesus, there was no place for sin. Righteousness and sin cannot walk together. However, sin was attractive, captivating, and seductive. At first, it produced an irresistible pleasure, but it left them with the bitter taste of defeat and guilt. The sin of pride was so attractive that there were moments when they wanted to practice it, but in order to do so, they first had to turn away from Jesus. Hence, on the way to Capernaum that day, they lagged behind on purpose. It would have been impossible to sin at Jesus’s side.

Do you realize that people never sin just like that, suddenly? First, they separate themselves from Jesus, cut off communion with Him. Now, if the wages of sin is death, we could wonder, would the disci-

ples die because they had discussed who would be the greatest or because they had separated themselves from the Source of life, Jesus?

The problem of the Christian life does not arise with our wrongdoing; the real tragedy is separating ourselves from Jesus. The sins we commit are the result of being separated from Righteousness. If you remain in permanent communion with Christ, sin will not prevail in your life. Is it possible, then, to maintain a permanent communion with Jesus and sometimes fall? No. Definitely not. Before falling, it is first necessary to cut the connection with the One who is able to keep you always standing, to break the yoke that unites you to Him, to separate yourself from the Master.

If you have to strive for something, if you need to make an effort for a specific reason, it should be to not interrupt your communion with Jesus. If you turn away from Him, you turn away from Righteousness, and consequently, you are already a sinner. The result of being a sinner is that sooner or later, you will practice sinful acts, but you won't be lost because of that. You were already lost the moment you distanced yourself from Jesus. Christ is your hope; only in Him will you be safe. Therefore, go to Him, take His yoke, and learn to be gentle and humble as He was.

7

"Rest for
Your Souls"





“Keep my Sabbaths holy,
that they may be a sign
between us”
(Ezekiel 20:20).



GABRIELA GOT READY to leave work that afternoon, but she first looked inside her bag at the cell phone she had furtively hidden there. She cautiously looked around and hurriedly left the office through the back door. The hot night did not match the cloud-covered sky. The young woman looked nervous. She had worked during the day almost without thinking, overwhelmed by her terrible financial problems, and when she noticed that a client had forgotten her phone, the secretary's first thought was to return it; however, realizing that it was an expensive device, she put it in her bag, even though her conscience reproached her.

Once she was on the street, she took the first bus and left without any specific destination in mind, immersed in a sea of problems and difficulties. More than an hour later, the driver's voice brought her back to reality: “This is the last stop.”

The young widow got off and walked to the train station. She felt her world crumbling. She had lost her husband three years before. Sometime later, she also lost her house and now, in debt,

she didn't know how to get out of that difficult situation. Her five-year-old child lived in another city with his grandparents because that was the only way she could devote herself to full-time work. She felt alone and without any direction in that big city. She had no peace of mind. Distraught and afflicted, she sought a ray of light to light up her shadow-filled world.

The stormy sea of difficulties that Gabriela was going through had nothing to do with the divine promise that offers "rest for your souls." The young widow was far from having peace. The conflict of conscience that tormented her heart that afternoon had not started with the cell phone. In reality, her inner struggle began one early morning when she brooded over her worries. Unable to sleep, she turned on the television. On the screen, she saw a man talking about "doing business with God." According to the speaker, the solution to one's problems consisted only in giving money to the church, and the Lord, for His part, would resolve the problems. This way of approaching life felt commercial to her, but it was the point that aroused her interest in knowing the divine will.

That night, after wandering aimlessly through the city, she returned home and called the neighbor who always invited her to church. "Hello, Laura, are you awake?"

"Yes, Gaby. What's wrong? Your voice sounds odd."

"It must be my problems, friend. You know my life is upside down."

"I know it's not easy for anyone, but remember that I'm always praying for you."

"Thank you, Laura, but it seems that God doesn't hear you because everything is still the same for me."

"Patience, Gaby. I've told you many times, we have to talk about your relationship with God. You are far from Him."

"I know, I know. That's why I'm calling you. I'd like to study the Bible seriously."

Laura almost fell down in surprise. Until that time, Gabriela had never shown interest in the things of God despite the difficulties she faced.

“Are you okay, Gaby?”

“No, I’m not. I need to talk to you.”

THE BEGINNING OF A NEW EXPERIENCE

The next night, those two friends got together. Gabriela’s expectation to see her problems resolved was great. She wanted God to intervene in her life in a monumental way, to do a miracle or something like that.

“I am willing to do what God wants so He can resolve my difficulties. I’m desperate,” she lamented.

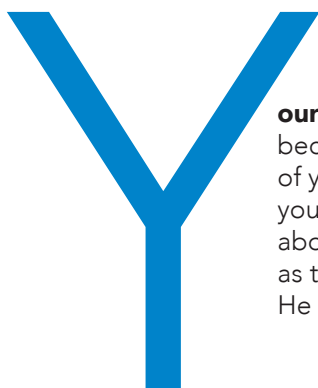
“Do you intend to carry out a kind of exchange of favors with God?” Laura asked.

“I don’t know, my friend. I’m at my wit’s end. Yesterday I even took a cell phone that was not mine, to sell it. Can God do something for me?”

“Of course, He can. God is God. He loves you very much and cares about you. Look at this promise: ‘Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? . . . And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?’ (Matthew 6:26, 28–30).”

“That’s my problem, Laura. I have no faith. I am a woman who, at this moment, is only thinking about getting out of debt.”

“Your problem is not a lack of money. I know your debts exist, but they are just the result of your real problem, which is the absence of God in your life. For you, God is an irrelevant detail as far as your decisions are concerned. You are alone in the world.”



our difficulties are suffocating you because God is not in control of your life. He is your Creator, your Father of love, and He cares about you. If you recognize Him as the sovereign of your life, He would work wonders for you.

“But with so many problems, I don’t have time for anything.”

“Your difficulties are suffocating you because God is not in control of your life. He is your Creator, your Father of love, and He cares about you. If you recognize Him as the sovereign of your life, He would work wonders for you. Note what David said: ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your mercy, because of Your truth. . . . But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. . . . You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. . . . He will bless those who fear the Lord, both small and great. May the Lord give you increase more and more, you and your children. May you be blessed by the Lord, who made heaven and earth’ (Psalm 115:1, 3, 11, 13–15, NKJV).”

“What does that mean?”

“The main idea of this text is that God is the sovereign, almighty, and eternal God. ‘God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.’ Human beings cannot make their own lives the center of their experience without running into difficulties. ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory,’ said David.”

“And what do I do with my problems?”

“Here is the verse that answers that: ‘You who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord; He is their help and their shield. He will bless those who

fear the Lord, both small and great.’ A shield is a protective weapon. If the Lord is your shield, who can hurt you?”

“And that’s a promise for me?”

“For you and for all those who trust in God. However, the right reason to seek Him should not be for the solution to your problems, but to recognize Him as the sovereign God in your life.”

“It’s very easy for you to say that. You’re not in my shoes right now,” Gabriela complained dejectedly.

“No, my dear, I am not in your shoes, but I’ve learned that blessings are a natural result of seeking the Lord with all one’s heart. That is what the Bible says: “I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing a rich inheritance on those who love me and making their treasuries full” (Proverbs 8:17–21).

Gabriela changed position on the sofa, and her eyes showed a different glow. It was as if a ray of light illuminated her dark and needy world. She was looking for a solution to her problems, but she was not looking for God. Realizing her attitude, she lowered her eyes in embarrassment and said, “I’m completely wrong, I know . . .”

“No, Gabriela; you, like many people, simply don’t understand the order of things. God is the beginning of everything. Look at what Jesus said: ‘But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you’ (Matthew 6:33, NKJV).”

“So what should I do?”

“Turn to God! You don’t belong to yourself. Recognize God not only as your Creator, but also as the Owner of all that you are and have. If you don’t, you’re taking control of what belongs to God. Look at what the Lord said in the time of Malachi: ‘Return to me, and I will return to you,’ says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, “How are we to return?”’ (Malachi 3:7). What God desires most is for His children to recognize that they have turned away from Him and to return to the loving arms of the Father.”

“Why do you say I turned away from Him?”

“I’ll explain it to you, but for that, we have to go back to the Garden of Eden.”

“Why?”

“It was there that it all began: ‘So God created mankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food” ’ (Genesis 1:27–29). Do you realize that in the garden, God gave humanity dominion and power over all creatures?”

“Yes.”

“God also gave them the whole earth so they could live and get their food from it, but He reserved something for Himself: ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” ’ (Genesis 2:15–17).”

GOD, OWNER AND LORD OF ALL

Gabriela looked confused. She had never looked at life from that point of view. Her mind was swarming with questions, and she couldn’t hold back: “What did that tree have?”

“Nothing. It was simply a test of loyalty for Adam and Eve. Respecting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil meant that they recognized the sovereignty of the Creator. Touching the tree, on the contrary, would mean taking control of things that belonged to God, setting themselves up as owners, and turning away from the Creator. The consequence of this rebellion would be death. Human beings would slowly begin to deteriorate.”

“I never thought about that.”

“God is the Owner of everything, Gaby. He says in His Word, ‘For every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it’ (Psalm 50:10–12). The problem is that we want to appropriate everything, even what belongs to God, and we think that everything we own belongs to us, especially when the circumstances of life are favorable to us.”

“Maybe that’s my case,” Gabriela reflected.

“Actually, that’s the case for everyone. It’s always been that way.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, already in the time of ancient Israel, God said, ‘Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. . . . You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me’ ’ (Deuteronomy 8:11–14, 17). Do you see how human beings have always had a tendency to take what belongs to God? Adam did, so did Israel, and today we continue to do the same thing.”

TITHING AND REST FOR THE SOUL

The night had progressed, but the conversation between these friends seemed to have no end. Gabriela reasoned keenly and argued, “But there is no tree of the knowledge of good and evil today, so I’m not touching anything that God has reserved for Himself.”

“Well, after leaving the garden because of sin, Adam and Eve no longer had the tree. Then tithing became proof of the recognition of divine sovereignty. Moses made it very clear: ‘A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord’ (Leviticus 27:30).”

“I don’t think this is a test of loyalty.”

“No? Then look at what God said in Malachi’s time: ‘Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it’ (Malachi 3:8–10).’ Do you realize that God said to Adam, ‘You shall surely die,’ and to us today, He says, ‘You are under a curse?’”

“But isn’t God love? How can He kill or curse someone just for touching a tree or not giving tithe?”

“It isn’t God who punishes with death, but since He is the Source of life, life itself, the greatest blessing, when human beings take what belongs to God, they turn away from Him and in doing so they voluntarily enter the territory of death and curse.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is as if God said, ‘Child, everything is Mine, but I lend it to you so that you can live. However, since I am God and I know everything, I know that as time goes by, you will think that everything belongs to you. So, in order for you to remember that I am the Owner and that you are only the administrator, you will return the tithe to Me. As long as you do that, I will know that you recognize Me as Owner and Sovereign, and I will take care of resolving the conflicts that appear along the way. If not, I will know that you are taking over what I have entrusted to you, and you will be responsible for the gales that blow on your boat.’ ”

STARTING TO UNDERSTAND

A ray of light illuminated Gabriela’s understanding. She suddenly understood the reason for her distress and lack of peace. “So, it’s people who determine their reality?” she asked anxiously

“Exactly. What God wants most is for human beings to live happily and blessedly, to have rest for their souls. ‘Say to them: “As surely

n our day,
the sacred tithe
is used for the maintenance
of ministers and for the
preaching of the gospel.

as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?”’ (Ezekiel 33:11).”

“I’ll be honest, Laura. I don’t think God needs my money.”

“Of course not. He Himself said, ‘“The silver is mine, and the gold is mine,” declares the Lord Almighty’ (Haggai 2:8).”

“Then why is He asking for the tithe?”

“As I told you, the problem is not tithe, but whether or not you recognize Him as sovereign in your life.”

“And what does the church do with the tithe? How does it use it?”

“In Moses’s time, tithe was used for the maintenance of the priests, who were members of the tribe of Levi. The Lord determined that they should devote themselves full-time to temple work and that they should live off of the tithe of the other tribes. ‘I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes that the Israelites present as an offering to the Lord. That is why I said concerning them: “They will have no inheritance among the Israelites” ’ (Numbers 18:24).”

“But that was in the time of Israel. What about now?”

“In our day, the sacred tithe is used for the maintenance of ministers and for the preaching of the gospel. Paul said, ‘Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and

that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (1 Corinthians 9:13, 14).”

The hours had passed without either of them noticing it. Gabriela had never imagined that the Bible would have answers to the concerns of the human heart.

Laura continued: “Ah, my friend, in the Holy Scriptures you can find answers to any question. This book is the love letter that Jesus left so that people don't get lost in the complexities of this life, trying to be happy in their own way.”

“Can we continue studying tomorrow?” Gabriela asked anxiously.

“Whenever you want. I'll always be ready.”

A NEW BEGINNING

When Gaby left her friend's house, it was already late at night. She arrived home, took a shower, and lay down. Her heart was beating fast. She felt music in her soul. The problems remained the same, but she had changed. The prayer Laura had offered before saying good-bye that night had touched her heart.

The next morning, she woke up to the song of the birds. She remembered what Jesus had said. If God cares about the birds, why shouldn't He care about her? She opened her eyes, knelt down, and said, “Lord, take control of my life. I am Your daughter. I know You love me, and I want to ask Your forgiveness because I never recognized You as my loving Father and my all-powerful God. Here is my life. I put it in Your hands. I don't know what You'll do for me, but one thing I know: I don't want to live alone anymore.”

Then she left. Not just to work, but in the direction of a victorious life, because nothing can touch those who place themselves in God's hands. The first thing she did when she arrived at the office was to call the owner of the cell phone and tell her, “We found your cell phone.”

“But I was told yesterday that I hadn't left it there.”

“It's here with me. Could you come?”

Four hours later, the owner of the device appeared. She was a mature woman with white hair, elegant, thin, of noble appearance.

Gabriela looked her in the eye and said, “I’m so sorry. I’m embarrassed. I hid your cell phone. Nothing justifies what I did. I just want to ask for forgiveness.”

The lady changed color when she heard the secretary’s confession. “And do you think these things are cleared up like this? ‘I’m sorry,’ and that’s it? I want to talk to your manager.”

That same morning, Gabriela was fired from work. She left the office sad and ashamed of her attitude. However, while walking down the street, she noticed something strange. She wasn’t desperate. An indescribable peace filled her heart. The sun was still shining in the distance. She was unemployed, but not worried. She knew that she was in God’s hands, and if He cared about the birds, He would also take care of her. In the following days, she continued to study the Bible with Laura, and on Sabbath, she attended church for the first time, giving tithe from the money she had been given when she was fired from her job.

“I know I need this money to deal with my debts, but I also know that I will never again touch what belongs to God,” she said.

That Sabbath, during lunch at the church, she was approached by a short, strong, white-haired man. “Hi, I was told you’re a secretary. Could I talk to you tomorrow?”

They talked, and on Monday she was employed again, earning almost double what she had received at her previous job. The years passed. Today Gabriela is married. Her daughter returned to be with her. Her parents already rest in Christ, and she lives happily, convinced that God is sovereign and eternal in her life. Only God is true rest for the soul.

THE SABBATH AND REST FOR THE SOUL

God is the Lord of rest, and rest is the beginning of productivity. It’s interesting that the word “Sabbath” in Hebrew is *shabbat*, which means “rest.” God is that: a loving Father of peace, tranquility, calm, and rest. When God created human beings, He didn’t do so in order



he Sabbath is not holy because a church decided it was holy. Only God has the power to create and establish what is holy. Human beings have the freedom to accept or reject what God determines, but they have no authority to decide what is or is not holy.

that they might live the absurd rhythm that they live today, but so that they would have time to enjoy the good things that the Creator was giving them. That is why, in Creation itself, He established the principle of rest.

There are three actions the Lord performed on the first Sabbath after Creation. First, the Lord rested, then He blessed, and finally, He sanctified. Let's analyze this triple action a little. If God rested, it was certainly not because He was tired. The Bible says God doesn't "grow tired or weary" (Isaiah 40:28), so why did He rest? It was to give us an example, to make the Sabbath a different day from the other six, and to teach us that there is a special blessing behind that day.

However, the text says that in addition to resting, God blessed and sanctified the Sabbath. It means that from that moment on, the seventh day would become blessed and holy. Consequently, we must be very careful regarding this special day, respect it, and hold it in high esteem. While in the wilderness, Moses once saw a burning bush, and as he approached, he heard a voice say to him, "Do not come any closer. . . . Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

The determination that the Sabbath was a holy day was not the whim of a selfish God who needed to have His children stop working

and worship Him. God does not live on the worship of His creatures. God created everything for humankind, including the Sabbath (see Mark 2:27). However, in His infinite wisdom, God knew that if the Sabbath did not exist, the creatures would forget the Creator, and human existence would be transformed into chaos. The day Adam and Eve forgot their Maker, they would get into serious trouble and life would be extinguished. He gave them the Sabbath in order that they might always remember that they came from God and that life is found only in Him.

Once a week, creatures would stop everything that was in their own interest and turn their eyes to their Creator. By doing this, life would always have meaning. It would be an exuberant, full, productive, and happy experience because the creatures' sense of belonging would be satisfied by knowing that there is a God, Father, Protector, and Friend. For this reason, Ezekiel stated, "Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us" (20:20). As long as we respect that sign, we will feel safe in the hands of an almighty God.

The Sabbath is not holy because a church decided it was holy. Only God has the power to create and establish what is holy. Human beings have the freedom to accept or reject what God determines, but they have no authority to decide what is or is not holy. God didn't give that prerogative to them. The verb "sanctify" in Hebrew is *qadash*, which literally means "set apart for a sacred purpose," and the Sabbath was set apart to be a special day of communion with God.

Someone recently said to me, "I don't need a special day to have communion with God. I communicate with Him every day." And I don't doubt it. Christians maintain daily communion with Jesus; but on the other hand, they need to live, and that means going out, working, buying, selling, falling in love, playing, traveling . . . and for that, God gave us six days in the week. However, the Sabbath is a day dedicated exclusively to the worship of God and fellowship with other believers. It is as if we were saying to the Lord, "I have worked all week, but on this day, I give myself completely to You." The result of that attitude is rest for the soul.

I'll give you an example. A young man and woman in love talk to each other every day on the phone, but one day a week, they forget about their other activities and spend the day together. That doesn't mean they stop talking on the other days; however, as each one has his or her daily responsibilities, because life is not just love, they devote that special day to putting everything aside and dedicating themselves to each other.

When Jesus came to earth, He found that the Jewish people had lost the spirit of the Sabbath. They didn't work, they didn't cook, they didn't light a fire, they didn't walk more than a thousand steps . . . in other words, they had invented a mountain of rules around the Sabbath, but they had forgotten to make that day a time of special fellowship and communion with the Creator. Jesus, then, tried to remove that shell of self-righteousness from the Sabbath and restore to it its true meaning of rest. That's why He performed many miracles on the seventh day, to show them that the Sabbath was a day of salvation, not just of inactivity.

IS THE SABBATH A HAPPY DAY?

The question today is this: To what extent is the Sabbath a spiritual day of delight and joy? The story I'm going to tell you may help you understand. When my oldest son was about four years old, I served as youth director for an Adventist Church conference and we met at the beach for a camp. On Sabbath, we naturally had activities that were different from the everyday ones. However, the child didn't understand why he couldn't get in the water if the sea was calm and beautiful, and it was very hot. My wife and I had taught our little son that the days of the week were Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and the happiest day. That's what we called the seventh day, wanting it to be different.

Throughout the day, our firstborn wanted to go the beach, and I told him, "No, son, remember that today is the happiest day." He repeated the same question over and over: "Daddy, can I go in the water?" and always got the same answer.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. I was leading an activity for the young people when the boy asked me aloud, "Daddy, is it long before the happiest day ends?" At that moment, I realized that I was trying to teach my son something that worked in words, but not in reality. Why, if the Sabbath was "the happiest day," was he so eager for it to end? Do you understand? We must create attractive activities that are related to God so that the Sabbath day is a true rest for the soul in the person of Jesus.



8

“My Yoke
Is Easy”





“Submit yourselves, then,
to God. Resist the devil,
and he will flee from you”
(James 4:7).



FRANCISCO LOOKED AT HIS PARENTS one day and said, “I always respected your faith. Now I ask that you please respect my convictions.”

At thirty years of age, the young executive who had been born in a Christian home considered part of his dreams fulfilled. He spoke five languages and traveled the world making major deals for the company he represented. Tall, handsome, and athletic, he played tennis three times a week. Having a lot of money and surrounded by beautiful women, he had come to the conclusion that his parents were too simple and that their faith had led them to be ostracized.

Francisco’s spiritual decline began during his adolescence. He stopped feeding on the Word of God, gave up his prayer life, and felt ashamed of being a Christian, so no one at school knew he attended church. Without the three instruments of communion with Jesus, his faith slowly died, and within a short

time, there were only faint memories of when, still a child, he delighted in hearing the Bible stories that his parents told him.

An obvious question would be this: “Did Francisco leave the church because he lost his communion with Christ, or vice versa?”

EVERYTHING FELL APART

Have you ever enjoyed a splendid day, a clear sky and bright sunshine, without a cloud obstructing the intense blue of the cosmic velvet, and suddenly, in a matter of seconds, the weather changed and the storm caught everyone off guard? That happened to Francisco. Only there was no sunshine in his life. At least not the figurative type: a gleam of hope in crucial hours. He lost everything he owned overnight—employment, health, and then his freedom, because in an effort to get out of the disastrous situation in which he found himself, he made use of dishonesty and was discovered. He ended up in jail.

In his hour of pain, Francisco was alone. The five languages he spoke, the money, and the brilliant professional career were not able to free him from depression, and one cold morning in June, he was found hanging in his cell—a sad end for a man who had been born and raised in the church but never had a personal experience of love and fellowship with Christ.

INDISPENSABLE COMMUNION WITH CHRIST

The disciples learned to depend on the Master. Their defeats and failures led them to understand that without Christ, they were nothing. They needed Him like lungs need oxygen. For that reason, the atmosphere at that moment was tense. Jesus, with His calm voice, had said things that shook His hearers. He never needed to raise the tone of His voice to shake hearts and make them think. His voice was soft and warm, but He had the authority that came from His communion with the Father.

Many abandoned Him that morning. That’s the way things are with Jesus. No one meets Him and stays the same. Either you accept Him or you reject Him; either you get better or you get worse, but wherever the Master goes, everything changes. People are transformed.

Lives turn one hundred and eighty degrees. Human beings take a stand in favor of or against Him. They follow or abandon Him. Christ is the element that separates water from vinegar, wheat from tares, and gold from dross.

John related the incident in the following way. “From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ ” (John 6:66–68).

Peter’s statement is much more than a theological confession. In it lies the secret of an abundant and happy life. It was what Francisco did not understand and what you and I need to understand: “You have the words of eternal life.” Jesus said it several times and in many ways: “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6); “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

LIFE IS CHRIST

Life is not a period of time, but a person: Jesus. In Him, we are alive. By remaining in Him, we flourish and bear fruit. The moment we interrupt that communion for whatever reason, we lose our lives, because Christ is life itself. Apart from Him, we can keep moving, working, running, and doing all our daily activities, but we are dead. What the human being calls “life,” separated from the Creator, is nothing but chaos and existential emptiness, the tireless search for a meaning for things.

If this is true, you don’t need to comply with a certain code of conduct in order to have a happy, abundant, and meaningful existence. You are not required to give yourself fifty lashes or make pilgrimages. All you have to do is seek the Person who is life—Jesus—and remain in Him.

You may stop breathing as a result of an accident or be consumed by illness, but if you close your eyes believing in the Savior, you will only sleep until the day of Christ’s coming, when you will awaken to continue living, with Jesus, the wonderful experience you began on this earth.

Eternal life is not a conquest of human effort. It is a gift of love. “Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12). You are alive in Jesus. Separated from Him, you find yourself in the territory of death. Abundant and full existence depends on your daily communion and relationship with the Redeemer. Good behavior and observance of rules are a natural result in the experience of those who live with Jesus. Without Him, your efforts will be fruitless, and your Christian life will be marked by the desperation produced by unfulfilled duty.

Now, “living in Christ,” “remaining in Jesus,” “walking with God,” and other such expressions are not just nice phrases we put in our songs or sermons. It is a reality that you and I can live. That is why the Master’s invitation to go to Him and remain by His side includes this explanation: “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Bearing the yoke of Christ involves effort, but that effort is nothing compared to the impossible mission of changing our character by our own strength. If you have ever resolved to study the Bible every day, to live in a spirit of prayer, and to make a new disciple, you know that it’s not an easy task. The sinful nature within us doesn’t like fellowship with Jesus. Even when it is weakened by our relationship with Christ, it will try to lead us to walk in our own ways. That’s why I want to invite you to consider the following inspired statement: “Let none imagine that without earnest effort on their part they can obtain the assurance of God’s love. When the mind has been long permitted to dwell only on earthly things, it is a difficult matter to change the habits of thought. That which the eye sees and the ear hears too often attracts the attention and absorbs the interest. But if we would enter the city of God, and look upon Jesus and His glory, we must become accustomed to beholding Him with the eye of faith here. The words and the character of Christ should be often the subject of our thoughts and of our conversation, and each day some time should be especially devoted to prayerful meditation upon these sacred themes” (*Reflecting Christ*, p. 99).

We find in this inspired quotation a puzzling concept: “Let none imagine that without earnest effort on their part they can obtain the

assurance of God's love." Does this mean that the assurance of God's love is something that is earned with "earnest effort"? Isn't it by grace? Yes, it is by grace and grace alone, but those who are far from God will never feel the assurance of His love. To take hold of that assurance, Christians need to live at Jesus's side through the exercise of the spiritual disciplines. Putting them into practice requires "earnest effort."

THE CHRISTIAN'S WAR

Since sin entered the world, the sinful nature disturbs people's lives. Even after conversion, it continues to be present within our being, fighting against the new nature that tries to lead us in God's ways. In this sense, the life of the Christian is a constant spiritual war. Thus, "religion must be made the great business of life. Everything else should be held subordinate to this. All our powers, of soul, body, and spirit, must be engaged in the Christian warfare. We must look to Christ for strength and grace, and we shall gain the victory as surely as Jesus did for us" (ibid., p. 100).

According to this quotation, "we must look to Christ for strength and grace," and no one looks at Christ without implementing in his experience the three spiritual disciplines that we have already mentioned in the previous chapters. If every Christian put into practice the three spiritual disciplines, "we shall gain the victory as surely as Jesus did for us." The reason is simple: Jesus is our righteousness, and if we are united with Him, we will end up being righteous.

When I was a child, I heard older people pray for righteousness: "Cover me with your robe of righteousness," they said, and I didn't understand what that robe looked like. What is righteousness for you? Who is "righteous" in your opinion? A righteous person is supposed to be gentle and humble of heart like Jesus. Have you already prayed for righteousness from God? What do you long for God to give you?

When you think of God's righteousness, do you think about a divine attribute, about the strength you need to obey, about forgiveness? According to Jeremiah, righteousness is neither an attribute, nor a force, nor a doctrine, and much less a theoretical concept. Righteousness is a

person. It is Jesus, our righteousness: “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell safely; now this is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:6, NKJV).

It means that when I ask God for righteousness, He comes to me and floods my life because He is righteousness itself. No one can separate God from His righteousness, which is the essence of His Being. Jesus is righteousness itself. If this concept is not clear in your mind, every time you try to be righteous, you are simply going to try to behave well, strive to maintain impeccable behavior, or anything else like that, but if you know that Jesus is righteousness, and you want to be a righteous person, all you need to do is go to Him and stay with Him and in Him, and you will be made the “righteousness of God.” This is what Paul said: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Do you understand? Paul went beyond what any human being can imagine. He said that in Jesus, human beings are made righteousness, not that they simply “practice” righteousness.

WHO IS “RIGHTEOUS”?

We often think of a “righteous” person as one who does not lie, steal, kill, and fulfill all that God’s law demands. This is true, but only when it’s the result of being in Jesus and remaining in constant communion with Him, because Christ is righteousness. Separated from Him, good behavior does not go beyond mere moralism. As we have seen before, “Christianity is not moralism, it is communion with Jesus.” When the Christian experience is just an obsession with “behaving well,” Christianity becomes suffocating. When we learn to live each day with Jesus, however, it is fascinating.

In conclusion, in order to have life, it is necessary to go to Him; if we want to be saved, it is indispensable that we go to the Savior; and if we want to be righteous, we need to run into the arms of the Person who is righteousness. Christ is life, salvation, and righteousness, and if those three concepts are summarized in one Person, we conclude that Christianity is nothing more than a personal relationship with the beloved Person of Jesus.

TWO WARS

Once we have understood that righteousness is only achieved by living in communion with Christ, we realize that there are two wars in the lives of Christians. To be victorious in them, you have to know how to fight. Paul said, “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:25–27). Paul experienced these two struggles at some point in his experience and was confused, but then he understood the matter and conveyed it to us with clarity and simplicity. He said, “I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.” If you fight the Christian battle like someone who beats the air, you won’t be able to hit the enemy, so let’s look at what those two battles are.

The first battle is against the devil. The enemy will do everything he can to turn us away from Jesus and lead us to sin. This is the battle we fight to overcome cherished sins and character defects. Referring to this war, Paul said, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

This is not a fight against a flesh-and-blood enemy, but against a rival who, from the human perspective, is impossible to defeat. The enemy is much more powerful than we are. Perhaps a biblical account can illustrate better this struggle and how we can gain victory. In biblical times, the citizens of Judah had to face the Moabite warriors, who were armed to the teeth and far surpassed them. It was then that God gave them the following message: “You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you, Judah and Jerusalem. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you” (2 Chronicles 20:17).



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In the account I just quoted, war would be waged by God, and victory would be theirs, but the people of Judah needed to do something concrete: “Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you.” Ah! There is human participation. In the war against sin, God will do His part, but you and I must also do our part. James clarified it: “Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). The human task is to “submit to God.” If we do so, and our fragile and human will is united with His holy will, the enemy will flee in defeat.

THE BATTLE OF FAITH

The second battle is that of faith. It is a lifelong battle that has to do with our growth as Christians once we have accepted Christ Jesus. Fighting in this battle means not “beating the air”; it is submitting to God. It implies “working first” before participating in the victories. Paul advised, “Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called” (1 Timothy 6:12). The “battle of faith” is a struggle to which God calls those who have been declared His children. The Lord calls you, but He does not drag you. It is you who must accept the invitation. Paul explains this battle as follows: “[Look] unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith . . . consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest

you become weary and discouraged in your souls. You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin” (Hebrews 12:2, 4, NKJV).

The apostle teaches that this struggle involves fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. This act of looking at Jesus is simply an illustration to refer to Bible reading, prayer, and witnessing. Paul hoped that we would not “become weary and discouraged in [our] souls. [We] have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.” This is the right way to fight sin. It’s not a direct struggle against sin, but rather, a struggle against ourselves in order to assimilate into our experience the three spiritual disciplines. Thus, although they are very similar, the two battles are different. The first is against the devil and the forces of evil, which fight to turn us away from God, while the second is a struggle against ourselves, with the objective of remaining on God’s side. In both cases, the secret is to keep us united with Jesus.

EFFORT IS NEEDED

We have already mentioned the three key spiritual disciplines for the Christian over and over again. Now, if we want to apply them without any effort we are completely deceived. “We are to watch, and work, and pray, never letting self obtain the mastery” (*The Upward Look*, p. 24). Our “self” will try to face the devil alone, because it is proud and believes itself to be self-sufficient. Of course, it will have no chance, because the battle against sin is a spiritual war that only God can overcome. Our part is to go to Jesus and watch, pray, and work. That’s why Jesus said that in order to follow Him, we must deny ourselves (see Matthew 16:24). To deny oneself and take up the cross of Christ means to renounce self and accept the divine plan that will lead us to true victory. “Here is a trustworthy saying: ‘If we died with him, we will also live with him’ ” (2 Timothy 2:11).

If we wish to live the victorious life that Christ lived, we first need to die with Him so we may be resurrected with Him. Only in this way will Christ live in us to overcome the battle against sin. Paul tried to teach this to those whom “God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory . . . so that we may present everyone fully mature in

Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:27–29).

Notice that Paul wanted to teach a “mystery.” It is the secret of victory that many are reluctant to understand and accept. “Christ in you.” That is the only way to “present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (v. 29, NKJV). Ellen G. White made the following comment: “The work of your salvation and mine depends wholly upon ourselves, for it rests with us to accept the provision that has been made for us. God has done everything for us that a God can do. Christ has purchased you with His own blood; He has paid the ransom money, that you might be united with God, and separated from sin and sinners. When the heart is opened to Christ, the Holy Spirit will work in it with mighty, renewing power. But in order that we may be laborers together with God, there must be on our part an entire surrender to God. We must, to the extent of our ability, devote ourselves to Him, straining every spiritual sinew, and as faithful soldiers doing service for Christ.”¹

LIKE CHILDREN

Have you ever wondered why Jesus said that if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must be like children (see Matthew 18:3)? Well, this is where that statement fits in. The most visible characteristic of children is their dependence. Children are unable to look after themselves. They need and seek the assistance of others. In the spiritual life and in the battle against sin, it is imperative that we accept our dependence on God. Without Him we can do nothing.

Being like children means recognizing that we cannot do it alone, but that Jesus can, and seeking daily nourishment for the spirit. Keeping this in mind, Peter advised, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). In the times of the Early Church, the Galatians accepted Jesus with all their being, but within a short time, they allowed themselves to be deceived and began to believe that external behavior was more important than the inner life, and fell into the hypocrisy of the façade. Then the apostle Paul admonished them: “You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have

fallen away from grace. . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth?” (Galatians 5:4, 6, 7).

LEARNING FROM DEFEATS

We should learn from victories, but unfortunately, as long as we live in this world, it's the defeats that teach us the most. David was one of the biblical characters who experienced a resounding spiritual fall. He turned away from God, trusted in his strength, and kissed the dust of failure, yet he got up and wrote that he no longer wanted to trust himself: “I am quiet now before the Lord, just as a child who is weaned from the breast. Yes, my begging has been stilled” (Psalm 131:2, TLB). And Paul, after conquering, already in his last days, exclaimed, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

Between fighting on our own to be better Christians and going to Jesus and depending on Him, the second option is the one that provides rest for the tired soul. Therefore, “The life we now live must be by faith in Jesus Christ. If we are Christ's followers our lives will not be as pieced out by little cheap spasmodic actions according to circumstances and surroundings” (*The Upward Look*, p. 36).

Dear reader, you are the most precious thing God has in this world. Jesus left everything in heaven and came to this earth to die for you. If anyone wants you to be saved, it is the Father of love who, from above, sees that you are more concerned with pleasing men than God. Now is the time to begin a new experience with Christ. Give up mere formalism and live the authentic experience of love with Jesus. May His character be reflected in your life and may we all soon see our King coming in glory.

1. Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), p. 25.

PART TWO:

IMITATING THE MODEL



“I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you”— **John 13:15, NKJV.**

“Through Christ had been communicated every ray of divine light that had ever reached our fallen world. . . . In Him was found the perfect ideal. To reveal this ideal as the only true standard for attainment; to show what every human being might become; what, through the indwelling of humanity by divinity, all who received Him would become—for this, Christ came to the world. He came to show how men are to be trained as befits the sons of God; how on earth they are to practice the principles and to live the life of heaven”

— **Education, p. 73.**



9 Jesus: Our Model of Spirituality





“God is spirit,
and his worshipers
must worship
in the Spirit
and in truth”
(John 4:24).



ONE OF THE MOST CRUCIAL ISSUES for every Christian is the struggle between the flesh and the spirit. We discussed that topic a bit in Chapter 3. The “flesh” represents the sinful nature that is inherent in the human being, while the “spirit” represents the new nature that characterizes those who have been born in Christ. The problem with our situation is that the Bible says that both natures oppose each other, sometimes causing us not to do the good we want to do, but instead the evil we detest, and such a situation produces the most overwhelming spiritual frustration (see Romans 7:15, 24). As a result, Christians have been called to walk in the Spirit and “not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16, 17). Furthermore, we are invited to understand that God’s true children are those who live under the control of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14). This is what we commonly call “spiritual life,” or simply, “spirituality.”

Now then, when it comes to learning to live “in the Spirit,” there is no doubt that the best example or model we can

count on is the person of Jesus. The set of principles and attitudes by which He governed His life while here on earth make Him our model par excellence. No one has lived like Him, and therefore no one has spoken like Him or reached His spiritual stature. In fact, the apostle Paul pointed out that God's final goal for each of His children is for us to reach "the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13, NKJV).

At this point, we would do well to ask ourselves the following: Why did Christ reach such a spiritual level? What kind of vision of this world and of the relationship with the Father did the Master have so that God would exalt Him to the highest and give Him a "name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:9)? I invite you to take a look in the next few paragraphs at the worldview and spiritual life of Jesus to try to understand why He is our Model. Then, we will try to learn from Him and keep our minds connected to the spiritual world, protecting our walk from everything that may impede the necessary progress of the Christian life.

Perhaps the first thing we should look at if we are going to talk about the spirituality of Jesus is the concept He had of God the Father. In addition, we must also consider the vision Christ had of the world and everything that happens in it, or the "worldview." These two points are important because spirituality does not occur in a vacuum, as many would like to believe, but is a result, first, of the concept we have of God, and second, of how we see life, its purposes, success, the future, people, and things, among other issues.

JESUS AND GOD THE FATHER

Jesus spoke extensively about His heavenly Father. Anyone who reads the Gospels will immediately notice that the Father was one of His favorite subjects. The concept Christ had of the Father can be summed up without any doubt in Matthew 5:48 when He said that "your heavenly Father is perfect." Of course, it must be made clear that the "perfection" of the Father finds its maximum expression in His mercy (compare Matthew 5:48 with Luke 6:36) and in His loving and kind treatment of the righteous and sinners (Matthew 5:45). In the Father's mercy and goodness, Jesus saw the divine foreknowledge

that can respond to the needs of His children long before they even ask the Father to supply them (see Matthew 6:8, 32).

Jesus showed admiration in seeing God's care in feeding and caring for even the simplest birds (see Matthew 6:26; 10:29) and believed that for the Father, nothing that's related to His children is insignificant, for He has counted each of our hairs (see Matthew 10:30). For Jesus, God is merciful (Luke 6:36), He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth (Matthew 11:25), and He is also the great Provider who had committed all things to Him (Matthew 11:27; Luke 10:22; John 3:35). Jesus also stated that God sees all of us as His children, that everything in Him is holy, and that He is also king (Luke 11:2) and the One who gives His kingdom to His faithful children (Luke 12:32).

For Jesus, God was a spiritual reality (see John 4:24). He also believed in divine immanence, which keeps Him in constant relationship with human beings (John 5:17). He believed in both God's self-sufficiency, as we see in John 5:26, and in divine justice. In short, for Jesus, God was above all, for He "is greater than all" (John 10:29).

JESUS AND THE WORLD AROUND HIM

In this particular aspect we must pay attention to the fact that at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry, the Bible says that Satan took Him to a very high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their riches, and then said to Him, "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." To this, Jesus replied, "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve'" (Matthew 4:9, 10, NKJV). This incident shows that from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus had a very peculiar concept on topics such as success, obtaining riches, idolatry, and the place that God should occupy in His life (and consequently, in ours). That's why it's not at all strange to find certain statements made by Jesus, such as the one we find in Matthew 16:26: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" There's no doubt that the One who uttered these words is the same One who rejected Satan's temptation on that mountain.

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For Jesus, love, mercy, justice, and faithfulness to God determined everything He did, said, or thought.

For Jesus, seeking God from the heart and practicing the righteousness that God approves of were tasks that should have priority over the search for the satisfaction of our most basic needs (see Luke 12:29–31). To Him, obeying God was even more important than life in this world, for this obedience was rewarded with eternal life (see John 12:25).

It's interesting to note that even when Christ considered Himself a King, He made it clear that His kingdom was not of this world and that His main function while passing through this world was to bear witness of the truth and save all those who were lost in error and sin (see John 18:36, 37; Luke 19:10). That's why, from a very young age, His mind showed clarity of purpose when He said to His mother, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49, NIV).

Jesus apparently saw His life in this world as an assignment, a time of trial, and therefore, it was something transitory and temporary for Him. And while it's true that He recognized and taught that what we do in this world has a direct effect on our eternal destiny, He was also very clear in not allowing the parameters and interests of this world to determine His existence, but lived the here and now by applying the eternal principles of the spiritual realm. Therefore, although Jesus

acknowledged that He had a family, His concept of it did not follow the earthly parameters (see Luke 8:21); the same thing can be said about His concept of material goods (Luke 12:15), of people (Luke 4:18, 19), and of His mission in life (Luke 19:10).

For Jesus, love, mercy, justice, and faithfulness to God determined everything He did, said, or thought, and that's why He was a deeply and authentically spiritual man. The material was secondary to Him, and for that reason what first stands out in His example of life is His spirituality.

THE BIG LESSON

What we learn from Jesus, then, is that true spirituality is not what happens when we manage to follow a list of requirements or attend certain religious activities, but it's a result that springs from what happens in the heart. True spirituality arises when we have accepted the fact that God must have the first place in our lives and therefore, that He is first in all other aspects. When a decision like this takes up residence in our minds, the result is that we will see life as a series of events that occur here and now but have consequences beyond our existence, and thus we must learn to live with spiritual responsibility.

Spirituality, then, is the result of understanding, in the light of our relationship with God, that material things are perishable and therefore temporal and unimportant; on the other hand, spiritual realities are imperishable and therefore are the most important and must take first place on our list of priorities.

Jesus was not a "religious practitioner." He was a thoroughly spiritual human being because His relationship with God was not only evident when He spoke of heavenly realities and faith, but also in His dealings with people, in the use of His time and His body, in the way He treated His family, in the fulfillment of all His duties, and in the perseverance and love with which He carried out His redemptive ministry until death itself. His spirituality was evident when He spoke, but also when He attended a party or celebration, as well as when He interacted with the sick, the marginalized, and the vulnerable; when He mingled with foreigners, with the rich and poor, with

men and women, with young people and children. In all these areas, He maintained a close and deep relationship with God the Father and at the same time, showed a spiritual understanding of events, which shaped His way of thinking and acting.

JESUS, THE SCRIPTURES, AND PRAYER

Perhaps one of the most transcendental aspects and one from which we can draw the most lessons from the life of Christ and His spirituality is His devotion, respect, and obedience to the Holy Scriptures. On the occasion of the first temptation, Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). It was Jesus who denounced those who invalidated the Word of God by mixing it with human traditions (see Mark 7:13). Jesus’s preaching was attractive because He proclaimed the Word of God (see Luke 5:1). And not only in His preaching, but in His teachings and conversations, in general, Jesus declared that when He spoke, it was God who spoke because the Holy Spirit had anointed Him to speak the Word of God (see John 3:34; 14:24).

Jesus had such a high concept of the Word of God that He once said, “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28). In fact, He considered Himself the fulfillment of the testimony given by the Scriptures (John 5:39) and declared that only those who believed in the Word of God that He presented to them would receive eternal life (John 5:24). For Christ, receiving or hearing the Word of God was a sign of belonging to God (John 8:47). He firmly believed that the Word of God could not be denied or broken (John 10:35). Finally, for Jesus, the Word of God constituted absolute and final truth (John 17:17).

With such a concept of the Holy Scriptures, it is not strange to note that they constituted the source of His thoughts, words, and actions. His most forceful statements were often accompanied or preceded by an “It is written.” Jesus was a deeply spiritual man because the Word of God dwelt in Him.

And what can be said about His prayer life? Since prayer is such an important sign when considering a person's relationship with God, let's look for a moment at some aspects of Jesus's prayer life.

No one who reads the Gospels will be able to deny that Jesus was a man of prayer. Christ developed that habit and practiced it constantly both by intertwining it with His intense daily activities and also in His private and intimate moments, whether alone or with His closest disciples, the twelve apostles. The Bible speaks about many moments when Jesus sought and set aside time for personal prayer (see Matthew 14:23; 26:36; Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 9:18, 28; 11:1). As can be seen from these texts, Jesus prayed alone, with other people, in public places, and in deserted (or at least secluded) places. His need to pray could lead Him to pray several times for the same matter as we see in Matthew 26:41, 42, and 44, and sometimes, He could spend the whole night praying (Luke 6:12).

Jesus not only practiced prayer, but also taught His disciples to pray (Matthew 6:9–13) and strongly recommended to them to pray so that they could successfully face the temptations of the enemy (Mark 14:38). He asked them to pray regarding the time of their persecution (Mark 13:18, 33), for those who slandered them (Luke 6:28), and for those who insulted and persecuted them (Matthew 5:44). He also taught them to pray simply, privately, and trusting in God's love (Matthew 6:5–9). To Jesus, the temple was a house of prayer (Matthew 21:13) and He believed that whatever His disciples asked for in prayer, believing, they would receive (Matthew 21:22).

Then where did Jesus's spirituality come from? Well, clearly from a heart that desired to be in constant communion with God, a heart that sought that communion regardless of the circumstances. Sometimes He did so very early; on other occasions, at the end of a long day of work, He would see people off and go to pray. Jesus was the spiritual model par excellence because He didn't put limits of time or days on prayer. With Him, prayer wasn't a program, but a lifestyle. It was not an activity that He performed under certain circumstances or when He was in some places. For Jesus, any day, any moment, any time was favorable for prayer. He never complicated the practice of

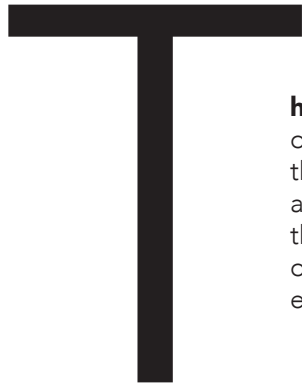
prayer, but simplified it and showed that the one who wants to pray simply does it, period. Jesus's spiritual life was definitely not just one more aspect of His life, but it was its essence, His way of seeing and living life; it was the result of what was in His mind and His heart. That's why Ellen G. White wrote that "Jesus lived in dependence upon God and communion with Him. . . . [T]he life of Jesus was a life of constant trust, sustained by continual communion; and His service for heaven and earth was without failure or faltering" (*Education*, ch. 8, p. 80).

THE FAITH OF JESUS

At this point, it is appropriate to point out that Christ's spirituality also shows that He manifested a deep faith in His heavenly Father. Christ is our example when it comes to living by faith. It is possible that as we look at Christ, we think that everything was simple for Him, that He didn't have the possibility of making a decision contrary to God's plan, but that's not what the Bible tells us. He was "tempted in every way" but "did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15), and considering that temptations are attempts by the enemy to divert us from God's will, we can conclude that Jesus lived in this world with the real possibility of not following God's plan to the letter. In fact, for Him who was God, this was a much greater temptation than for us, but as a man, He had to learn obedience (Hebrews 5:8), and that means that He learned to live by faith in God.

The faith that Christ manifested toward the Father is evident in the Scriptures. Attentive readers of God's Word can see that Jesus was also our Model for living by faith in God. We can see this when we consider what Jesus said about faith (Matthew 9:29; 17:20–23), the importance He gave to that virtue (Matthew 9:2; 15:28; Mark 10:52; Luke 17:6), and how much He recommended it to His disciples (Mark 11:22; Luke 8:25; 18:8; 22:32; Matthew 21:21).

Again, Jesus was not only a teacher or promoter of faith, but He Himself put it into practice. That's why Hebrews points out that He is the "author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2, NKJV). Jesus was convinced that God loved Him (John 15:9; 10:17); He had absolute faith that He had been sent by the Father to fulfill the plan of



he church that has the faith

of Jesus is not only the one that believes in Him as Lord and Savior, but also the one that lives according to the model of faith that Jesus showed in His experience of life on this earth.

salvation (John 3:17; 20:21; 5:37; 6:38; 7:16); He believed that the Father was always with Him (John 5:19, 20; 11:42; 12:49; 13:3; 17:21); He believed that God loved people and actively sought the salvation of all (John 3:16, 17; 5:17; 16:27); and He also believed in the final triumph of God's plan (Matthew 16:18; 25:31; 16:27; John 14:1-3; Luke 22:42).

In light of all this biblical evidence, it can be said that the church that has the faith of Jesus is not only the one that believes in Him as Lord and Savior, but also the one that lives according to the model of faith that Jesus showed in His experience of life on this earth.

A SENSITIVE GOD

Another aspect of Jesus's spirituality that we cannot ignore is Jesus's spiritual sensitivity. There has been no more sensitive person in this world than Jesus. That is, Christ's gentleness and tenderness gave Him the incomparable ability to recognize the beautiful, the just, the good, and the demonstrations of love, compassion, and mercy He witnessed. However, at the same time, that same sensitivity made Him feel indignant about the vile, the immoral, hypocrisy, and evil. Jesus applied the principles of the kingdom of God to daily circumstances. He was a person who believed in God's love and took that love to all those who needed it regardless of whether it was a child, an adult, a man, a woman, a rich person, a poor person, a Jew, or a

foreigner. He rejected evil and sin in all its forms. He didn't remain silent in the face of hypocrisy, zeal for profit-making, religious falsehood, or greed. He didn't let anyone pull Him away from the will of God and never rejected any human being; on the contrary, He gave everyone hope, forgiveness, opportunities, and above all, love.

Therefore, when we say that Christ is our model of spirituality, we must include in that definition of spirituality Christ's sensitivity, which led Him to practice compassion with everyone and always to seek to fulfill the will of His Father in this world. Jesus was not a sensitive person in the sense that He allowed Himself to be controlled by feelings that had no purpose. Jesus was sensitive to pain, to need, to love, and to faith, and that led Him to put God first and love His neighbor as Himself.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE MODEL?

After analyzing Jesus as a model of spirituality, it is appropriate to ask ourselves the following: what can we learn by contemplating Him as our model? Perhaps the first thing is to admit that when we look at spirituality as seen in the life of Christ, we will understand better His invitation to learn from Him (see Matthew 11:29).

Second, we learn that a false spirituality, based on forms, rites, programs, ceremonies, or simple adherence to a church will not take us very far. Many of us, just like the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well, continue to believe that spirituality is determined by such arbitrary matters as the clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the liturgy that governs our services, or a thousand other things we can add to the list. But perhaps Jesus would tell us the same thing He said to her: "God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24).

This means that there is a true spirituality and a false one; it's not a matter of chance. It isn't possible to please God in just any way or to get to heaven by taking just any path. In this case, not all roads lead to Rome. We need to be sure that we are and remain in a right and

acceptable relationship with our God. If that's your desire, then learn from the spirituality of Christ.

Ask yourself, "What is the concept I have of God? Who is God to me? What is He like, how does He act, what has He done for me?" We need to fill these gaps and answer these questions if we ever want to develop a spiritual—not merely religious—relationship with God. By learning from the Model, we will come to the conclusion that our spirituality will not be higher than our concept of God. Therefore, our spirituality begins by getting to know God, and from there, developing a loving relationship with Him.

Then we have to ask ourselves, "What is my concept about life in this world? What do I exist for? How should I use that existence?" It would be virtually impossible to develop true spirituality living in this world unless we understand well the spiritual reality that occurs within it and how God's will fits into the midst of our earthly circumstances.

By not fully understanding how the world operates and the impact its paths have on the experience of a person who wants to please God, many within the church have ended up dividing their lives into two parts: one secular and one spiritual. We think that spirituality is what we do when we go to church or participate in its activities: prayer, preaching, returning tithes, and giving generous offerings. The rest of our lives, we think, is something else. "I'll have to see how I manage, because that's another world, and spiritual principles don't apply there," we usually think. That kind of dichotomy makes us Christians/worldly. Of course, this concept is totally fictitious, but plenty of people have tried to live life under that perspective, experiencing the devastating consequences. For this reason, Jesus made it very clear that spirituality also implies knowing that this world is God's, and that we live in the midst of a war caused by the rebellion of human beings toward God, where the one who wants to be a friend of God cannot also be a friend of the world. Therefore, being spiritual is not only knowing how to deal with the church, but also with the world, with its ideas, and with its desires. If we don't have a spiritual concept of life in this world, we will end up having a worldly concept of our spirituality.

That being said, if we want to develop a correct concept of God and of life in this world, we will need the Word of God, which is spiritual nourishment (see Matthew 4:4). The idea that someone can become a Christian without feeding daily on the Word of God must be considered absurd. Perhaps we should put a very large sign in the churches that says to all who attend, “WARNING: TO BE A CHRISTIAN, ONE MUST STUDY AND PRACTICE THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE.”

We can say the same thing about prayer. If we want to be spiritual, we need to pray in order to enter into communion with the source of spirituality. There will be no way to look at Christ, to speak about Christ, or to think about Him, and at the same time ignore the fact that He prayed without ceasing. Even though He was an extremely busy man, sought after by multitudes, with enemies who tried to ensnare Him, and devoting full-time to the preparation of His disciples, He set aside time to pray. The truth is that speaking about imitating Christ without developing the habit of prayer is only speaking for the sake of it.

In short, learning from Jesus what spirituality means is understanding that it's a personal matter which begins in the heart and develops to the point where it becomes evident to those around us (see Matthew 5:17). Learning from Jesus what spirituality means is also learning to have a faith like His and asking Him to help us live by faith. Above all, learning from Jesus means asking Him to teach us to live in the midst of a world in which many who claim to love God despise and disrespect other people at the same time. May this teach us to be sensitive like Christ to love all that is kind, all that is pure, all that is just, all that is good, all that is virtuous; and to reject with all our strength all that is evil, sinful, indecent, abusive, oppressive, and harmful.

Finally, we must ask God to give us a spirituality that allows us to illuminate the world with His light and to take God's love wherever we go; a spirituality that doesn't allow us to love the world and its sinful ways; a spirituality that we can experience seven days a week, wherever we go and with everyone around us. That's what the Chris-

tian life is all about, and that was the example Christ left us during His time here: living for God and being a blessing to others.

That's why God brought you to His church; that's why He has given you His Word; that's why your church tries to encourage you and help you with the study of this material. For either we live for the flesh and "from the flesh reap corruption," or we live for the Spirit and "from the Spirit will reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:8).

10

Jesus, Our Model of Obedience





“Come to me, all you
who are weary
and burdened, and I
will give you rest”
(Matthew 11:28).



AS THEY REFLECT ON Jesus and His work on our behalf, Christians very often run the risk of focusing only on His death on the cross. This way of understanding Christ’s work can make Him seem disconnected from our present; that is, someone who did something for us in the past and for which we should be grateful, but that from now on, it’s up to us to do the best we can with our lives. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The New Testament states emphatically that Christ not only died, but also lived for us. We not only owe our redemption to Christ, but He is also the perfect example of how those of us who desire to please God and fulfill His will are to live. Jesus lived not only as Adam should have lived, but as each of us should live. He not only redeemed us from the condemnation of sin (Romans 8:1), but also rescued us from our vain way of life (1 Peter 1:18). Therefore, we should not only thank Him infinitely for His vicarious death, but also learn from Him constantly how to live for God.

When Christ said in Matthew 11:29, “Learn from me,” He was not making a suggestion. He was instead indicating the

way we should see Him and relate to Him. He was showing what it means to follow Him as Master. It's interesting that Matthew 11:29 is not the only time Jesus said we should learn from Him. In John 13:15, Jesus said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." What do we need to learn from Jesus? In what are we to see Him as our example and model to follow? It is very evident when we read the biblical account that many of Christ's statements and actions are far beyond our reality, our possibilities, and our human circumstances. Even so, there are aspects of the Master's life that He wants us to learn and imitate. In this chapter we'll pay attention to one of those aspects in particular: Jesus as a model of obedience.

SATAN TEMPTS JESUS

The Bible tells that the Savior was baptized by John in a simple but unforgettable ceremony in the Jordan River (Matthew 3:13–17). That baptism had all the necessary elements to also serve as the inauguration of Jesus's public ministry. After the baptism, we note the participation of the other two members of the Deity: on the one hand, the Father spoke from heaven to testify about the kind of relationship He had with Jesus; on the other, the Holy Spirit manifested Himself by descending in the form of a dove. The Son Himself also bore witness to John the Baptist that He had come to "fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). With all this evidence available, John felt absolute confidence and had the immense honor of making the official presentation of Jesus as the Messiah with these memorable words: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). However, besides John the Baptist and the Trinity being involved, someone else set himself in motion—except it was to try to prevent Jesus's ministry from being carried out effectively: Satan.

The Bible says that after Jesus's baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. The divine plan was evidently for the Savior to have time to pray, meditate, and fast. By retreating into the wilderness, Jesus showed that anyone who wishes to remain in tune with God and to do His will must seek a personal encounter with God. And in the case of our Lord Jesus, it would be no different, because He became man and as such, had to carry out the mission that was

given to Him by the Father. That time in the wilderness, together with the experience of baptism, would enable Him even more to carry out the intense tasks that awaited Him.

However, Satan does not respect even the time that a child of God devotes to communion with the Lord. He will interfere anywhere and interrupt the most solemn moments with his temptations. He did it with Jesus and will do the same with you. Satan found Jesus in a moment of intimate spiritual communion with the Father, so he tried to take advantage of that situation to deceive Him. How? By convincing Jesus that obedience isn't necessary to have a relationship with God or to fulfill His will. If the enemy succeeded in striking that blow at the very beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, it would guarantee the ultimate victory of the forces of evil.

Matthew is one of the Gospel writers who recorded the temptations. Let's pay attention to his account of the temptation. Satan's first attack went like this: "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3), but Jesus's response was not long in coming: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (4:4). A second attack by the enemy led Jesus to the holy city of Jerusalem; he took Him to the highest part of the temple and said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone'" (4:6), and again Jesus responded immediately: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test'" (4:7).

Then came Satan's third attack: "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only"'" (4:8–10).

This story presents us with a real spiritual battle between two titans. The moves are fast; the attacks by Satan come in deceptive wrappings, while Jesus takes refuge in the Word of God to repel the attacks

and triumph over the devil. Every word counts in this battle! And all to determine whether God's children should align our lives with God's revealed will or can, by prayer, fasting, and meditation, choose our own ideas or preferences to fulfill the divine will.

Those of us who read the Bible don't always immediately grasp all the implications of this battle between Jesus and Satan, but we undoubtedly have here the greatest and most important example that Christ left us as our model for living a life of obedience to God. That example was not a method for being leaders, or a plan to organize the church or reach various social classes; it was an example for all of us who bear the name of "Christians." That same attitude of absolute dependence on the Father that Christ manifested at the beginning of His earthly ministry can be seen in His miracles, His sermons, and even in His death on the cross. With this in mind, I invite you to analyze in more detail the account of the temptations in order to discover in it the teachings of the divine Master regarding obedience. By doing so, we will understand much better Christ's invitation when He said to us, "Learn from me" (Matthew 11:29).

THE PROTAGONISTS

In order to understand better the message of the story of temptation, we must first look at each of the characters and try to understand what each one was seeking and what was behind their words and actions. First, there is Satan. We need to look at how he attacked, as well as what words he used and the meanings that lie behind them. We already know from his names (Satan and devil) that he is a deceiver, a lying accuser, and an enemy of God and His people. In the account of the temptation, it is clear that the satanic deception consisted in wanting to sell the idea to our Savior that, since He had been sent to save mankind, He then had to "devise" a way to carry out the plan of salvation. In other words, the enemy insinuated that we can be faithful to God by following our own ideas and preferences, especially if we have been fasting and praying.

If we pay attention to each of Satan's words in the temptation incident, we'll notice that he was trying to convince Jesus that it's not always necessary do things exactly as God says; that is, that there are

other ways to do our duty to God and that it's not necessarily disobedience to add or change something in the plan God has for us. Of course, all these ideas manifested themselves most directly in the last attack, where he pointed out that if the Savior bowed down and worshiped him, He could fulfill the mission God had given Him much more easily and pleasantly, without having to die on the cross. In other words, he suggested that he could give Him the same thing His Father offered Him, but at a lower price.

By analyzing the situation from this point of view, we can know what Satan thinks about obedience to God. It's obvious that Satan thinks that obedience depends on circumstances, that obedience to God doesn't override our own ideas and opinions, and that we should put our comfort and safety first; then, if possible, we can do what God asks. Thus, the temptations had a much greater purpose than simply producing bread or performing a suicidal leap. The enemy's real intention was to eradicate from the mind of Jesus the idea that we are to obey God. The enemy sought to remove God from His universal throne and settle himself there.

The second character we encounter in the wilderness of temptation is Jesus, and He also presented what He thought about obedience. Let's analyze His words and actions. First, Jesus turned to the divine wisdom revealed in the Word of God. The Master answered the three attacks of the enemy with quotations from the book of Deuteronomy. The three times Satan tried to sell Him his false ideas about obedience to God, Jesus rejected them with words that came from God Himself, thus showing us that "the weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Corinthians 10:4); that is, they are spiritual weapons with which we can confront and defeat "spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12, NKJV).

CHRIST'S THREE ANSWERS

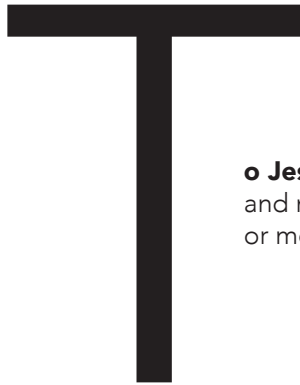
Jesus answered the first temptation with the following statement: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). With this answer, Jesus was saying, "My source for deciding what I'm going to believe or what I'm

going to do is not you, Satan, or anyone else outside of the Holy Word of God. That's My foundation, and I will evaluate everything based on it, because being obedient to God is not doing what's most convenient, what's most striking, what's fashionable, or what others tell Me. Being obedient is doing what the Scriptures say." In fact, the Scriptures clearly indicate that life isn't just food, meaning, it's not just being comfortable or making good impressions on others. The first and most important thing is to make sure that what we do is aligned with the words that come from the mouth of God as revealed in the Bible. In fact, The Living Bible renders Matthew 4:4 as follows: "The Scriptures tell us that bread won't feed men's souls: obedience to every word of God is what we need."

As our model of obedience, the first thing Jesus teaches us is that obeying involves knowing the Word of God and following it in all times and circumstances. Obeying is not doing the best thing we come up with, but what the Scriptures say. This seems very simple, but in practice, many stumble because they don't know the Scriptures. When we ignore the words that come out of God's mouth, it's easy to believe any lie from Satan.

Another detail that we cannot overlook is that in the wilderness, Satan showed that for him, the Word of God was not first when it came to making decisions; however, for Christ, the Word was in first place. Note that the Master said, "Not . . . on bread alone." This is a very noteworthy statement, for it indicates out that to Jesus, bread was important and necessary, but not the first or most important element. Jesus didn't ignore material realities or needs, but He always put them in their proper place. Before the material is the spiritual; before bread is the will of God.

The Lord's second response was this: "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test' " (Matthew 4:7). It should be noted that, for the second temptation, Satan quoted Psalm 91. Perhaps realizing that Jesus quoted the Bible to answer his first temptation, he thought he could fight fire with fire and pointed to the psalmist's prayer, which says, "For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so



o **Jesus**, bread was important and necessary, but not the first or most important element.

that you will not strike your foot against a stone” (Psalm 91:11, 12). However, for the second time, the Lord turned to divine wisdom and brandished the Word to defeat the malicious way Satan had quoted the Bible and to teach us that obedience means trusting in the Word of God and not testing it. Jesus pointed out very clearly that in obeying as God asks, the key is not waiting for God to show us that what He says is true but trusting that what He says is true. Children of God don’t need to jump from a tower to see whether it’s true that God will command His angels to carry them in their arms and save them from death. That’s a promise from God for those who trust in Him and have no need to test God about what He has promised, since His promises are faithful and true (Revelation 21:5; 22:6). Testing God’s Word is like saying to the Lord, “I don’t really trust what You say. I don’t have a guarantee that what You say will happen or that You will fulfill what You promise. If You want my obedience and my faith, show that You keep your word.” However, this kind of thought constitutes a grave offense against God, His holiness, and His character!

Deuteronomy 6:16 shows that in ancient times, God had forbidden His people to manifest such an attitude toward Him. In Exodus 17:7, we are told that Moses gave the name “Massah” to a place where Israel tried to test God by saying, “If it’s true that You are with us, prove it by giving us water.”

From this second experience of Christ before the tempter, it follows that when Jesus tells us “learn from me,” He’s inviting us to obey

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eing obedient is making a commitment of exclusivity to God and not allowing anything or anyone to stand between us and our Savior.

without trying to prove God. Being a Christian is not coming to church with the idea of seeing if we are doing well, if things are improving, if our desires or expectations are fulfilled, to then give ourselves to God and serve Him. God's children, like Jesus, recognize that the Bible is not a book to test God, but to test us regarding our faith and obedience. Every word of God is a test for that faith and obedience. Taking those words and attempting to force God to do things we want or need is having the audacity of wanting to set a sort of trap for God. However, God cannot be tested by anything or anyone. He is the Sovereign of the universe, and that means that there is no law to which He submits nor authority to which He has to give account. God's sovereignty makes His Word an irrefutable law and therefore, obedience consists in trusting Him by faith.

Thus, in Christ's first two responses, we learn from our Model of obedience that the basis for genuine obedience to God is knowledge of His Word and faith in it. In this way, the stage is set to reflect on Christ's last answer: "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only' " (Matthew 4:10).

This response from Christ seems to suggest that Satan lost his composure at this point in the account and showed himself brazenly. Since he knew that Christ had come into the world to rescue the human race and that in the end Jesus would become King of kings and Lord of lords, he took off his mask. He no longer gave Him advice as

when he suggested turning stones into bread; he no longer hid behind a biblical passage as when he told Him of the angels who would come to rescue Him. Now he was filled with pride and showed his true intentions. He said to Jesus in a few words, “Do you want to reign over all the countries of this world? Do you want to have followers in all of them? You should know they are mine; I control them, but I will give them to You if you recognize me as Your god and give me due worship. They are mine and I will give them to You if You obey me and serve my purposes.” So much pretentiousness from this fallen angel before God made Man!

Perhaps that’s why, in His last answer, Jesus called him by name. He unmasked him as the only being who has wanted to usurp the place and worship that only correspond to God. Jesus called him by name so that all of us who read the story can understand that wherever we see something or someone trying to take God’s place, Satan is certainly there.

It strikes me that to the one who said, “Worship me, obey me, serve me,” Jesus commanded him, “Get out of here” (v. 10, TLB). In other words, He said to him, “You speak as if you have authority over Me, but I, in the name of God and clinging to His Word, defeat you and command you to leave. You’re not in charge; away with you. You’re just a usurper wanting to make Me believe that you can give Me what only My Father can give Me.” And then, for the third time, He quoted the Bible against the enemy, and in doing so, did not allow him to argue further or refute divine wisdom: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus, our example of obedience, taught us that in this world there aren’t two gods, but only one true God. There aren’t two sources of authority; there’s only one and a deceiver who aims to refute it. Jesus left us no choice when He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6, NKJV). There are no two ways, two truths, or two possibilities to have access to eternal life; there’s only one, and it’s Jesus Christ.

Obedying, then, doesn’t mean that the Bible shares the pedestal with my ideas, my experience, my culture, my friends, and my circumstances.

Obedying is doing what God says, being where He wants me to be, and doing what He commands. Being obedient is making a commitment of exclusivity to God and not allowing anything or anyone to stand between us and our Savior.

When we look at Christ's obedience in the Bible, what we see is not a model of the "This is OK, that's not" type. Jesus didn't discuss the nutritional value of bread, or whether the tower was a good place from which to jump, or whether the list of countries Satan offered Him was complete. For Jesus, obedience didn't begin with an action, a decision, or a word. For Jesus, the key to obedience was always the revealed will of God in His Word. And that Jesus is the same one who said, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). He is the One who invites us today to learn from Him.

Because we must recognize that at the bottom of every temptation hides the satanic intention of making us doubt our status as sons and daughters of God, you and I have been set apart as stewards. We manage the life that God has loaned us and the planet that has been given to us as a home. Since this is our reality, obedience to God is at the very center of our response of love and faith to that God who is our Owner and our Lord.

Even today, Satan tempts us to make us believe that if we are intelligent, up-to-date, and have access to information, then we don't need the Bible. We can use it, he whispers in our ears, but it's not necessary for everything to be done only as God says. We can also have "our own plan," and if we pray and fast, God will bless what we do even if it's not fully aligned with His Word. What a big lie!

Even today, Satan approaches us to suggest that it's legitimate to seek easier or less costly ways to do God's will, even if we have to choose a different path than He has indicated to us. Satan insinuates to us that, in order to achieve our goals, any path is valid; and worshipping or serving anyone is justifiable, even if it's not God.

Dear reader, we often run the risk of thinking that on the subject of obedience, what's at stake is whether we dress a certain way, or whether we don't eat this or that, or whether we return our tithes and

bring generous offerings, or whether we don't listen to a certain type of music. The truth is that if all this were the crux of the matter, then it would be relatively easy to demonstrate perfect obedience to God; but if our example of obedience is Christ, then what's at stake here is this: what are our minds full of? Of the Word of God, of our own ideas, or of the advice of others? What's at stake is whether we're willing to obey after God keeps His promises or whether we're ready to obey because God always fulfills them. What's at stake is whether we're capable of bowing before anyone and serving anyone who promises to fulfill our desires, even if doing so involves denying God. May God help us to live a life grounded in His Word, a life of continuous worship and obedience following our example, Christ Jesus.

11

Jesus, Our Model of Generosity





“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich”
(2 Corinthians 8:9).



ONE OF THE MOST WONDERFUL ASPECTS of the Bible is the quadruple perspective we have of the life of Jesus when considered in the light of the Gospels. Each of the authors presents a different and at the same time illuminating perspective of His life. Scholars who have analyzed and compared the Gospels suggest that Matthew, for example, was primarily interested in demonstrating to an evidently Jewish audience that Jesus was the Messiah of the prophecies and that in Him were fulfilled the promises made to Abraham and David in the Old Testament. Mark, on the other hand, seems to show us a Jesus of action and also suffering. Luke presented Jesus to us as the Savior of all mankind, and also highlighted His compassion for the sick and social outcasts. Finally, experts suggest that John dedicated his Gospel to revealing the divinity of Jesus.

Now then, the fact that each Gospel highlights a different aspect of Christ does not mean that this emphasis is the *only* thing we find when reading a certain Gospel, but that each Gospel writer showed us the life of the Master in a different light

that allows us to make the most of the study of Jesus's work, all with the aim of answering this question: what should we learn from the life of Christ in order to imitate Him?

I would like to invite you to consider the Gospel of Luke in this chapter, since one of the subtopics Dr. Luke presented in his Gospel was that of Jesus's generosity. In Luke, Jesus shines for His kindness, His goodness, and above all, His generosity toward everyone. Jesus Himself made His masterful entry as a teacher in Luke 4:16–21. According to Luke's account, Jesus presented Himself as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1, 2 as the bearer of good news for the poor and of freedom for the imprisoned; as the one who gives sight to those who cannot see, and deliverance to those who are in bondage.

The fact that Luke was a physician may have made him more sensitive to Jesus's merciful ministry. I imagine Luke felt great admiration knowing that Jesus touched lepers, raised up the paralyzed, and cast out the demons that tormented people. That's why Luke couldn't help but show Jesus healing a constant blood flow, returning sight to the blind, healing dropsy in a man, and even resurrecting a girl. Luke presented Jesus as someone dedicated to giving without expecting to receive anything in return; as someone who gave more than just material things, who also offered spiritual help to those who needed it, and who ended up giving His own life in an infinite gesture of divine altruism and solidarity. If we have to choose one word to describe all this, I think the most appropriate would be **generosity**.

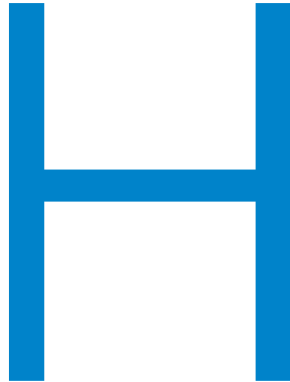
In addition to Luke, Paul also showed special interest and great admiration for Christ's generosity and its implications for us as His followers. In fact, Paul pointed out in 2 Corinthians 8:9 that Jesus was admired by all His followers for His goodness, and that such goodness was the greatest incentive so that they, too, might manifest that quality in their lives: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Paul understood that the whole life and work of Christ was a great demonstration of generosity on behalf of humankind and he wanted everyone to understand it that way too. He, being rich—that is, being

the Owner and Lord of the universe—agreed to become one of us and live with all the precariousness that being a human being implies. The One who was truly rich became poor, so much so that Luke recorded the following words of Christ: “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). However, the same One who recognized that He possessed nothing on this earth devoted Himself to doing good through preaching, teaching, and the ministry of healing toward the sick and vulnerable. Jesus was undoubtedly generosity turned into human form! No one, ever, neither in the time of Christ nor later, has surpassed the generosity manifested by the Master of Galilee. Jesus demonstrated solidarity and kindness to all kinds of people, regardless of nationality, sex, or social, physical, emotional, or spiritual status.

Now, it’s one thing to consider the generosity of Christ and quite another to understand the implications of generosity. Again, we will turn to Paul to understand the theological implications of Christ’s generosity: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:5–11).

There is no doubt that Philippians 2:5–11 is one of the richest passages in the entire New Testament, a passage that unfolds before us the great truths of Christ’s divinity, His incarnation, and His saving work. With this in mind, let’s analyze and reflect on this passage and its meaning to try to understand what the Bible means to us when it speaks of Jesus’s grace or generosity toward us. In addition, we will note that Paul made a very deep theological statement but with very practical purposes, which proved relevant to a church that struggled with selfish attitudes and power struggles. This reality



human beings
are servants one way
or another;
there's no other
possibility for us.
Either we serve God,
or we serve Satan.

makes Philippians 2:5–11 more important to the twenty-first century society preferring individualism and selfishness over altruism or generosity.

THE GENEROSITY OF THE INCARNATION

Faced with the unfathomable mystery of Christ's incarnation, all we can do is surrender to the love and majesty of the One who was willing to make such a sacrifice for us. In fact, when we consider the Incarnation, we notice that Christ's generosity did not manifest itself through a financial transaction but reached its maximum expression in the fact that Christ was willing to forget Himself, to renounce His prerogatives, and to make Himself "of no reputation," not for any personal gain, but to benefit you and me.

Christ was not a good man who sacrificed Himself to help other human beings. He wasn't someone who had a lot and gave something for others to have. He was not a very spiritual and religious person who, with His heart filled with the love of God, gave Himself, body and soul, to a work of love. All of the above would be admirable if it were said of any of us, but Christ's case transcends all this. But Jesus is God! He wasn't someone who had a lot and gave a part—He is the Owner of the whole universe and gave Himself completely to save us. Jesus didn't help His neighbor; He became our neighbor and saved us.

For us, showing generosity isn't complicated, first, because we know how to help others if we want to. In addition, we can be generous just by helping a little. We don't have to stop being who we are or give up everything we have. With a little faith in God and love for Him, we can do a lot of good for others. But the case of Christ is very different because in order to show generosity for us, He first had to make Himself like us, and for that He had to "give Himself up," or rather, "empty" Himself. In His case, it wasn't enough to give a little of what He had. He had to give everything, and He did so moved by His own loving nature. That's why Jesus is our example of generosity: because His love and kindness led him to relinquish His divine privileges and give His very self.

When we consider Jesus from this perspective, we notice that His generosity is not only manifested when He heals us of an illness or provides food for our table or helps us get some money. While all of these are certainly part of our Savior's generous provision, they are matters in which a good doctor or a person who has money can also help us. Beyond the material, and therefore the temporal, the Bible seeks to make us understand that Jesus not only shows generosity toward us, but also personifies generosity itself, and that is much greater and more important than getting what we want at any given time. This means that the essence of Christ is being generous to His creatures. He is absolutely free from selfishness and pride, which are the essence of sin.

That's why Paul said that Jesus, being equal with God, did not cling to that reality with all its rights. He did not cling to His place as part of the Deity but agreed to occupy a much lower place than His own and to being treated as He did not deserve, so that we could have the possibility of being reconciled with God and taking back the place we lost when we rebelled against the Creator.

When we speak about Christ and His selfless attitude, we cannot help but also look at Lucifer, the highest-ranking angel in heaven who became Satan because he was unwilling to recognize and accept his rightful place, carrying out a crude attempt to usurp the place of God Himself. The same thing happened with our first parents. When they came out of God's hands, they were perfect creatures. However, from

that excellent position, human beings have become sinners, rebellious against God, and increasingly depraved and evil. And it all started when Adam and Eve tried to “be like gods.”

What Satan did, and then our first parents, incited by him, has only one name: **selfishness**; that is, we chose to live thinking only of ourselves and believing that everything else, including God, must revolve around our desires and preferences. Selfishness comes from **pride**, which makes us believe that we are what we are not, and that we occupy a place that we really don't and have rights that haven't been given to us nor have we won. In other words, pride distorts and corrupts us.

However, Jesus, who didn't need to usurp God's place because He was God, didn't rebel, didn't cling to His privileged position, but was willing to accept a much lower place than He was entitled to (“though He was rich . . . He became poor,” Paul said) and agreed to submit in obedience to God's will until the end of His earthly existence.

What Jesus did is the ultimate example of **generosity**, for He put us first. He gave up His wealth so that it might be given to us and He accepted our poverty as His own. He humbled Himself, gave Himself up, and did it all to make our redemption possible.

With all our pride and selfishness, both Satan and us human beings have only obtained condemnation and death, but Jesus, through generosity and humility, obtained a name that is above all other names. He who didn't contend to demand that He be treated like God, because of His generosity will see the day when every tongue will praise Him and every knee will bow before Him. He who never tried to sit on God's throne, which rightfully belonged to Him, will see the day when everyone will recognize Him as Lord and righteous God.

GENEROSITY IS MANIFESTED THROUGH OBEDIENCE

Paul developed a very significant argument when he said that Jesus, being equal to God, did not cling to that status, but “relinquished” it; that is, He voluntarily agreed to live an experience during which He would not take advantage of His divine prerogatives. Paul went on to say that Jesus took “the very nature of a servant,” becoming like

human beings. This commentary by Paul not only shows the great sacrifice Christ made for us, but also speaks of the human reality.

Philippians 2:5–11 tells us that human beings, biblically speaking, are servants. Another word to describe our reality is that we are “slaves.” It is something that many, very many, don’t know, don’t understand well, or simply don’t accept, but it is our reality. Human beings are servants one way or another; there’s no other possibility for us. Either we serve God, or we serve Satan. We either align our lives with God’s will, or we align it with Satan’s. Either we use our body, time, and talents in ways that glorify God, or we do so in ways that show we serve another power. Either we put our resources in God’s treasury, or they end up in Satan’s treasury. Those are the two great powers competing for the control of every human being: God and Satan, good and evil. And we are all servants of one of them, even if we do not acknowledge it or refuse to accept that reality.

Thus, in deciding whom we will serve, we must recognize that it isn’t possible to serve both powers at the same time (see Matthew 6:24) any more than we can escape into some space where we live free from one of them (see Matthew 12:30). Ignoring this spiritual reality means living a lie that exposes us to falling under the control of the wrong power.

For that reason, Paul told the believers of Philippi, who were all looking after their own interests, that instead of having that contentious attitude, they should imitate the attitude of Christ Jesus, who, being God, showed humility by submitting to the Father.

When we think of Jesus and the salvation He obtained for us, we don’t always reflect on how He achieved that salvation. That’s why Paul helps us understand that Jesus saved us, not only by dying on the cross and rising on the third day (although that was certainly the pinnacle act that sealed the whole process), but also that our salvation began with Christ’s humiliation. If Jesus had not humbled Himself and agreed to renounce His divine prerogatives and become one of us, what happened on the cross would never have taken place. While it’s true that the Cross is the clearest image we have of Jesus’s generosity, it’s also true that the Cross is the result of a life of self-denial and humiliation. Hence, for Paul, Christ’s humility is the source of His generosity.

This means that there's no other way you and I can stop being under the bondage of sin except by becoming servants of God, as Jesus did. The Bible says that, "when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4). The Scriptures present an interesting balance: Jesus "came" (Matthew 5:17; 9:13; 10:34; Mark 1:38; John 5:43; 8:14; 9:39), but Jesus and the rest of the authors declared that He was sent (John 4:34; 5:30, 36, 37). It was the Father who gave His Son to mankind (John 3:16). It was the Father who told His Son what He had to say and teach (John 8:28). It was the Father who decided the moment when Jesus had to go to the cross (Matthew 26:39, 42). It was the Father who decided that Jesus had to go through that moment alone (Matthew 27:46; Isaiah 63:2, 3). It was the Father who resurrected Him (Acts 2:32; 5:30; Romans 8:11; Galatians 1:1). It was the Father who accepted His sacrifice for us and gave Jesus the exalted name that He now has (Philippians 2:5–11). In other words, everything Christ won for us, He won by humbling Himself and submitting to the will of His Father. And that's precisely the only way a human being can please God. We must make the decision to surrender to His will. This is why Jesus tells us, "Learn from Me."

But there's still more, because in the case of Jesus, He not only showed His generosity by humbling Himself, but while being in the condition of a human being—which in itself implied humiliation to the eternal God—He humbled Himself through obedience and maintained that attitude until His own death.

That's why what Paul said in these verses must be considered among the major biblical statements about Christ and His work on our behalf. The message that Paul tried to convey in his Letter to the Philippians was that Christ's generosity was not only an exceptional matter, reaching its maximum demonstration on the Cross, but that Jesus's attitude of generosity was eternal—it had no beginning or end, since He agreed before the foundation of the world to humble Himself out of love for us. Being God, He agreed to become a servant. And already reduced to the condition of a servant, He humbled Himself even more, becoming obedient to the will of His Father until death. Jesus's generosity is limitless. He was not generous just once and for all; He continues to be generous to us every day and every moment (see Lamentations 3:22, 23).

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esus's generosity is limitless. He was not generous just once and for all; He continues to be generous to us every day and every moment.

This is the reason why Paul was so insistent that we understand the idea that Christ's generosity is the foundation on which the whole plan of salvation rests. We need to understand what Jesus's generosity meant so that we can appreciate more what He did and what He is for us. We are to reflect on Christ's generosity and on the results of that generosity in order to learn to live according to His example and thus fulfill God's revealed will.

When we understand the generosity of Christ, we will realize that what God expects and asks of us is not that we die crucified on a cross, because that only made sense when the One on the cross was Jesus, the Son of God. What God does ask of us is that we crucify our "self" with Christ (see Galatians 2:20). This means that, motivated by the same generosity that impelled Christ, we understand that the path that leads us upward begins by going downward. The Bible says that "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). When God asks us to humble ourselves to His will, what He is telling us is that the surest path is to obey His will, to stop living as if we were gods and accept God's lordship and government in all aspects of our lives.

Jesus says to you today, "Learn from Me, for I am generous. Learn to be humble before God. Don't try to take control; let God rule your life. Don't try to chart your own way; recognize that He is the way. Don't think you can invent your own truth; admit that God is the truth."

That was the key to Christ's triumph: He forgot Himself, what He was, and what belonged to Him. He became a servant and learned through obedience (Hebrews 5:8) to live as a servant, letting the Father direct everything. Today, the name of Jesus is above all other names; today, He is the source of salvation for everyone who wants to be saved; and today, the Father loves Him because He gave His life because of His love for you and me (John 10:17).

The question that now arises before us is this: how will we demonstrate Christ's generosity? How can I truly be a servant of God, subject to His will? Perhaps we can begin by answering the main question: who governs my life? And if we want to go further, then we must consider the following questions:

1. Am I humble before God in caring for my body? Do I glorify Him in eating, drinking, dressing, working, resting, or having fun? Does the way my body looks and the way I treat it say that God rules my life?
2. Am I humble before God in managing my time? Is every day the same for me or can I really say that the Sabbath is different? Would anyone who sees how I use my time say that I make the best use of it and that I try to please God in this area of my life?
3. Am I humble before God in the way I get and spend money? Can I ask for God's blessing upon the way I earn money? Does my use of money say that God is the owner of that money, or does it say I am? Do I return tithe? Am I generous in giving offerings to God? Do I tithe and give offerings because I am an Adventist or because I have made the decision to obey God in everything He asks of me?
4. Am I humble before God in the way I use my talents and abilities? Do I see my profession, my knowledge, and my skills as something that belongs to me or as something that God has bestowed upon me? Am I so busy taking advantage of my abilities that I don't have time to put them in the service of God and His church? Am I a blessing to others or do I just brag about my blessings without others receiving anything from me?.

These questions say a lot about whether we have learned from Jesus's generosity. The issues implicit in these questions are the kinds of things that say which side we're on, who we serve, and what attitude characterizes us. That's why, even today, Paul's message should resonate loud and clear in every church, in every home, and in the mind of every Christian: "Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). We need to listen once again to our beloved Savior's invitation: "Learn from Me" (Matthew 11:29, NKJV). May God help us to be generous like Jesus.

12

Jesus,
Our Model
of Service





“For who is greater,
the one who is at the table
or the one who serves?

Is it not the one
who is at the table?
But I am among you
as one who serves”
(Luke 22:27).



THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY has excellent examples of selfless service. Perhaps you grew up listening to the stories of Diana of Wales and Teresa of Calcutta, to mention just two famous examples of the twentieth century. However, we must recognize that no one on this planet has surpassed the life of service of Jesus, the Son of God. That’s why any list we make would be unfinished without His supreme example of service and all the things we can learn from His life in order to imitate Him. Fortunately, we have enough information in the Holy Scriptures about this aspect of the Messiah’s life so we can have a clear idea of what it means to serve God and our neighbor from the perspective of the Nazarene.

To continue with what we learned in the previous chapter, perhaps we should look again at Philippians 2:5–7: “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

According to this passage, for Christ serving was neither a responsibility nor a strategy to gain friends or followers. Service was an innate quality of the Master, the very essence of His humanity. That's why He was always serving, regardless of the activity He was doing at the time.

BORN TO SERVE

In the Gospels, there are several statements of Christ Himself that help us understand the service-oriented mentality that prevailed in Jesus. In Mark 10:45, He said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." On another occasion, He had His disciples reflect on these words: "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27).

From these two passages, we can conclude that for Jesus, His mission consisted in serving, and that service implies greatness. Though it may seem counterproductive, we must admit that nowadays, service doesn't always generate joy in those who provide it, while others serve as long as the service is useful to them for a later purpose, whether apparent or not so obvious. In fact, there are those who serve because they are obligated to do so, and if they could dodge such a "burden," they would do so without a second thought. And all this happens because serving is not the same as being a servant from one's heart.

Now then, Jesus not only assumed the title of "servant," but also behaved as one. In this sense, the most sobering experience for His disciples is found in the Gospel of John:

It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

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erving is not the same
as being a servant
from one's heart.

He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:1–15).

There are several lessons in this account. One of the most important is that there is no place for pride where Jesus is, no desire for power or prestige or competition to try to be in the highest position.

THE GREATNESS OF SERVICE

A detail that we cannot overlook is that John's account shows that none of the disciples was willing to take a servant's place and wash the

feet of the others. This detail is relevant when we take into account that, according to the Gospels, the disciples frequently argued about which of them would be the greatest. Thus, it is logical to assume that none of them wanted the others to identify him as the “servant” of the group because in the mentality of the disciples, that implied accepting the lowest place according to the social parameters of the time.

Under those circumstances, it must have been very shocking for the disciples to see Jesus get up, take off His cloak, gird Himself with a towel, and begin to wash and dry the feet of all of them. However, perhaps most surprisingly, the Master did not reproach them for not having been willing to do the work reserved for the servants but, by example, He dismantled before their eyes the fantasy world based on power and position that existed in their minds.

That night, in the upper room, Jesus taught that living a loving relationship with Him involves accepting service as a way of life. He demonstrated by His actions that for Him, greatness was synonymous with selfless and joyful service on behalf of others, that dignity was inherent in a heart willing to give itself in love and service, and that the only and greatest position available to His followers was that of servants. Before the Last Supper, the disciples conceived of ministry as an activity marked by selfishness and characterized by a pursuit of preeminence at any price. However, on the last night Jesus shared with them before His crucifixion, He challenged them with a service-based model of ministry. He visualized them as a group of people with a genuine willingness to do everything in their power to help other people, regardless of how humble the task was in order to achieve it.

Every Christian should meditate on the fact that Jesus dedicated His last meeting with the apostles to reminding them that He had not come to be served but to serve, that He had not come to demand the highest place but to give everything so that others would be raised to God and salvation. Jesus dignified service and elevated it to the highest and most desirable position for those who want to live lives that make a difference. The memory of that night would no doubt be forever imprinted on the minds of the disciples and would be an inextinguishable motivation for what took place with them after Christ’s resurrection.

THE BASIS OF SERVICE

When we delve into the reasons why Christ made the decision to serve humanity, we notice that Christ's spirit of service was based on love for God and human beings. When the Master served people, He valued them and recognized their dignity. That's why He washed the feet of His disciples—to show them that they were worthy. Of course, recognizing the dignity of His disciples didn't affect Christ's position at all; after washing their feet, He continued to be their Teacher and Lord. He attested to it when He said, "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am" (John 11:13). By the end of the incident, Jesus had not only affirmed His authority as Teacher and Lord, but had earned the respect and admiration of the apostles—and all because of His service!

By washing the disciples' feet, Jesus shattered the idea that to be great, you have to let others serve you. Of course, Jesus was aware that this concept was not only in the minds of His disciples, but was a well-established idea in society at the time . . . and that it continues today. That's reason we must regard the following statement as a fundamental part of what happened in the upper room: "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42–44).

Jesus showed with His example of service that when one loves God and people, the natural result will be the desire to help and bless others. Therefore, a position of authority will never be a valid excuse to stop serving or a justification for taking advantage of them. On the contrary, love leads us to serve with humility and joy from the position in which we find ourselves. Thus, Jesus said emphatically, "Yet it shall not be so among you" (verse 43, NKJV). In other words, Christ forbade that in His cause people might try to be in control of others or seek for ways to receive more recognition than others. These attitudes are contrary to the example set by Christ, and He asks His followers to dismiss them.



Christ's death

was the greatest service ever rendered to mankind.

Thus, Jesus has, without a doubt, all the moral authority to tell us, “Learn from Me and imitate My life of service.” He not only asks us to be willing to serve everywhere and at all times, but He also taught us that we should serve as He did: by example, with humility, with simplicity, and with joy. When Jesus walked on the earth, He served the poor, the rich, the ignorant, the knowledgeable, men, women, children, sinners, the despised, and the religious. He taught the gospel to all who wanted to hear it; fed the hungry people who went to hear Him; and healed the sick regardless of nationality, religion, or social status. He helped always and at any time, because He made service to others His ministry; because His ministry was to serve, not to be served.

The book *Steps to Christ* describes the life of the Master in these words: “The Saviour’s life on earth was not a life of ease and devotion to Himself, but He toiled with persistent, earnest, untiring effort for the salvation of lost mankind. From the manger to Calvary He followed the path of self-denial and sought not to be released from arduous tasks, painful travels and exhausting care and labor” (ch. 9, p. 78).

SERVICE IN RETROSPECT

When Jesus, gathered with His disciples in the upper room, girded Himself with the towel, took the basin, and washed the feet of all of them, He not only solved the inconvenience caused by the absence

of a servant to do that work, but that night, He elevated service to a kind of royalty that must be achieved by all who want to be part of His kingdom. While the disciples were absorbed in their discussions about who would have more prestige, the Master left them speechless saying, “Things will not be like that here. That happens outside this circle, but here it will be different. And since you’re only used to thinking the way you think and act out there, then I have set an example for you so that you may also do as I have done.”

How embarrassed they must have felt to see their Master doing what they thought was degrading! No wonder Peter tried to “correct” that “shame” by refusing to let Christ wash his feet. It has always been like that among us: we don’t like those who show our defects with their virtues, those who with their humility reveal our pride and arrogance. However, Jesus made Peter see that it wasn’t necessary to hide Christ’s humility for reasons of “shame.” That’s why He said to him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me” (John 13:8). That is, “If I do not help you understand this lesson, the damage will be greater. You will be disqualified from the kingdom.” Just before that, the Master told him, “You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand” (John 13:7).

Jesus knew that His disciples did not properly understand His work or mission. They had the idea that Jesus was the king who had come to restore Jewish rule over the other nations. That’s why they were preparing to take the most advantageous position in such a scenario. And that’s why it was frustrating for Peter to see the king who would make him great girded with a towel and washing the feet of others. That distorted view of Christ and His work was what made them become totally disillusioned when they saw Him nailed to the cross. If seeing Him washing feet already made them suspect that something was wrong with their expectations, seeing Him on the cross convinced them that everything had been a “failure.” It was for that reason that Jesus told Peter “later you will understand.” That “later” would be the Resurrection, when they, at last, with their understanding opened by the Holy Spirit, realized that death on Calvary had actually been victory over sin, that the cross was necessary within God’s great plan of salvation, and that it was on that cross that Christ

conquered a name above every name and became the eternal source of salvation for mankind (see Luke 24:46–48).

It was only after the Resurrection that the disciples understood that Christ's death was the greatest service ever rendered to mankind, that He should never have died because He had nothing to pay. Then the disciples understood that it was all about serving others, helping others, saving others. Then they understood that the cross was the instrument of salvation and the throne from which Christ reigns over the souls of those He conquered with His love and redeemed with His blood. It was then that they understood the image of Christ girded with a towel and with a basin in His hands, washing the dirty feet of His disciples. Only by contemplating the empty cross and the risen Christ do we understand that God's work is always a work of love that demands humility, sacrifice, and surrender.

When the disciples understood that service is the mark of true greatness in Christ's kingdom, they then experienced a transformation in their lives. The book of Acts shows a church that was alive, that served the community and spared no effort in preaching the gospel. That's why even today, more than two thousand years later, the followers of Christ need to listen carefully to the voice of the Master saying to us, "Learn from Me to serve and not to be served."

Every true disciple of Christ is recognized by others as a servant. Paul even said, "This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed" (1 Corinthians 4:1). Thus, all of us who have made the decision to follow Christ must be willing to serve Him regardless of our social or economic position. The Lord Jesus never made such exceptions or distinctions. On the contrary, when a woman came to Him requesting privileges and honor for her sons, Jesus was very emphatic in answering the following: "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26, 27). I don't know if Mrs. Zebedee learned the lesson, but her two sons definitely did.

A CHURCH OF SERVANTS

By this point we should have no doubts remaining. No one, absolutely no one, should come to church seeking positions of authority

in order to try to have prestige and power over others from that position. Jesus, the Owner and Lord of the universe, did not come from heaven to humiliate us, but humbled Himself to save us. He did not come to control us and impose His power over us. Rather, He came to rescue us and give us freedom and to offer us the power of God to overcome the evil one and his temptations.

With this in mind, every member of Christ's church should sincerely ask and answer the following two questions:

- ❖ In what ways am I serving Christ in my life?
- ❖ Is the church a place where I come to seek for myself, or where I come to offer my service to God and to my neighbors?

There is a great difference between “growing old” in the bosom of the church and “growing” in the grace of Christ. Ellen G. White wrote that “the only way to grow in grace is to be disinterestedly doing the very work which Christ has enjoined upon us—to engage, to the extent of our ability, in helping and blessing those who need the help we can give them” (*Steps to Christ*, ch. 9, p. 80).

One of the reasons Christ asks us to be servants is because in this way, God's blessings multiply on behalf of others. God has designed His work so that, although He is the head and goes ahead of us, He often uses instruments like us to carry out His work. Thus, the more people who are serving selflessly, the more channels that will exist through which God's power will be poured out on behalf of others.

Another of the great blessings we receive from serving is character building. Ellen G. White also wrote that “the spirit of unselfish labor for others gives depth, stability, and Christlike loveliness to the character, and brings peace and happiness to its possessor. The aspirations are elevated. There is no room for sloth or selfishness. Those who thus exercise the Christian graces will grow and will become strong to work for God. They will have clear spiritual perceptions, a steady, growing faith, and an increased power in prayer” (*ibid.*). Thus, selfless service is not only a privilege for every Christian, but also a great blessing.

It is for that reason that we want to invite you, dear reader, to serve God and humanity by following the selfless example of Christ. There are many opportunities for service both inside and outside the church. You can serve within your circle of action by helping those closest to you. You can serve at home, at school, at work, or in your neighborhood. There is a great work to be done. Some need food, clothes, a little money, medicine, or a place to stay. Others need support because they are sick, friendship, acceptance, comfort, love, understanding, and empathy. There are many people who need someone to listen to them; who need a prayer, a visit, or a word of encouragement; or they need someone to defend them from abuse, violence, and intolerance. There is so much to do! Jesus was right when He taught that instead of arguing about positions of authority, we should devote ourselves to providing help to those in need.

Of course, as members of Christ's church, the greatest service we can render to the world is the preaching of the gospel. In fact, the church is God's agency in this world to organize and carry out a ministry of restoration on behalf of human beings. The mission to serve was given by Christ to the church, not to a group or to a type of people within it: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:19, 20). These words of Christ apply to all of us and also show that the greatest service we can give people is helping them know God and His wonderful plan for them.

Since preaching the gospel is the greatest service we can render, don't you think we should all work together so that the church can carry out the Great Commission? There are many ways you and I can help and follow Christ's example of service. Perhaps the one that first comes to mind is the active preaching of the gospel, the testimony of which we have already spoken in other chapters. You can also use your talents to bless the lives of others. You can help the church fulfill the mission of bringing the gospel to the whole world through your faithfulness by returning tithes, which are then used to sustain the pastoral ministry, devoted to the full-time preaching of the gospel.

You also help the gospel reach new places through your generous offerings and you collaborate so that thousands of local congregations remain open and reach people for Christ.

You can also help by accepting leadership or support responsibilities in one of the church's ministries, visiting other church members and friends to pray and study the Bible with them, or singing in the choir, serving in the Sabbath School, helping in the children's department, collaborating with the youth, or any other aspect of the church. This was the call Jesus made to Peter after his spiritual restoration, when He said to him three times, "Feed My sheep and My lambs" (see John 21:15–17). Peter accepted that tender call and devoted the rest of his life to selfless service.

When it comes to serving, the most important thing is to do what you can at every opportunity God gives you. The way it's done, how many people you can reach, or whether someone will recognize the work are not the most important issues. It's about understanding that we are children of God and followers of Christ, and that our identity is clearly manifested in the way we act and imitate our Master's humility, generosity, and spirit of service.

As we contemplate Jesus serving those most in need, the desire to imitate Him, to be like Him, to serve as He did, and to give everything as He did must be awakened within us. Today Jesus tells you, "Learn from Me to serve God and others." That's the fundamental reason why we are part of God's people, to experience in our lives the transforming power of Jesus that will lead us from postmodern selfishness to biblical generosity. What are you waiting for? Today may be the first day of your new life of service.

13

Jesus, Our Model of Faithfulness





“And He said to them,
‘Why did you seek Me?
Did you not know
that I must be about
My Father’s business?’ ”
(Luke 2:49, NKJV).



EACH YEAR, Mary and Joseph, the earthly parents of the Lord Jesus, traveled to Jerusalem to partake of the Passover according to Jewish custom. The Gospel of Luke says that when Christ turned twelve, His parents took Him to that event for the first time. When the celebration was over, an incident complicated the family’s return to Nazareth. Jesus was not with His parents! And the worst thing was that they had already traveled a whole day when they realized it. At first, they were confident that the young Jesus was with relatives or with other travelers they knew, but when they realized that the Son of God was not among the group, they had to return to the city, and it was not until three days later that they found Him, in the Temple, sitting among the experts in Jewish law and Scriptures, listening to them and asking them questions.

Upon finding Jesus, Mary reproached Him for the great distress and despair they had experienced as they anxiously searched for Him everywhere; they asked Him why He had done such a thing to them. Christ’s response matters a lot for

what we're going to address in this last chapter. "And He said to them, 'Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?' " (Luke 2:49, NKJV). Then Luke added with insight that the parents didn't actually understand that answer, but Jesus went back to Nazareth with them and lived subject to them as He grew in wisdom, stature, and favor with God and human beings (see Luke 2:50–52).

Before considering this statement and its implications, we must keep in mind that this was a response of Jesus to His earthly parents, whom He respected and obeyed. Another element that we have to consider is Jesus's age: barely twelve years old. About eighteen more years would pass before the Nazarene began His public ministry (see Luke 3:23).

That said, this incident presents us with a Jesus who was sure of His mission and clear about His loyalties. In fact, Jesus had no qualms about telling His earthly parents, the people for whom He had the most consideration in this world, that His primary commitment was to "His Father's business," and that no person or relationship in this world would occupy a higher place in His life than His relationship with His heavenly Father. In other words, we see here the first public evidence that Jesus had come to do God's will in this world and that He would remain faithful to His mission regardless of the situation.

IMITATE THE FAITHFULNESS OF CHRIST

During the last chapters of this book, we have analyzed the practical implications of Jesus's invitation: "Learn from Me." In this chapter, we will take a look at the last component in the list of the qualities of Jesus that we must imitate: His faithfulness. Christ can rightly tell His followers to learn from Him to be faithful to God because He set that example with His life, He taught that with His words, and He challenged His followers to show faithfulness unto death.

Jesus spoke repeatedly of faithfulness, of the importance that God gives to it, and of the implications it has for human beings. It was Jesus who said that those servants of God who were found faithful and living wisely when He returned in glory would receive His approval (see Matthew 24:45–47). He also said that only those who served

God faithfully would be welcomed by Him into the kingdom of heaven to be with Him for all eternity (Matthew 25:21, 23). It was Jesus who taught that he who is faithful in the little things would also be found faithful in much, and the same applies when being unjust (Luke 16:10). He also spoke about the danger of being unfaithful to God in the handling of worldly wealth and of any other kind of blessing that belongs to God (Luke 16:11, 12).

However, as we have said before, for Jesus, faithfulness was not only a teaching that we must know but a value that we must live, and that's why the New Testament writers went out of their way to highlight Jesus's faithfulness.

One of the most significant statements we find in the New Testament regarding Jesus's faithfulness is this:

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory (Hebrews 3:1–6).

In trying to understand the meaning of these passages, it's important that we understand what it says in the context of the entire Letter to the Hebrews. In that letter, you can see from the beginning the author's interest in demonstrating his claim that Jesus Christ was superior or better than all (the angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron . . .), especially when it comes to access to God, representing Him before human beings, and reconciling ourselves with Him.

The author of Hebrews had already presented in the previous chapters the fact that Jesus is superior to the prophets and the angels, and then said that He is superior to Moses, considered in Jewish tradition as the man who had been closest to God, so close that the Bible itself said that they spoke "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11; see also Numbers 12:8), in addition to being the

means God had used to communicate the law that formalized the covenant between God and His people.

In order to understand the superiority of Jesus, the author of Hebrews asks all of us who have received the heavenly call to “consider” Jesus Christ, which means to contemplate Him, observe Him, study Him, and above all, imitate Him, because He is the only One who can take us to God. What is it that we’ll discover and learn if we look closely at Christ? We’ll see that Jesus was faithful to the One who appointed Him; that is, He was faithful to His heavenly Father. Hebrews says that Jesus was faithful in all God’s house, as was Moses, but in a dimension greater than that of the latter, and therefore receiving greater honor. We can appreciate better the faithfulness to which these passages refer through two meaningful images that appear in Hebrews 3:1.

Jesus, the superior Apostle. The word “apostle” is of Greek origin (*apostolos*, to be more exact) and means “sent.” This means that Jesus was the Father’s envoy. He had exclusivity in representation, access, and execution of the plan of salvation. That’s why the church understood from the beginning and proclaimed that there’s salvation only in Jesus, and “in no one else” (Acts 4:12).

Christ was Heaven’s ambassador for the salvation of mankind in the highest possible sense: He is Immanuel, God with us! He was the voice of God speaking to us and had all the backing of heaven in His mission of salvation. In His mission as an apostle of God, Jesus remained faithful to the Father. He devoted Himself exclusively to His “Father’s business” (see Luke 2:49; John 4:34), to doing His Father’s will (John 5:30; 6:38), and to teaching and saying whatever the Father directed Him to do (John 12:49; 14:10); in short, He never put His will before that of the Father (Luke 22:42). In fact, when the enemy tried to convince Him to take charge of His life and direct the plan of salvation by Himself, He firmly rejected those temptations and proclaimed that He would obey God’s Word and submit only to the Father (see chapter 10).

When Jesus says, “Learn from Me to be faithful,” He is no doubt inviting us to consider how He carried out His part in the plan of salvation, how He related to His Father, and how He showed who was in charge and who accepted the position of servant to obey out of love for us.

Jesus demonstrated by His example that being faithful to God is not going only where we want or doing only what suits us. Jesus taught us that being faithful involves dying to self and letting God take first place. Perhaps that's why most people who fall prey to unfaithfulness to the Lord manifest the same attitude. I have constantly heard people say, "I know what's best," "I can handle tithes and offerings more efficiently than God's plan for them." However, complete faithfulness springs from a heart that has decided to give God first place. For that reason, Jesus was able to fulfill His role as apostle or envoy of God. If Jesus, the eternal Son of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, ceded control to the Father, don't you think that we, imperfect human beings, who will never be on the same level as Christ, will be more secure if we manifest an attitude of obedience and faithfulness to the Father's designs? When the Letter to the Hebrews identifies Jesus as the apostle of God, it's showing Him as someone who followed the plan of salvation to the letter, without deviating in the slightest from the plans of the heavenly council. That's what is called faithfulness: doing what God says we should do and how He says we should do it.

Jesus, the supreme High Priest. The second image that the Letter to the Hebrews presents of Jesus's faithfulness is His role as high priest of the faith we profess. This is an impressive statement and is full of meaning. The high priest in the Bible was nothing more than the mediator between God and human beings. When the Bible refers to Christ as our high priest, it alludes to the fact that the work that the Father assigned to the Son had to do with the creation of a way of understanding between both parties, meaning God and human beings, who were separated by sin. Christ had to reveal to mankind who God is in such a way that we could believe and trust in His love, His forgiveness, and the fact that He was willing to reconcile them to God. Put another way, Jesus had to build our faith in God, and that faith had to be a kind of bridge that, as we crossed it, would take us back to God. That's why it says later in Hebrews that He is the author and finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

However, in addition to revealing to us who God is and how much He loves us, as a priest Jesus also had to represent humanity before

the divinity and show that our debt had been paid on the cross, that the price to free us from slavery had been satisfied, and that rebellion against God would no longer remain activated in those of us who have accepted His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. Thus, through the ministry of Christ, the way was paved for human beings and God to meet again. Hebrews puts it this way: Christ has opened “a new and living way . . . for us,” to the very presence of God (Hebrews 10:20).

This was a task that could not be carried out by someone who was only God, because He could not relate to humans on an equal level; neither could it be fulfilled by someone who was only human, because human beings on their own can never have access to the holiness of God. The task of reconciling humanity with God had to fall on Someone who was God and man at the same time. And that’s what Christ did, because only He could do it (see Hebrews 4:14–16). That’s why “salvation is found in no one else”; that’s why “there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” outside the name of Christ Jesus (Acts 4:12). Ellen G. White summed up this idea well with the following words: “He who seeks to transform humanity must himself understand humanity. Only through sympathy, faith, and love can men be reached and uplifted. Here Christ stands revealed as the master teacher; of all that ever dwelt on the earth, He alone has perfect understanding of the human soul” (*Education*, ch. 8, p. 78).

Jesus was definitely faithful in His task as the High Priest of our faith. He showed us God as no one else could. The Bible says that “no one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (John 1:18, NKJV). Thanks to Christ, we can believe; through Him, we can trust and give ourselves to the love of God. The portrait of God that Christ gave us in Himself has opened a path of reconciliation because we now know that God is not angry with us but loves us and wants our salvation (John 3:16). We now know that the Father has not prepared a hell for us, but for the devil and his angels and, on the contrary, He has prepared an eternal kingdom for us (see Matthew 25:31, 41).

So Jesus is not only God’s representative before us (apostle), but He is also our representative before God (high priest). That’s why

Jesus, who was sure about His mission and His unique identity, proclaimed Himself as the Son of God and the Son of man at the same time (see Matthew 20:28; 8:20; Mark 8:38; Luke 18:8; John 1:51, etc.). As a man, He lived in this world and was tempted in everything, but without sinning (see Hebrews 4:15). The Letter to the Hebrews itself says that He “is not ashamed to call [us] brothers and sisters” (Hebrews 2:11). Referring to this, Ellen G. White wrote, “Christ ascended to heaven, bearing a sanctified, holy humanity. He took this humanity with Him into the heavenly courts, and through the eternal ages He will bear it.”¹ Jesus was, is, and will be God for all eternity, but Jesus is the God who became man and who will preserve that nature for eternity as a testimony that He saved every human being who dwells on the new earth. That’s why there is no doubt that He was faithful as High Priest.

In this context, then, Jesus showed by His example that being faithful to God means serving Him by fulfilling the ministry that He assigns to us. Those who are responsible are also faithful in what they have to do, and that’s why they are reliable. There’s no such thing as faithfulness without responsibility, according to what we see in the life of Christ. If Christ stands before us today to tell us “learn from Me,” it’s because He faithfully fulfilled His mission. Faithfulness is born in the heart as a voluntary decision and is seen in our actions and words every day. Faithfulness is obedience put into action.

SUPERIOR FAITHFULNESS

After having seen how Jesus’s faithfulness permeates His role as both apostle and high priest, we can conclude that Hebrews 3:1–6 seeks to present Jesus as the superior and supreme model of faithfulness. Since no one has been or will be as faithful as He is, no one else is qualified to be our role model, or, as Hebrews would say, worthy of our “considering” Him.

To better illustrate Jesus’s faithfulness to His mission, the author of Hebrews compared Him to Moses, the chief leader of God’s people, the one responsible for leading Israel out of Egypt, forming the nation of Israel, and leading it for forty years in the wilderness until it reached the borders of Canaan. By taking Moses as a point of comparison, the

author was aware that, in the Jewish mentality, Moses was the man who had had the closest relationship with God and the servant to whom the Lord had shown the greatest confidence and support. Moses was the deliverer, lawgiver, and prophet par excellence for Israel, and each of these functions was faithfully performed according to God's orders.

Thus, imagine now the surprise of readers when the apostle pointed out that Christ was superior in the faithfulness shown to His Father, first, because His condition was not the same as that of Moses. Jesus was the Son of God, while Moses was only the servant of God. Moses, therefore, served in God's house, but Christ was the Creator of everything, including that house of Israel in which Moses served. Moses was the intermediary for the law to reach the Israelites, but "Christ is the culmination [purpose] of the law" (Romans 10:4) for all human beings. Moses served God by leading the people of Israel out of Egypt and then leading them to the earthly Canaan, but Jesus agreed to become God's Servant to make possible the deliverance of all mankind and lead all those saved to the heavenly Canaan.

In short, we can say that Moses knew God, spoke to God face to face, saw the glory of God, and therefore, knew more about God than everyone else in Israel. But regarding Jesus, suffice it to say that He is God! Therefore, He has the greatest honor and has received the highest name and position from the Father because He alone is the source of salvation for the entire human race.

Because of all this, if we want to understand what it means to be faithful to God and what the faithfulness that God accepts and approves is, we only have to look at Jesus and learn from Him, from His teachings, and from His example of life. From Him, we will certainly learn that to be faithful to God is to go wherever He wants us to go and to do whatever He wants us to do, and that everything else is a mere by-product of the above.

This is how we come to Hebrews 3:6, where we are told that Christ's incomparable faithfulness will be effective in us and through us as long as we keep our trust in Christ steadfast to the end. Unfortunately, we very often think of faithfulness as if it were an ability we develop and by which we please God with the things we do or say,

but the great biblical truth is that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6). In other words, faithfulness is really faith expressed in deeds and words. In fact, in both Hebrew and Greek the same word is used for “faith” as for “faithfulness,” which is why it is so important to follow the counsel of Hebrews and “consider” Christ, look at Him, and imitate Him so that we develop our faith in Him and have that faith leads us on the path of faithfulness.

- ❖ That path of faithfulness translates into the fact that since Jesus dwells in us because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, we must take care of our body with the care that the temple of God deserves, taking care of it diligently.
- ❖ That path of faithfulness involves believing that God created our world in six days and rested on the seventh day and sanctified it. Accepting this truth will lead us to honor God by observing the Sabbath, the monument of Creation.
- ❖ That path of faithfulness entails believing that each day is a new gift of God’s mercy and as such, we must manage time wisely, knowing that it is a gift for which we will have to give an account to God.
- ❖ That path of faithfulness also requires the acknowledgment that God owns the gold and silver, that He is the One who gives us the ability to generate wealth, and that we owe everything we have and are to His grace. This will produce in us an unparalleled joy when we participate in returning the tenth of our income that belongs to Him as recognition that He is the Owner of everything. In addition, by giving Him our voluntary and generous offerings, we say “thank You” and show Him our love and generosity.
- ❖ That path of faithfulness also means that no one receives anything if it is not given to them from above. Therefore, “every good gift and every perfect gift is . . . from the Father of lights” (James 1:17, NKJV), from the God of love. Understanding this will lead me to feel delight when I place my gifts and abilities in the service of the Lord and His church.

As we can see, being faithful to God isn’t doing the best we can come up with; it isn’t improving our behavior until it pleases God. More than this, faithfulness is a spiritual work that God does

in us and that begins when we focus on Christ and learn who He is and what He has done for us. The Letter to the Hebrews then adds that, besides the faith we must hold steadfast to the end, we must also boast in the hope in order to remain part of God's house, or family.

Boasting in the blessed hope we have in Christ means giving God first place in our lives. It means that my whole life revolves around my faith in Christ. It means that my greatest longing is to be with Him and therefore, my first task every day is to consecrate myself to Him; my greatest expectation is to welcome Him when He returns in the clouds of heaven; my best business is to be faithful to Him in the little things here in order to receive great things when He receives me in His kingdom.

Boasting in the blessed hope is understanding that I am passing through this world and that there is no point in overloading myself with earthly things. Boasting in the blessed hope is not letting myself be dominated by fear but remembering that God has plans for me; it is trusting that if Christ died for me on the cross of Calvary, then He will no doubt also come back to take me with Him. It is believing that there is certainly a place for me in heaven and that no one can take it from me or occupy it. Only those who boast in the blessed hope in Christ and who make it the greatest glory of their lives can make the decision to live for God, even as our planet continues in constant rebellion against God.

This is how Jesus was; from the time He was a child, He manifested an unwavering faith and faithfulness to the Father. John 13:3 says that Jesus knew "that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God" (NKJV). When Lazarus was resurrected, Jesus uttered the following prayer: "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me" (John 11:41, 42, NKJV). Christ's faith and faithfulness to the Father that was manifested at the age of twelve in Jerusalem accompanied Him throughout His life, up to the cross of Calvary. I want such a faith! I want to be faithful like that! Would you like to have such a faith?

You and I, who live in the time of the end, need such a faith. The last book of the Bible indicates that God's people at the end of time will be characterized, among other things, by keeping "the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12, NKJV). In other words, in order to get through the final events safely, you and I will need to manifest the same faith that Jesus manifested, that same faith that He bestows upon us through His Spirit.

LET US IMITATE GOD

We Christians have been called to imitate God (see Ephesians 5:1), and since God gave Himself completely in the person of Christ, He now asks for total surrender. That is the meaning behind the first commandment: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). God asks for exclusivity because He has already given it.

Being faithful to God, then, means giving the Lord the exclusivity of our love, our obedience, and our worship. In addition, it involves being thorough in our devotion to God, considering small matters as equally important as larger ones. In fact, Jesus said that "whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much" (Luke 16:10) and then immediately added, "So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" (verses 11, 12). In other words, Jesus cultivated faithfulness since His childhood, as we saw in the introduction to this chapter, and when the time came to make the supreme sacrifice, He was ready. Can the same thing be said about you and me today? If we waste a life of seventy or eighty years, will we be ready to manage an entire eternity? If we neglect our fragile and mortal body, will we be in a position to administer an incorruptible body? If we are petty with the pennies we earn here on earth and find it difficult to give back to God what belongs to Him, do you think God will entrust us with eternal riches? This life is a test to know if we are worthy to inherit eternal riches.

It is because of everything previously said that when we speak about faithfulness in ecclesiastical terms, we do so with practical rather than

only theoretical implications in mind. It was Jesus who said that “each tree is recognized by its own fruit” (Luke 6:44) and with this, He established that the most reliable way to verify the authenticity of our experience as Christians is through the concrete fruits that our life produces. That’s why it’s pertinent, before ending the topic of Jesus as our model of faithfulness, that we ask ourselves some questions for reflection.

- ❖ Am I a person who is trustworthy to God and to others? The Bible shows that God is looking for people who not only do what He says, but also do things the way He says. Being faithful is not doing the best we can; it’s doing what God says in the big things and in the little ones, in public and in private, in the individual and in the collective.
- ❖ Do my daily life, my decisions, and my preferences show that I live to glorify God? How do I use my time? Do I take care of my body? What do I like to talk about? What do I like to think about? How do I use the money and material goods God has given me? What image of God do those who know me see through my behavior?

It is because of issues like the aforementioned ones that the message of Christian stewardship is so timely and useful for our spiritual growth. When stewardship encourages and challenges us to be faithful to God, it’s inviting us to imitate Christ, and that’s what Christianity is all about. Therefore, stewardship is spirituality and salvation in Christ.

Don’t spend any more time in the church without deciding that your goal in life will be to glorify God in everything you do. Live like Jesus, who was faithful to His Father until His death on the cross. Like Christ, fulfill whatever God faithfully asks of you and remain that way until the end as He did, trusting in God and boasting in the hope that the One “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

