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EIGHT

Sanctification: Perfecting Holiness

Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, 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 shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

Very few professing Christians would debate that the above scripture is an invitation to salvation from the lips of Jesus. It is used frequently in evangelistic sermons. Jesus was offering rest to the weary. He was obviously not speaking of *physical* rest for those who are physically weary. Rather, He was promising rest for souls (v. 29) that are burdened with sin and guilt. He was offering salvation. But how is this salvation received? Jesus said it is received by taking His yoke upon us.

Perhaps the favorite antinomian interpretation of what it means to take Jesus' yoke is the following: Supposedly, Jesus is wearing a *double* yoke that He wants to share with us. The "proof" of this interpretation is that Jesus refers to the yoke as "*My yoke*," indicating that it must be a yoke around His own neck. "And of course," the antinomian thinks, "Jesus can't mean that He wants to *transfer* that yoke from His neck to my neck, so He must be wearing a double yoke, meant for two oxen! He thus wants me to be "yoked" to Him by faith, inseparably joined together on our journey to heaven."

But this far-fetched interpretation misses the point entirely. Taking Jesus' yoke is symbolic of submitting to His authority. He doesn't have a double-yoke around His neck that He wants us to share. He, the Master, is holding a yoke in His hands, standing before all the wild oxen who are presently laboring under a load of guilt, yoked to sin. To them He cries out, "If you want rest, there's only one way to get it. Take *My* yoke upon you. I want to be *your* Master, but you must submit to Me. Become My disciple; learn of Me, and the heavy burden on your soul will be lifted. The yoke I will place on you will be easy, and the burden I'll give you to pull will be light, because My Holy Spirit will enable you to obey Me. Once you've believed in Me and submitted to My lordship, you'll be spiritually reborn; then My commandments will not be burdensome" (see 1 John 5:3). This is Jesus' consistent salvation message.

"Bearing the yoke" is symbolic of coming under the authority of another. Scripture frequently uses the yoke imagery in this way.¹ Those who truly believe in Jesus submit to His authority. The yoked ox has one reason for existence: his master's service. He may not know exactly what his master wants him to do, but his will is submitted. He's ready to go to work.

Sanctification Defined

This chapter is about sanctification, or the growing holiness experienced by those who've been born again. To be sanctified means "to be set apart for holy use," so it is a word that beautifully describes God's plan for every true believer. The New Testament uses the word in two tenses: past and present. Believers have *been sanctified* and are *being sanctified*. The past tense reveals God's intention—He has forgiven our sins and given us His Holy Spirit to set us apart for His own holy use.² The present tense reveals the ongoing process of the

¹ See, for example, Gen. 27:40; Lev. 26:13; Deut. 28:48; 1 Kin. 12:10-11; Is. 14:25; 47:6; 58:6, 9; Jer. 2:20; 5:5; 27:8-12; 28:2-4, 14; 30:8; Ezek. 30:18; 34:27; Hos. 10:11; 11:4; Nah. 1:13; Gal. 5:1; 1 Tim. 6:1.

² 1 Cor. 1:2; 6:11; Heb. 2:11; 10:10, 14 are examples of the first uses of the word *sanctification*.

fulfillment of His intention—we are continually and increasingly being used for God’s holy purposes.³

Unfortunately, to many professing Christians, sanctification is nothing more than a theory, because they’ve never been born again, which is absolutely essential for sanctification. Yet many are convinced they’ve been made righteous in Christ even though there is no evidence of sanctification in their lives. Scripture tells us, however, that with righteousness also comes sanctification:

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us...*righteousness* and *sanctification*, and redemption....And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were *sanctified*, but you were *justified* [made righteous] in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11, emphasis added).

John wrote,

If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone also who practices righteousness is born of Him....Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous (1 John 2:29; 3:7).

Many professing Christians will gladly listen to sermons that fall under the category of “sanctification sermons,” through which they’re admonished to “turn over” various areas of their lives to Christ’s lordship. However, listening to those sermons becomes an end in itself, because they really never intend to “turn over” any area of their lives to Christ’s lordship, especially if doing so requires any self-denial. Yet they somehow convince themselves that there is some virtue in listening to convicting sermons, regardless of whether they adjust their lives

³ Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Thes. 4:3; 1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:2 are examples of this second usage of the word *sanctification*.

accordingly. James warned against this very thing: “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves” (Jas. 1:22).

Hearers who aren’t doers are deluded because they think they’re saved when they aren’t. Those kinds of professing Christians are the chief frustration of many godly pastors, who wonder why people in their congregations never change or demonstrate any growth in holiness. The reason is because those people have never taken Jesus’ yoke and have never been born again. They may *think* they’ve been born again because they once prayed a salvation prayer and now understand that salvation is by grace, not works. But they’re not, because they’ve never submitted themselves to Jesus. All attempts to get them to act more like Christ will be essentially futile until they take that first step.

The foundation of sanctification is submission to God; sanctification will never happen in anyone’s life without submission. Once we’ve submitted, however, the sanctification process continues in our lives as we learn God’s will and spiritual truth. We first take on Jesus’ yoke; then we “learn from Him” as He said (Matt. 11:29). We “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet. 3:18, emphasis added).

At first, we don’t fully know God’s will or all that God has done for us through Christ, nor do we realize all that needs changed in our lives. But as Paul wrote, we are “trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph. 5:10). This is why Paul’s prayers for Christians are petitions for their increased spiritual understanding and knowledge.⁴ And that is why Paul often admonished his readers using the words, “Do you not know that..?”⁵ He expected that the believers to whom he was writing would act differently if they knew some theological truth, such as the fact that their bodies were temples of the Holy Spirit.

That is why it is so important for followers of Christ to avail themselves to all that God has provided for them to learn spiritual truth. They should study the Scriptures themselves, and true followers of Christ will, because they’ll have a

⁴ See, for example, Eph. 1:15-19; 3:14-19; Phil. 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-12; Philem. 1:6.

⁵ See Rom. 6:3; 6:16; 7:1; 11:2; 1 Cor. 3:16; 5:6; 6:2-3, 9,15-16, 19; 9:13, 24.

desire to learn about spiritual things. They should also avail themselves to instruction from those in the church whom God has specifically called to teach His Word. They should be a part of a local church that has a vision for making disciples. That is what Jesus wants. He said, “Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). True disciples are learning.

Going on to Perfection

Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians: “Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). This indicates to us that true believers are not necessarily perfect, as some extremists would have us believe. Defilements of flesh and spirit remain in the lives of true believers. We must, however, read Paul’s words within the context of the rest of the New Testament. Although true Christians may still be partially defiled, they are characterized predominately by righteousness. Notice that Paul did not admonish his readers to *begin* acting holy. Rather, he admonished them to *perfect* their holiness. You can only perfect what you are already doing fairly well. Paul’s words indicate that the Corinthian Christians were already acting holy, and now their holiness needed perfecting. That is what biblical sanctification is—perfecting holiness.

Paul’s words also help us to understand that the ongoing process of sanctification in our lives is not something God does apart from us. We must cleanse *ourselves* from fleshly and spiritual defilements. The writer of Hebrews says, “Pursue...the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). God does not override our free will, and Scripture couldn’t be more clear about our responsibility in the sanctification process.⁶

On the other hand, we should not think that sanctification is something we must do apart from God’s involvement. Paul also wrote, “For I am confident of

⁶ In the next chapter, I list hundreds of scriptures that reveal human responsibility in sanctification.

this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). Perhaps the balance between our part and God’s part is best expressed by Paul in Philippians 2:12-13:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, *work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you*, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (emphasis added).

Paul was writing to true believers, those who obeyed even in his absence. Obviously, God was at work within them by His indwelling Spirit. Thus, they had a solemn obligation to cooperate with what He was doing in their lives. *Sanctification occurs as we cooperate with God.*

The Chronology of Sanctification

In this chapter and the next, we’ll consider the process of sanctification, and how it involves God and us. Let’s begin at the beginning.

God’s work, of course, began long before anyone was sanctified. He preordained the plan of salvation through His Son, who fulfilled that plan, dying for our sins and rising from the dead. Through the means of a God-ordained messenger who shares the gospel, and by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, the sinner is awakened and convicted of his sin and need for salvation.

At the point of conviction, human responsibility enters the picture. We have a choice to make, and the only proper response on our part is to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus. God commands us to repent and believe in Jesus,⁷ so repenting and believing must be something that is our responsibility, not God’s.

However, the moment we repent and believe the gospel, God goes to work again. He immediately indwells us by His Holy Spirit, regenerating our spirits, and breaks sin’s power over our lives, releasing us from its clutches. Our spirits

⁷ See, for example, Mark 1:15; John 14:1; Acts 17:30; Rev. 3:3.

are reborn, re-created in Christ's likeness, and we become new creations in Him (see 1 Pet. 1:3; Eph. 4:24; 2 Cor. 5:17). God becomes our spiritual Father.

The result is an immediate degree of holiness manifested in the life of the new believer. From scriptures such as 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph. 5:5-6, 1 John 3:15 and Rev. 21:8, we can be certain that the new birth brings an end to the practice of certain grievous sins such as fornication, adultery, immorality, impurity, sensuality, effeminacy, homosexuality, coveting, thievery, swindling, drunkenness, carousing, reviling, enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, idolatry, sorcery, murder and lying.

This is not to say that a true believer *couldn't* commit any of those sins. Any believer could, if he decided, commit any of those sins, because God has not taken away his free will. However, he will find that he possesses an inward resistance and abhorrence of sin that he did not possess previously. His ability to resist temptation is greatly increased. If he does yield to temptation, he will feel greatly convicted and sorrowful until he confesses his sin to God. Again, the *practice* of such sins is a guarantee that one will not inherit God's kingdom, as Scripture repeatedly warns.

Is All Sin the Same in God's Eyes?

Some would argue that "all sin is the same," and thus say that the habitual, unrepentant practice of the above-listed sins can't be considered any different than the habitual, unrepentant practice of any other sin. This logic, however, doesn't change the scriptures I've listed, nor does it strengthen any counter-argument against what I've said. If all sin is the same in God's sight, then we must greatly extend Paul's exclusionary lists to include *every* sin, and thus conclude that no one is truly saved! Yet, thankfully, ingratitude, worry, and sleeping during sermons are not included in any of Paul's exclusionary lists!

Clearly, all sin is not the same in God's sight. Jesus spoke of lesser and (thus by implication) greater commandments (see Matt. 5:19). He spoke of a "greater sin," and (thus by implication) a lesser sin (see John 19:11). He considered one particular commandment to be "great and foremost" (Matt. 22:38), and another to be second only to it. He mentioned one sin that is uniquely unforgivable (see

Matt. 12:31-32). He rebuked the Pharisees, who neglected “the *weightier* provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness,” and emphasized the lighter requirements of the law, such as tithing (Matt. 23:23, emphasis added).

The fact that some sins are more grievous in God’s eyes than others is reflected in the Law of Moses, where some transgressions summoned more severe punishment. We also note that God initially gave Israel *ten* commandments, rather than eleven or forty. This indicates that He considers some commandments to be more important than others.

In Ezekiel 8, we read how the Lord showed Ezekiel four successive scenes of certain sins being practiced in Israel. Each sinful practice God called an even “greater abomination” than the previous one.

The apostle John stated that there is a sin “not leading to death,” and a sin “leading to death” (1 John 5:16-17).

Clearly, all sin is not the same in God’s eyes. All sin separates us from God, and all sin grieves God, but all sin is not equally grievous to Him. Everyone knows that both murder and giving someone a black eye are wrong. However, everyone also knows the former is more serious than the latter.

The Initial and Ongoing Transformation

If you’re born again, God has taken care of what is most grievous to Him. You’ve experienced an initial transformation. But God isn’t satisfied with just that. His goal for you is perfection, and so you can expect an ongoing transformation. The chart below illustrates this:

ALL OF HUMANITY

GOD

UNSAVED

fornication
adultery
immorality
impurity
suality
effeminacy
homosexuality
coveting
thievery
swindling
drunkenness
caarousing
reviling
enmity, strife
jealousy
outbursts of anger
disputes
dissensions
factions, envying
idolatry, sorcery
murder
lying

Matt. 5:20-30
1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10;
Gal. 5:19-21
Eph. 5:5-6
1 John 3:7-10, 15
Rev. 21:8

Conversion

The New Birth

Salvation

Conversion

The New Birth

Salvation

SAVED

love
joy
peace
patience
kindness
goodness
faithfulness
gentleness
self-control

Matt. 7:2
Gal. 5:22-24
Jas. 2:26
1 John 3:7-15

PERFECTION

Matthew 5:48

On the left two-thirds of the chart, all of humanity is divided into two groups, the unsaved and the saved. There are, of course, no other categories. You are either in one or the other.

As you travel from left to right, you progress from wickedness to holiness. The UNSAVED category includes people who are the most wicked (on the extreme left), and the least wicked (on the extreme right of the UNSAVED column). Not all non-Christians are equally evil.

However, as you continue to the right, you cross a thick line, which represents conversion and the new birth. Once you cross that line, you are among the saved. However, the saved on the extreme left are less holy than those who have progressed further to the right. Not all Christians are equally holy.

Nevertheless, the difference that is made as one crosses the line of conversion is dramatic, which is why the line of conversion is so thick. There is no “thin line” between the saved and unsaved. The apostle John wrote that it is obvious who is saved and unsaved (see 1 John 3:10).

As a saved person is sanctified by cooperating with the Holy Spirit, he moves progressively toward the right, closer to the right-hand third of the chart, which is labeled PERFECTION. At present, of course, only God is perfect.

Notice that under the UNSAVED column, I’ve listed sins that, if practiced, are proof that a person is not born again, and some scriptures that say so.

Under the SAVED column, I’ve listed the fruit of the Spirit and some relevant scriptures. Fruit can ripen and mature, and so can all of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We can all grow in love, peace, patience and so on.

Hopefully, you’ve not found yourself described in the unsaved column. If you have, you need to repent and believe in Jesus, crossing the line of conversion. If you do, you will immediately be born again and experience God’s initial transformation.

Once we are born again, God accomplishes His ongoing work of transforming us through a number of means that we will consider. We must first understand, however, that God’s success is very dependent upon our cooperation. He does not override our free will. On the other hand, He provides lots of motivation for us to cooperate.

What is it that motivates us to strive against sin and become progressively more like Jesus? There are at least three motivations with which God supplies us: love, hope and fear. All of those motivations are legitimate and scriptural. More specifically, they are (1) love for God, (2) hope of reward, and (3) fear of discipline.

Love for God

Obedience that springs from love would seem to be the highest and most pleasing kind of obedience to God. Ideally, we should obey Him only because we love Him, and every true believer will do this to some extent. Jesus spoke of the obedience of love, saying:

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments....He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him (John 14:15, 21).

Likewise, the apostle John wrote,

For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

How can we not love Him when we understand what He has done for us? How can we not feel a sense of gratitude for His amazing self-denial on our behalf? How can we not seek to please Him who loves us so much?

Let's imagine for a moment that you are crossing the street on a busy corner and carelessly step in front of an oncoming bus. A fellow pedestrian lunges at you, just barely pushing you out of harm's way, but he himself is hit by the bus. He is rushed to the hospital, where he learns that he will be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

Would you not feel a debt of gratitude to him who saved you at such great personal cost? Would you not feel an obligation to repay what you could never

repay? Your love for the one who showed you so much love would motivate you to do what you could to please him. If he desired something, you would do what you could to provide it. So it is with those who believe in Jesus. They can't help but love Him, and because they do, they strive to please Him by their obedience.

Hope of Reward

A second motivation God provides to those who obey Him is the hope of reward. Clearly, salvation is given to us by God's grace. This is not to say, however, that other blessings aren't given in response to our works. Both present and future blessings are repeatedly promised in Scripture as rewards to the obedient. Paul wrote that, "godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:8). Indeed, God is "a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Hope of reward could be considered a selfish motivation, hardly virtuous compared to being motivated by pure love for God. Would not the Lord prefer that we serve Him because we love Him, rather than for personal benefit (as is so clearly exemplified by the testing of Job, for example)?

I would tend to think so. Nevertheless, God is the one who initiated the program of rewards for obedience. Like any good parent, He might prefer that His children obey Him motivated by pure love, but He knows, like most parents, that filial love is often insufficient. Parents frequently promise their children rewards for good behavior, and it works. Besides, the earthly rewards we receive glorify the goodness of our God who loves to bless His children.

We must also keep in mind that selfishness is serving ourselves at the expense of others. Thus, not all that benefits self is necessarily selfish. Without a hint of disapproval, Scripture describes true Christians as those who "by perseverance in doing good *seek for glory and honor and immortality*" (Rom. 2:7, emphasis added). Most of us, I suppose, believed in Christ (at least initially) out of concern for ourselves—we want to go to heaven and miss hell. Yet our act of believing in Christ can hardly be considered selfish. Our receiving eternal life did not cause someone else's exclusion from the same blessing. If anything, our receiving eternal life *increased* the possibility that others would be saved. Consequently,

receiving salvation because of concern for self cannot be classified as selfish. So it is also true of the rewards God promises to the godly. They don't come at the expense of others. Neither God's grace nor His rewards are limited. We're not competing against others for a piece of the pie.

This being so, desire for reward should not be considered sinful, wrong, or selfish, especially since God is the initiator and promiser of the rewards. If it were wrong for us to desire a reward God promises, then He is guilty of enticing us to do wrong, making Him a sinner. That, of course, is impossible.

Repayment According to Deeds

Throughout Scripture, the godly are promised special rewards for their obedience. For example, we know that in the future kingdom at Christ's return, God is going to repay every one of us according to our deeds:

For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and will then *recompense every man according to his deeds* (Matt. 16:27, emphasis added).

Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, *to render to every man according to what he has done* (Rev. 22:12, emphasis added).

The recompense and rewards of which Jesus spoke not only include general repayments that all the saved or unsaved shall mutually share, such as heaven or hell. The promised repayments also include specific and individual rewards based upon each person's individual deeds. Paul, writing of his and Apollos' ministries, stated,

Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his *own* reward according to his *own* labor (1 Cor. 3:8, emphasis added; see also vv. 9-15).

Our future rewards will be based on our own works, taking into consideration our particular gifts, talents, and opportunities. Jesus' Parable of the Talents makes this ever so clear (see Matt. 25:14-30). God expects more from those He's given more. Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much shall much be required" (Luke 12:48).

The Time of Reward

Scripture doesn't always make it clear exactly *when* the godly will be rewarded. Some promises are clearly for this life, while others are for the next. Some are ambiguous. First, let's consider a few that apparently promise rewards in this life:

Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), *that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth* (Eph. 6:2-3, emphasis added).

And do not judge and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, *they* [the KJV says 'men']⁸ will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return (Luke 6:37-38, emphasis added).

For, "Let him who means to *love life and see good days* refrain his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking guile" (1 Pet. 3:10, emphasis added).

But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty [the law of love], and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, *this man shall be blessed in what he does* (James 1:25, emphasis added).

⁸ This seems to be a clue that the rewards promised here will be in this life.

Here are a few examples of promises that clearly have application to our future lives:

But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for *you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous* (Luke 14:13-14, emphasis added).

Rejoice, and be glad, for *your reward in heaven is great*, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:12, emphasis added).

Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves purses which do not wear out, an unfailing *treasure in heaven*, where no thief comes near, nor moth destroys (Luke 12:33, emphasis added).

What heavenly rewards might be in store for us, only God knows. As vague as heaven is to us, so are the special rewards that await us there. Earthly rewards, however, should be understood to be anything we would consider a blessing. Don't limit God's blessings to only happy inward feelings or shivers down your spine!

Finally, here are a few promises whose time of fulfilled reward is ambiguous:

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and *your reward will be great*, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men (Luke 6:35, emphasis added).

But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret *will repay you*....But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret *will repay you*....But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face so that you may not be seen fasting

by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret *will repay you* (Matt. 6:3-4, 6, 17-18, emphasis added).

With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, *this he will receive back from the Lord*, whether slave or free (Eph. 6:7-8, emphasis added).

God is keeping track of even the smallest good deeds, with plans to reward them:

For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because of your name as followers of Christ, truly I say to you, he shall not lose his reward (Mark 9:41).

Do you desire to enjoy more blessings from your heavenly Father, both now and in heaven? Of course you do! Then obey Him more, and you will be rewarded. Jesus said, "*Blessed* are those who hear the word of God, and observe it" (Luke 11:28, emphasis added).

Fear of Discipline

Apart from love of God and hope for reward, there is at least one other way God motivates His children to be obedient: through fear of discipline. I would suspect that this third motivation is the one God prefers to use the least of the three. Nevertheless, it is certainly valid and scriptural. Most parents use all three means to motivate their children to be obedient, and none should be considered blameworthy.

Against this, some contend that fearing God is incompatible with loving Him. Does not Scripture say, "perfect love casts out fear"? (1 John 4:18).

The fear of which John wrote that is cast out by love is not the fear of holy reverence for God. It is the fear of eternal punishment that begins on "the day of judgment" (1 John 4:17). Having understood and received the love of God, and

now abiding in His love (see John 15:10), we need not fear the hell that we formerly deserved.

Loving and fearing God are not incompatible according to the New Testament. Believers are *commanded* to fear God (see 1 Pet. 2:17). They are told to be subject to one another “in the fear of Christ” (Eph. 5:21), to “work out [their] salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12), and to perfect their holiness “in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1). Peter admonished the recipients of his first letter to conduct themselves *with fear* during their earthly sojourn, knowing that God would impartially judge each one of them according to their works (see 1 Pet. 1:17).

Discipline at Corinth

Unfortunately, God’s discipline is a foreign concept to many professing Christians, but it is certainly not foreign to the Bible. From Adam and Eve to Ananias and Sapphira, from the Israelites who died in the wilderness to the Christians who were sick in Corinth, God’s discipline is revealed in Scripture. Sometimes His discipline can be severe when there is good cause for it. Consider Paul’s important words to the Corinthian believers:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be *guilty* of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks *judgment* to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. *For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world* (1 Cor. 11:27-32, emphasis added).

First, note that as a result of God’s discipline, which Paul also refers to as God’s judgment, some of the Corinthians were weak and sick. Some had even died.

The reason for God’s judgment? They were partaking of the Lord’s Supper in an “unworthy manner” (11:27). What did Paul mean? From the context, we can

safely conclude that he was referring to partaking of the Lord's Supper while in disobedience to the Lord. For example, Paul wrote that we should first *examine* ourselves before Communion, and warned that we are in danger of judgment if we don't "judge the body rightly" (11:29). It would seem reasonable to conclude that "judging the body rightly" would be equivalent to other related phrases within the context, namely, those that say we should examine and judge ourselves. We know that it is the "deeds of the body" that get us into trouble (see Rom. 8:12-14; 1 Cor. 9:27). "Judging the body rightly" must mean recognizing and subduing the sinful nature within that wars against the Spirit. We can avoid God's judgment if we would judge ourselves, that is, not yield to the sinful nature, continually examine ourselves, and confess our sins if need be.

Can Christians Go to Hell?

God disciplines us, as Paul wrote, "in order that we may not be condemned along with the world" (11:32). The world, of course, is going to be condemned to eternal damnation. Thus, God disciplines sinning believers so they don't go to hell (indicating, again, that heaven is only for the holy).

This raises several important questions. The first is this: Is there really a danger that a true believer could end up in hell?

The answer is *yes*. If a true believer returns to committing the "exclusionary sins," those which, if practiced, Scripture guarantees will result in one's exclusion from God's kingdom (see 1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21, Eph. 5:5-6), he forfeits eternal life. God has not taken away our free will nor our capacity to sin. Contrary to what many modern teachers say, the Bible teaches that any believer who consistently follows after the old sinful nature, what Scripture calls *the flesh*, is in danger of spiritual death. Writing to Christians, Paul said:

So then, *brethren*, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, *you must die*; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, *you will live*. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, *these* are sons of God (Rom. 8:12-14, emphasis added).

For at least two reasons we must conclude that Paul was addressing spiritually alive Christian believers.

First, notice that he addressed them as *brethren*.

Second, they had the capacity to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit, which is something only believers, indwelt by the Spirit, could do.

Note that Paul warned the Roman Christians that if they lived according to the flesh, they *must* die. Was he referring to physical or spiritual death? It seems logical to conclude that he was referring to spiritual death, since everyone, even those who “are putting to death the deeds of the body,” is going to die physically sooner or later. Is it not also true that those who “live according to the flesh” often continue to enjoy physical life for a long, long time?

The only proper conclusion that can be drawn from these facts is that true Christian believers can die spiritually by “living according to the flesh.” Thus Paul’s “exclusionary lists” of 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21 and Eph. 5:5-6 should not be considered only applicable to those who do not profess faith in Christ. They are just as applicable to those who do profess faith in Christ. (In fact, within their context, the “exclusionary lists” are written as warnings to believers.) It is those who are led by the Spirit, as opposed to the flesh, who are the true children of God, as Paul so clearly stated (see Rom. 8:14).

More Proof that Christians Can Die Spiritually

Paul wrote similar words to the Galatian Christians. After warning them that those who practice the “deeds of the flesh” will not inherit God’s kingdom, he stated:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap *eternal life*. And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap *if* we do not grow weary (Gal. 6:7-9, emphasis added).

Notice the two people who are contrasted. One sows to his flesh and the other to the Spirit. The first reaps corruption (the NIV translates it “destruction”) and the other reaps eternal life. If corruption (destruction) is the opposite of eternal life, then it must refer to spiritual death. Please note that reaping eternal life is only promised to those who sow to the Spirit and who continue sowing to the Spirit. Those who sow to the flesh will *not* reap eternal life, but destruction. As Paul warned, “Do not be deceived” about this (Gal. 6:7). Yet so many today are.

Sowing to the flesh was a personal concern of the apostle Paul, who, like every other true Christian, still possessed a sinful nature. He wrote to the Corinthians:

And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but *I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly, after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified* (1 Cor. 9:25-27, emphasis added).

Like Olympic athletes, we must also exercise self-control if we hope to receive our imperishable prize. Paul stated that he buffeted his body and made it his slave, because if he didn’t, he was in danger of being “disqualified.”⁹ When one is disqualified, there is no hope that he might win. The immediate context of Paul’s words makes it clear that he was not expressing concern over the possibility of losing further opportunities for service or heavenly rewards, but of losing his ultimate salvation. In fact, in the verses that follow (1 Cor. 10:1-14), Paul warned the Corinthian Christians not to follow the tragic example of the Israelites who, although they were so initially blessed and privileged, ultimately perished in the wilderness because they did not continue in obedient faith. Unlike the Israelites who perished, the believers in Corinth should flee from

⁹ The Greek word translated “disqualified” here in the NASB (*adokimos*), is the same word Paul used in 2 Cor. 13:5 to describe those in whom Christ does not dwell: “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test [*adokimos*]?”

greed, idolatry, immorality (sins Paul previously listed in his “exclusionary list of 6:9-10), testing God, and grumbling, admonishing them, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

James Adds His “Amen”

Consider also what James wrote to Christian believers about persevering under trial. Those who successfully persevere are the ones who will receive “the crown of life,” that is, salvation.¹⁰ Those who return to a life of sin will die:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, *it brings forth death*. Do not be deceived, my *beloved brethren* (Jas. 1:12-16, emphasis added).

James stated that it is not God who is tempting us, but “each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust [desires]” (1:14). The result is that “when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin” (1:15). Finally, when sin is “accomplished,” or as the NIV and NKJV say, when it is “full-grown,” it brings forth death. How long it takes for sin to become “full-grown” and result in death is a matter of conjecture. Certainly, a single sin by a believer does not result in instant spiritual death. Persisting in sin, however, or habitually walking after the flesh, does eventually result in spiritual death. James warns us not to be deceived about this.

¹⁰ The “crown of life” is often interpreted as being a special, literal crown that only some Christians will receive. Note, however, that it is promised to all those who love the Lord, which is true of all authentic believers. Our love for the Lord is proven by our persevering under trial.

Again, how could James be warning about physical death as opposed to spiritual death, as some claim? Everyone is going to die physically, sinner and saint.

Additionally, how can some claim that James is addressing unbelievers in this passage? It isn't possible for sin to "bring forth death" in them, because they are already "dead in [their] trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). James was clearly addressing Christians, "*beloved brethren*" (Jas. 1:16, emphasis added).

James also wrote at the end of his epistle:

My brethren, if any *among you* strays from the truth, and one *turns him back*, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way *will save his soul from death*, and will cover a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:19-20).

Notice that James was addressing *brethren*. He stated that "if *any among you* strays from the truth," so he must have meant fellow believers who were previously in the truth but who strayed from it. That they had not strayed in doctrine only is clear from James' words, "he who turns a *sinner* from the error of his *way*" (5:20). These people had strayed from holiness.

However, if we turn back one who has strayed as James described, we "will save his soul from death." Note that James didn't say we would save his *body* from death, but rather, his *soul*. Again, the only honest conclusion we can draw is that James believed that a spiritually alive person could ultimately die spiritually by returning to the practice of sin.

Peter Joins the Chorus

Not only did Paul and James agree on this issue, but so did Peter. Warning about the seduction of believers by false teachers, he wrote,

For speaking out arrogant words of vanity they entice by fleshly desires, by sensuality, *those who barely escape from the ones who live in error*, promising them freedom while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved. For if *after they have escaped the*

defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:18-22, emphasis added).

First, note that Peter wrote that the false teachers entice “those who barely escape from the ones who live in error” (2:18). Peter was clearly writing of true Christians, because they *did* escape, although “barely” from the ones who live in error, the nonbelievers. Peter also said that they had “escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2:20). That can only mean that they were born again and were no longer practicing sin. (Notice what Peter considered to be the mark of the true believer.) They were spiritually alive.

But, Peter wrote, they were “again entangled” in what previously defiled them and were “overcome” (2:20). The result was that the “last state has become worse for them than the first” (2:20). If that was the case, could they still have been spiritually alive and heaven-bound? Obviously not. Peter compared them to dogs returning to their vomit and pigs going back to the mud. Are we to think that such people are spiritually alive, children of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and on the sure road to heaven?¹¹

John’s Testimony

¹¹ This passage also helps us to understand what “backsliding,” as it is often called, actually is. In order to truly “backslide,” a person first has to “frontslide.” What is often referred to as backsliding today is nothing more than when a sinner verbally professes faith in Christ and then grows more sinful. He never manifested any indication that he had “escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2:20). He cannot be rightfully accused of “leaving his first love” (see Rev. 2:4), because Jesus never was his first love.

The apostle John obviously believed that a spiritually alive person could become spiritually dead:

If anyone sees his *brother* committing a *sin not leading to death*, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. *There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this.* All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death. We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him (1 John 5:16-18).

First, note that John was speaking of fellow Christians sinning.

Second, note that John did not believe that any and every sin a Christian might commit would immediately result in his death, as some extremists say. However, John did believe that there was a “sin leading to death” and that there was no point in praying for a brother who committed that sin. We could debate about what exactly that sin is, but may it suffice for now to say that such a sin exists.

Did John mean that there is a sin unto physical death? Many think so, primarily because their theology leaves no possibility for a spiritually alive person to die spiritually. However, when we consider the context before and after John’s statement, *eternal life* is clearly what he had in mind when he was writing (see 1 John 5:13, 20). The sin unto death is the sin that ends eternal life.

Jesus Warned His Followers of Hell

Jesus, too, believed that present salvation was no absolute guarantee of future salvation. He warned His *own disciples* to “fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). Consider also His words recorded in Luke 12:35-46, also addressed to His own disciples:

“Be dressed in readiness, and keep your lamps alight. And be like men who are waiting for their master when he returns from the wedding feast, so that they may immediately open the door to him when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master shall find on the alert

when he comes; truly I say to you, that he will gird himself to serve, and have them recline at the table, and will come up and wait on them. Whether he comes in the second watch, or even in the third, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves. And be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have allowed his house to be broken into. You too, be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you do not expect.”

And Peter said, “*Lord, are You addressing this parable to us, or to everyone else as well?*” And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and sensible steward, whom his master will put in charge of his servants, to give them their rations at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you, that he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, ‘My master will be a long time in coming,’ and begins to beat the slaves, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk; the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him, and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and *assign him a place with the unbelievers*” (emphasis added).

Matthew recorded this same admonition by Jesus, including His further elaboration on the final destination of the unfaithful servant: “Weeping shall be there and the gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 24:51). Thus, according to Jesus, one who formerly served the Lord, his Master, can still be damned if he returns to a lifestyle of sin.

Notice that the apostate slave in this parable was characterized by hating his fellow slaves and drunkenness, two sins that mark a person as unsaved (see 1 John 3:13-15; 1 Cor. 6:10).

Notice also that Jesus was clearly addressing this parable to His own disciples, as revealed by Luke 12:22 and 41. Present salvation is not guarantee of future salvation. We must continue in a living faith. The two parables that follow in Matthew’s Gospel, that of the Ten Virgins and the Talents, also serve to illustrate this fact (see Matt. 25:1-30).

Jesus' point is so unmistakably clear in this parable that some who subscribe to the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security are forced to conclude that "outer darkness," where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth," describes a place in heaven where less faithful Christians will temporarily mourn their loss of heavenly rewards!¹²

Jesus also once warned the church in Sardis of the danger of born-again members dying spiritually. Apparently, the majority of the Christians in Sardis had returned to the practice of sin; thus they were in grave danger that they would not be clothed in white garments, that Jesus would not confess them before His Father, and that their names would be erased from the book of life. Yet there was still time for them to repent. Read slowly and honestly:

I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead. Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die; for I have not found your deeds completed in the sight of My God. Remember therefore what you have received and heard; and keep it, and repent. If therefore you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. But you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; and they will walk with Me in white; for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels (Rev. 3:1-5, emphasis added).

In light of all Jesus, Peter, James, John and Paul taught, how is it that so many modern teachers maintain that if a person is truly saved, he can never forfeit his salvation, no matter how he lives? This is the devil's original lie, when he said to a spiritually alive person who was considering sin, "You surely shall not die!"

¹² In a later chapter, I provide a quotation from one of the most well-known Evangelical teachers in America, stating this absurd theory.

(Gen. 3:4). Why don't more Christians recognize Satan's original lie being perpetrated through modern false doctrine?¹³

When a Believer Stops Believing

The practice of unrighteousness is not the only danger for believers. If a true believer stops believing, he will forfeit his salvation, since salvation is only promised to those who believe and continue to believe. In reference to salvation, the New Testament Greek often uses the word *believe* in a continuous tense. Salvation is for those who believe and continue believing, not to those who believed at some moment in the past. For this reason and others, the New Testament is full of admonitions that exhort believers to continue along the paths of righteousness. Jesus warned His own disciples that "it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved" (Matt. 10:22).

Notice the conditional *if* in Paul's words to the Colossian Christians:

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—*if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven* (Col. 1:21-23, emphasis added).

Some Calvinists claim Paul meant that all true Christians will continue to persevere in faith until death, and if at some point they stop believing, that proves they never truly believed in the first place and were never actually saved. Because of the many fruit-bearing believers who apparently do fall away, some also maintain that a phony Christian, who, of course, is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit, can appear to be a true believer. He may even demonstrate more fruit than some authentic Christians, yet he will ultimately go to hell because he never

¹³ Two other related scriptures worth reading are Ezekiel 18:24-32 and 33:12-19.

really possessed saving faith! Thus, the Calvinist who is consistent in his theology must always live with the possibility that his faith may yet prove to be bogus if he ever stops believing. If the only genuine faith is faith that perseveres until death, then a Calvinist can never be certain of his salvation, because he won't know if his faith is genuine until his final breath. Only then will he know if his faith persevered until death, thus proving itself to be true.

This theory is obviously not what Paul had in mind in Colossians 1:23. He wanted the Colossian Christians to know that they were presently reconciled to God, and that they would maintain their blameless standing before Him if they continued to believe.

Notice Paul's conditional *if* regarding the Corinthian's salvation:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, *if you hold fast the word which I preached to you...* (1 Cor. 15:1-2, emphasis added).

Paul assured them of their salvation, predicated on their faith. They would remain saved if they held fast to the gospel. He did not say that time would tell if they really were saved if they persevered in faith until death.

Guard Your Heart Against Unbelief

The writer of the book of Hebrews warned of the real dangers of allowing unbelief or sin to creep into our lives. Note that he addressed his words to Christian brethren:¹⁴

¹⁴ Contrary to what some want us to believe, the author was not addressing *Hebrew brethren* who were only considering if they might believe in Jesus. He wrote to brethren who were already "partakers of Christ" (3:14), not brethren who were *considering* partaking of Christ. Additionally, he admonished them to "hold fast the beginning of [their] assurance firm until the end" (3:14), something only a believer who already has assurance can do. Moreover, the author warned these brethren to take care, lest there should be in any one of them an "evil, unbelieving heart in falling away from the living God" (3:12). Those who are not born again presently have evil, unbelieving

Take care, *brethren*, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, *if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end* (Heb. 3:12-14, emphasis added).

We are "partakers of Christ" as long as we "hold fast" in faith. Sin has the ability to deceive and harden us, so we should beware of both unbelief and sin creeping into our lives.

Later in his epistle, the author of the book of Hebrews quoted one of the most well-known verses in the Old Testament, Habakkuk 2:4, and then added his inspired commentary:

"But My righteous one shall live by faith; And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those *who shrink back to destruction*, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul (Heb. 10:38-39, emphasis added).

How much clearer could it be?

Grafted in and Broken Off

Among many other scriptures, Romans 11:13-24 also stands out as proof that true believers can forfeit their salvation if they abandon their faith. This, any honest reader will have to admit:

hearts, and thus are in no danger of their hearts becoming evil and unbelieving. Finally, these brethren were in danger of "falling away from the living God," whereas Hebrew brethren who were only considering Christ had not even come to God yet.

But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too. But if some of the [Jewish] branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive [a Gentile], were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, *they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.* Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, *if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.* And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom. 11:13-24, emphasis added).

Clearly, there exists the possibility of losing one's position in God's tree of salvation. We stand by our faith and are guaranteed our place only if we "continue in His kindness" (11:22).¹⁵

¹⁵ Those who are still not persuaded that a Christian can forfeit his salvation should consider all of the following New Testament passages: Matt. 18:21-35; 24:4-5, 11-13, 23-26, 42-51; 25:1-30; Luke 8:11-15; 11:24-28; 12:42-46; John 6:66-71; 8:31-32, 51; 15:1-6; Acts 11:21-23; 14:21-22; Rom. 6:11-23; 8:12-14, 17; 11:20-22; 1 Cor. 9:23-27; 10:1-21; 11:29-32; 15:1-2; 2 Cor. 1:24; 11:2-4; 12:21-13:5; Gal. 5:1-4; 6:7-9; Phil. 2:12-16; 3:17-4:1; Col. 1:21-23; 2:4-8, 18-19; 1 Thes. 3:1-8; 1 Tim. 1:3-7, 18-20; 4:1-16; 5:5-6, 11-15, 6:9-12, 17-19, 20-21; 2 Tim. 2:11-18; 3:13-15; Heb. 2:1-3; 3:6-19; 4:1-16; 5:8-9; 6:4-9, 10-20; 10:19-39; 12:1-17, 25-29; Jas. 1:12-16; 4:4-10; 5:19-20; 2 Pet. 1:5-11; 2:1-22; 3:16-17; 1 John 2:15-2:28; 5:16; 2 John 6-9; Jude 20-21; Rev. 2:7, 10-11, 17-26; 3:4-5, 8-12, 14-22; 21:7-8; 22:18-19.

Back to God's Discipline

With all this in mind, let's go back now to Paul's words about God's discipline in 1 Corinthians 11:27-34 and ask another question: Does God's discipline guarantee that a sinning Christian will repent and not be condemned along with the world?

Obviously the answer is *no* for several reasons. First, because of the many scriptures we've just considered, all of which indicate that a true believer can forfeit his salvation by abandoning his faith or returning to the practice of unrighteousness. Any believer who strays is, without a doubt, the object of God's love, and Scripture teaches that He disciplines those He loves (see Heb. 12:6). However, since it's clearly possible for believers to return to unrighteousness or unbelief and die spiritually, we can only conclude that God's discipline doesn't always bring back those who stray.

Second, God never overrides our free will so far as our own salvation is concerned. If we don't want to serve Him, we don't have to, and the Bible contains scores of examples of those whom God disciplined who did not repent. King Asa, for example, was a man who initially was a very godly king. Later in his life, however, he sinned, and refused to repent even while suffering God's discipline, dispensed by means of a disease in his feet. He ultimately died from his disease (see 2 Chron. 14-16).

It is quite possible, according to the author of the book of Hebrews, for God's children to respond wrongly to His discipline:

You have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him"....Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? (Heb. 12:5, 9).

When we are disciplined by our Father, we can “regard [it] lightly,” that is, ignore it, or “faint,” that is, be overcome by it and quit. God, however, desires that we subject ourselves to His discipline and “live.” Clearly, the implication is that if we don’t subject ourselves, we will not live, but die. The author must have been writing about spiritual life (and, by implication, spiritual death), simply because even obedient Christians all eventually die physically, not to mention the fact that many who are not subject to “the Father of spirits” continue to live physically for a long time.

This leads us to the next question: What about premature physical death? If that is a form of God’s discipline, the purpose of which is that we “may not be condemned along with the world,” wouldn’t the Lord bring every sinning Christian home to heaven before he died spiritually?

If that was always the case, then it would be impossible for a person to forfeit his salvation. If a person was saved, he would never need to be concerned about abandoning his faith or returning to the practice of sin, because he could rest in the assurance that the Lord would cut his life short before he died spiritually and lost his salvation. This idea, however, stands opposed to the many scriptures that clearly indicate that a truly saved person can forfeit his salvation. So what is the answer?

Perhaps an example from human experience might help us: A citizen might break the law and suffer the discipline of the government. If he, however, flees the country, he has taken himself out of the jurisdiction of the government. Consequently, he neither suffers its wrath nor enjoys the benefits shared by all its citizens.

Or another example: A son might disobey his father and suffer his loving discipline. But if the son runs away from home to constantly indulge in what his father would disapprove of, he need not fear his father’s discipline. He’s removed himself from the family. So, too, those who abandon their faith or return wholeheartedly to follow the flesh, the comfort of promised discipline and, if need be, premature death, does not apply. They have forfeited all that was theirs. They, of course, may well die prematurely, but their final destination is not heaven.

Those among God's children, however, who stumble into sin but whose hearts are still inclined to serve God, place themselves in a position to be disciplined by their Father if they do not judge themselves by confession and repentance. These children are generally obedient: not running away or abandoning their family, but are disobedient to some degree. If they persist in their disobedience, not confessing and repenting of their sin, they may be judged by means of premature physical death, but are still saved when they die.

For example, God may call one of His children to be a pastor. If that child of God resists the call, he may suffer God's discipline in some form. If he persists in disobedience, he may suffer premature death, yet he will still go to heaven. He was not "living according to the flesh," but was "by the Spirit putting to death the deeds of the body." He had fruit in his life, but was falling short of what God expected. So he is not like the Christian who has abandoned his faith or returned to the practice of sin.

We might ask, "What is so terrible about dying prematurely and going to heaven? Wouldn't that be more of a reward than a chastisement?"

Such a question reveals our lack of understanding of how greatly God will reward the godly in the next life. If giving even a cup of cold water will be rewarded; if by patiently enduring "momentary, light affliction" we can expect in return "an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17); if by sharing with those in need we can lay up "treasure in heaven" (Luke 12:33), then every extra second we can serve God on earth should be considered an unparalleled opportunity. How sad it is when we waste time that we can never regain. In the future, we will look back with much regret. How much more will this be true of those who died prematurely and had no further opportunities to serve the Lord on earth?

Is All Sickness an Indication of God's Discipline?

Clearly, from what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, weakness, sickness and premature death can all be manifestations of God's discipline. Although it would be unsafe to conclude that all weakness, sickness or premature death is a sure indication of God's discipline, there are many other scriptures besides 1

Corinthians 11:27-32 that attest to the possibility.¹⁶ Thus any Christian who finds himself suffering physically would be wise to spend some time in self-examination. If we *are* suffering God's discipline, it would seem unlikely that we would find lasting physical relief apart from repentance and God's forgiveness.

God's discipline can certainly come in forms other than physical illness. God can arrange circumstances in an infinite number of ways to accomplish His purposes. Jacob, who once impersonated his brother in order to deceive his father, woke up one morning married to a woman who had impersonated his fiancée! Many disobedient Christians have awakened to similar circumstances, as the Lord gently taught them about sowing and reaping.

Above all, we should not forget that God's discipline is an indication of His love for us. The disciplined Christian should not entertain any thoughts that would say otherwise. Jesus said, *"Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent"* (Rev. 3:19, emphasis added). The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that God deals with us as any good father would his son:

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons,

*"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
Nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him;
For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines,
And He scourges every son whom He receives."*

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are

¹⁶ See, for example, Ex. 15:26; Num. 12:1-15; Deut. 7:15; 28:22, 27-28, 35, 58-61; 1 Sam. 5:1-12; 1 Kings 8:35-39; 2 Kings 5:21-27; 2 Chron. 16:10-13; 21:12-20; 26:16-21; Ps. 38:3; 106:13-15; 107:17-18; Is. 10:15-16; Jn. 5:5-14; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 11:27-34; Jas. 5:13-16; Rev. 2:20-23.

without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:3-11).

Taking into consideration what we've just read, it would seem that we should be more concerned about *not being* disciplined than *being* disciplined! The author of Hebrews wrote that "all have become partakers" of God's discipline, and those who haven't are "illegitimate children and not sons" (12:8).

God desires that we share His holiness. This has been His intention from the beginning. Being disciplined is no fun, but after we've endured it, it yields righteousness in our lives. The Psalmist wrote, "Before I was afflicted I went astray / But now I keep Thy word...It is good for me that I was afflicted / That I may learn Thy statutes" (Ps. 119:67, 71).

When the Church Administers God's Discipline

There is one other aspect of God's discipline that we need to consider. It, too, is something God uses to motivate us to be holy. It is discipline administered by the church.

Unfortunately, Jesus' words on the subject are rarely obeyed, primarily because the focus of so many churches and professing Christians is not personal or corporate holiness. Nevertheless, true Christians who are striving together to please the Lord won't ignore what Jesus said:

And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;

and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer (Matt. 18:15-17).

One can't help but wonder what would happen if these commands were obeyed in every church. No doubt that in many, attendance would significantly drop. Clearly, as fellow members of Christ's body, we have a responsibility, not only for our own holiness, but we also share some responsibility for the holiness of other believers and the purity of Christ's church.

It seems reasonable to think that Jesus' words regarding church discipline have application to those times when a brother sins against us *personally*, and not when a brother sins in general. This interpretation is buttressed somewhat by Jesus' words recorded in Luke 17:3-4: "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins *against you* seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him" (emphasis added).

Notice Jesus said, "If he sins *against you*." Also, Jesus told us to forgive any repentant brother whom we rebuke. We can only forgive the personal offenses of others, not their general sins. Moreover, we note that following Jesus' words about church discipline in Matthew 18 is the parable of the unforgiving servant, prompted by Peter's question regarding how often he should forgive his brother. Implied in Peter's question and Jesus' answer in the parable is the idea of personal offenses.

The Proper Sequence

"Church discipline," of course, should rarely involve the whole church. It begins with one person who is devoted to being holy. He must be holy for at least two reasons. First, if he is not personally holy to some degree, he will play the part of the man with a log in his eye who is trying to remove the speck in the eye of another (see Matt. 7:3-5). What right do I have to correct a sinning brother if I am a greater sinner?

Second, if the offense committed is personal, then the offended one must be holy enough to desire reconciliation. Too many of us, when offended, talk about

the offense with everyone but the offender, preferring to gossip rather than work for reconciliation. Scripture warns us that, when we do this, we are in danger of judgment (see Matt. 7:1-2; Jas. 4:11; 5:9).

So, let's imagine that a fellow believer sins,¹⁷ and let's say his offense is against you. You should then lovingly, gently, and humbly confront him. Most times you will discover that the offender didn't realize what he'd done, and he will immediately ask your forgiveness. You, of course, will then be obligated to forgive him, and you may want to question at that point if you are a little bit too sensitive. Many "offenses" that people "suffer" ought to be overlooked with the assumption that the offender intended no harm. For example, just because it *seemed* as if your pastor was avoiding you at church doesn't mean he *was* avoiding you. He may have just been busy looking after others.

Another possibility when you confront the offender is that he may enlighten you as to your contribution in the breach. He may tell you that he did what he did because you offended him. Of course, if that is the case, he should have already come to you! Nevertheless, you may now understand that you were the real cause of the problem and need to ask forgiveness. Your brother, then, will be obligated to forgive you, and reconciliation will occur.

Steps Two and Three

But let's say that neither of these things happens, and the offender refuses to acknowledge his guilt or ask your forgiveness. Then you should "take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed" (Matt. 18:16).

Of course, before you'll be able to convince one or two others to confront the offender, you'll have to convince them of your case. They may want to quiz the offender before they'll take your side. They may even become convinced that the

¹⁷ It's a different story when an unbeliever sins against you, because he is not submitted to Christ. Trying to correct him could result in a fulfillment of Proverbs 9:7: "He who corrects a scoffer gets dishonor for himself, And he who reproves a wicked man gets insults for himself."

supposed offender is guiltless and correct you! If that is the case, you should then seek the “offender’s” forgiveness.

If you are able to convince the one or two others of your case, then together, you should all confront the offender once again. Hopefully, their siding with you should be enough to convince him to admit his wrong and seek your forgiveness, resulting in reconciliation.

Rarely does it happen, but if he still refuses to admit his wrong, then the matter should be taken before the whole church. This will, of course, require that those in church leadership be involved; they will doubtlessly want to investigate everything fully before deciding to join your cause. Again, the possibility exists that they may discover that both sides have valid complaints, and that both parties need to seek each other’s forgiveness. However, if they join your side, you can be reasonably sure that you have a justified complaint against your brother.

When he discovers that the entire church has taken your side and is planning to confront him publicly, he will then either repent or leave the church. It is quite unlikely that he will have to be excommunicated. Jesus said that he should be treated as a “Gentile and a tax-gatherer” (18:17). That is, he should be treated as an unregenerate person, because that is what he obviously is. One who is truly born again would not have resisted the collective conviction of the entire church. Thus, he should be treated like an unbeliever—in need of being evangelized and born again.

Keep in mind that Jesus never envisioned the large congregations that often comprise churches today. The early churches were small groups that met in homes. So the third step Jesus envisioned would have involved probably no more than twenty people, all of whom knew and loved both the offender and offended persons. This being so, it would be better to follow this third step in the context of a small group.

If the Offender Repents...

If, at any point before, during, or after the process of church discipline, the offender asks your forgiveness, you must forgive him, or you will experience

God's discipline. Within seconds of giving instructions regarding church discipline, Jesus told a story about a slave who was forgiven an enormous debt by his king. Yet that slave then refused to forgive a fellow slave who owed him a much smaller debt, and he had that fellow slave thrown into prison. When the king heard of his slave's unforgiveness, he was "moved with anger" and "handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him" (Matt. 18:34). Jesus then promised us, "So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart" (Matt. 18:35).

Clearly, the unforgiving servant again became responsible for his past debt which he could never repay, and found himself in the same state as he had been previously: unforgiven. Does this not indicate that he "lost his salvation?" Jesus promised that unless we forgive the sins of others, we would not be forgiven (see Matt. 6:14-15).

False Forgiveness

Do we have an obligation to forgive those who wrong us, but who never admit their offenses? Must we treat unrepentant offenders as if nothing has happened? These are important questions that plague the minds of many Christians.

First, we must realize that there can be no true reconciliation apart from communication, repentance and forgiveness. This is easily understood in the context of marriage. When one spouse offends another, there is tension between them. Perhaps they stop talking to one another. One sleeps on the couch.

What is it that can restore their relationship? Only communication, repentance and forgiveness. They may simply try to ignore what has happened. They may force themselves to smile at one another and chat about other subjects. But there is still something between them. Their relationship has been damaged, and it will remain that way until there is communication, repentance and forgiveness.

If one person is the sole offender, the offended one may attempt to "forgive," trying to forget what has happened and go on with life as if nothing happened. But every time he or she sees the offender, the offense comes to mind. "Why can't I forgive?" is the anguished thought.

The reason is because he or she attempts the impossible, doing what God Himself doesn't practice. God only forgives those who repent. He doesn't expect an offended believer to pretend that there has been no offense committed against him, while trying to convince himself that the offender is really a wonderful person with no flaws. That is precisely why Jesus instructed us to confront the offender, and, if he doesn't repent, to take him through the steps of church discipline. At any point in the process, if he repents, then we *must* forgive him. If Jesus expected an offended believer just to "forgive" and go on, He would never have said what He did about church discipline. Again, Jesus said,

Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and *if he repents, forgive him*. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, "*I repent*" *forgive hi*" (Luke 17:3-4, emphasis added).

It is possible, and expected, that believers will love everyone, even unrepentant offenders, just as God does. But loving them doesn't necessarily require unconditional forgiveness. God loves everyone, but not everyone is forgiven by Him.

Impossible Cases

But what if it is impossible, because of circumstances beyond your control, to follow the three-step process Jesus outlined? For example, you've been seriously offended by an influential believer, such as a pastor, and he won't let you make an appointment with him. Or, you confront an offender who refuses to repent, and you can't find anyone willing to go back with you for the second step.

In such cases, Paul's words apply: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men" (Rom. 12:18). Do what you can do; that is all God expects.

Regardless of the situation, the Lord always wants us to "turn the other cheek" and "go the extra mile." As I've previously said, this doesn't mean that we should allow ourselves to be abused, but that we should go beyond what people would normally expect. This is especially true when we deal with unbelievers.

They've made no claim to be Christ's followers, so to try to take them through the process that God has given to the church would be foolish.

As I've already said, although God does not forgive anyone unless he repents, He still loves unrepentant people and longingly waits with open arms to receive them at any time. That should be our attitude toward *any* unrepentant offender. We can't forgive him until he repents, but we can love him, pray for him, and wait with open arms of love. The prodigal son's father didn't journey to a distant land to offer his son a low-interest loan, but neither did he turn his back when he saw his son coming home in shame. He ran and embraced him. Joseph didn't reveal himself to his brothers when they first visited him in Egypt, but once they demonstrated their repentance some time later, he received them with tears.

The Other Side of the Coin

What if *you* are the object of church discipline? A brother comes to you with word that you've offended him. What should you do? You should swallow any pride that might try to surface, listen carefully, and consider what he's saying. If you think his gripe is justified, you should apologize and ask forgiveness. If you think otherwise, you should gently discuss your feelings and work for understanding and reconciliation. Hopefully you'll succeed.

If he returns with one or two others, and they side with the offended one even after listening to your version of the story, you should very seriously consider what they tell you and admit your wrong, asking forgiveness.

If you are convinced that all three are wrong and they take the matter to the church, you should willingly meet with any of the leadership who requests a meeting, carefully explaining your version of the story. If the entire church sides with the offended brother, you should realize that you are wrong, admit it, and ask forgiveness.

Reverse Church Discipline

Church discipline is a form of God's discipline since it is done at His command. It is another way He motivates us to be holy and a means whereby He keeps His true church pure.

In churches full of phony Christians, however, it is an entirely different story. I know a godly pastor who refused to sing a duet with a man who attended his church and who was living in a fornicating relationship. The fornicator was the member of a family of long-standing "pillars" in the church, and when they learned of this pastor's "offense," they worked to get him removed from his pastorate. He was too judgmental and intolerant, they said, and most of the congregation sided with them. Consequently, they were able to remove him. That is church discipline in reverse, and is another way that God keeps *His* church pure!

We should consider all three of the motivations—love of God, hope of reward, and fear of discipline—as further evidence of God's amazing grace toward us. Each is a gift He didn't have to give, but He has, by His grace. All glory be to Him for our holiness!