

The Kingdom of God is like... -- 31OCT2010

(Luke 17:21)

- **King James Bible**
Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.
- **New International Version (©1984)**
nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."
- **New American Standard Bible (©1995)**
nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst."
- **New Living Translation (©2007)**
You won't be able to say, 'Here it is!' or 'It's over there!' For the Kingdom of God is already among you."
- **English Standard Version (©2001)**
nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

In my [lectio](#) yesterday and this morning I was reading and contemplating several passages from the gospels; in particular Matthew 13:31-33 started to tickle my thoughts a bit. Here are the passages:

***The Kingdom of Heaven** is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches (Matt. 13:31-32).*

***The Kingdom of Heaven** is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough (Matt. 13:33).*

***Also in my consideration is The Parable of the Sower** (Matt. 13:1-23) with particular focus on this statement of Jesus; "The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"*

The first thing that struck me when reading "the kingdom is like..." passages was the drastic and transformative imagery that Jesus presents. I don't think exact comparisons of these illustrations are necessary and they are not the real point of Jesus' examples. For instance, he could have said an acorn turns into a mighty oak or the seed from a pine cone turns into a cedar that reaches the heavens. Likewise, the point can be made for the yeast in the flour dough... something "small" had great influence and had amazing transformative power or was amazingly transformed.

As I was thinking about these passages, especially in context with the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23), I started considering how my previous thinking about these Kingdom of Heaven word pictures might not have been perceived correctly. I have, or had, generally considered these statements as something **outside** of me and not necessarily **within** me. I don't know why that is, but it is. Suddenly, something clicked though, and I began to consider this from a different vantage point... and it seems to make much more sense to me now. Not that my previous thinking was inaccurate, but I was thinking in more of an **ultimate** and **complete** sense of understanding. Ultimately the Kingdom of God will be all encompassing and the ruling reign of Jesus will be over all things; the Bible speaks prophetically of this, so yes... those Kingdom of God is like metaphors make sense in those respects. Jesus, in his humble arrival, and with the help of his unassuming disciples ultimately reorder all things on the earth through his atoning sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. I get it; it makes sense... something small and it radically transforms into something much larger than itself. Or is there more?

I think there is more and maybe I'm just a little slow to arrive at this conclusion and everybody else has already seen this. If that is the case, welcome me to the party...sorry I have been late in arriving. So...considering the Kingdom of God, I remember on a couple of occasions in particular Jesus stating that the Kingdom of God is already among you (Matthew 12:28). Particularly in Luke 17:21 I was reminded of several translations (see above) that indicated the Kingdom is within you, among you, and in your midst. I'm very much an "if—then" thinker. I'm always postulating ideas into if/then statements and overlaying them on different scenarios. It was one of these moments that opened up some serious heart examination questions for me with this **Kingdom of God is like...** idea presented by Jesus in Matt. 13:31-33.

Ok... the Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a mighty garden plant or tree, and the Kingdom of God is like a tiny measure of yeast put into three full measures of flour that doesn't stop working (activating) until it has worked itself through the whole dough. What does that mean to me? If the Kingdom of God is **within me** or **among me** like the "seed" or the "yeast," how has it impacted me? Is the Kingdom growing within me and working itself through every molecule of my being (much like the yeast in the flour)? Has the tiny seed of God's Kingdom taken root within me and begun its mighty transformative work in me so I no longer appear the same as I used to? Do other creatures of God want to take up residence in the haven of God's Kingdom which has become my life?

*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; **it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches...***

I'm brought back to the beginning of this chapter thirteen in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the Parable of the Sower and I wonder; which seed am I? Certainly I am not [seed one](#) (Matt. 13:18-19) and I don't consider myself [seed two](#) (Matt. 13:20-21). **If** this Good News of Jesus Christ, the seed of God's Kingdom has truly been planted within and among me, and Jesus' words are true about what the Kingdom of God is like... **then** I will not fall victim of [seed three](#) (Matt. 13:22) either. However, I'm not fully convinced when I look honestly in the mirror of my life, that I am [seed four](#) (Matt. 13:23)... Radical transformation on the level of Jesus' descriptions will indeed produce a harvest of 30, 60, 100 fold. I believe my tendency is to be satisfied and give myself applause if I am able to successfully replicate myself; what is that one-fold??? Two-fold??? In either event it doesn't sound radically transformative as is depicted in Jesus' illustration.

I suppose the bottom line question in my ongoing meditation is this; "Is the kingdom of God like Jeff?" The truth of the matter is if Jesus' words are true and the Kingdom has been planted in me, I will be radically transformed into something that no longer resembles my old self. Sadly, we have a tendency to start out down the road of transformation (seed two or seed three) and then fail to allow the yeast of Christ any more leeway in our lives. I desire whole life transformation and I believe the key is whole death. I think I read this one time...

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels—a plentiful harvest of new lives. John 12:24

Transform me, O My God, through the yeast of your word. May it consume and devour all that am so I might be a deeply rooted tree in your kingdom, a safe haven for others to call home. Amen.

Interior Life only Skin Deep -- 02NOV2010

I'm reading a marvelous work by Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*, and came across something this morning that gave me pause. I so pray that I do not fall into this trap... I do recognize that the problem does not simply fall upon contemplatives and mystics.

"Sometimes it seems that the so called "interior life" is little more than a web of illusion, spun out of jargon and pious phrases which we have lifted from books and sermons and with which we conceal, rather than reveal, what is in us. How often the (spiritual) director, listening to seemingly admirable religious souls, is saddened and chilled by the sense that a smug, unconscious complacency, armed with the clichés of pious authors, stands before him fully prepared to resist every advance of humility and truth. His heart is contracted by a kind of hopelessness, a feeling that there is no way of breaking through and setting free the real person who remains buried and imprisoned under the false front that has been acquired, unfortunately, as a result of religious malformation." --Thomas Merton; *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*

Most of my "church" experience with the majority of "believers" could be described in this paragraph by Merton. I certainly **do not** intend for my statement to come across as an unfair indictment, but it has been my experience. In my world of Protestant Evangelicalism experience, we might substitute elder or pastor for spiritual director, but most often (again, my opinion and experience only) they are living behind some facade as much as the person they are providing direction to. I know this is a broad generalization, but sadly, those experiences that are in the exception are not making enough forward progress to stave off the epidemic of shallow non-christian formation, or as Merton puts it... **religious malformation**. Many of our churches hide themselves behind the stages of Oz (*reference Wizard of Oz*). Our religious experience is relegated to a talent show on the weekends with the most charismatic speakers, musicians, and entertainers leading our spiritual journeys. Our Attention Deficit Disorder is perpetuated by our inability to focus long term on the slow and arduous task of spiritual formation, so instead of moving in this direction we cater to our ADD personalities with short edutainment sermon series patterned after movies, TV sitcoms, and other culturally relevant wordplay. Our spiritual growth curriculum is mass produced by publishing houses that are primarily in the business to sell their books. As a result, we most often get the most recent curriculum (brilliantly marketed) that supports the latest Christian bestseller. This is usually touted to be the "light" that will usher in revival and spiritual maturity... Until the ink dries on the next "brilliant" release.

Unfortunately, a cursory look within our ranks at our Christian community will reveal the truth of Merton's words (*penned some 50 years ago*) are as accurate today as they were when he wrote them. Most of us are filled to overflowing with religious jargon and deceived by our own homespun web of illusion. We're over-educated and information-insulated from the true work that God desires to do in us. Until we are willing to drop our masks and submit ourselves to being broken by God's hand, we will never be remade in His Image... we are still too much in love with our own to ever allow that to happen.

WE DON'T KNOW WHAT WE DON'T KNOW...

OR, WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN (AND PROBABLY WILL) HURT YOU. -- 03NOV2010

A Meditation in Ephesians 5:1-20 ([link to BibleGateway here](#))

"...Don't be fooled by those who try to excuse sin" (Eph. 5:6). "Live as people of light!" (Eph. 5:8). "Carefully determine what pleases the Lord" (Eph. 5:10). "Light makes everything visible..." (Eph. 5:14). "So be careful how you live. Make the most of every opportunity... Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do" (Eph. 5:15-17).

As often happens with me, several things I am reading and considering converge into a single train of thought. In this particular case it is the thought of what happens to us as we seek more of God and grow closer to Him and the antithesis of that seeking, (or perhaps even [antipathy](#) of that seeking) spiritual sloth and apathy, toward growing closer to God and becoming more like Him (Ephesians 5:1).

I mentioned a [couple days ago](#) I was reading a small, but very deep book by Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*. Something I ran into while reading this book has rattled me along the same lines as [this meditation](#) from Luke I penned a while back. In it (among other things) I talk about the demise of the so-called "believer" or "follower" of Jesus who ignores or refuses the commands and obedient life of truly becoming a fully mature disciple of the Most High God, Jesus Christ. Merton provided me insight that I may have been cognizant of, but his words helped to clarify the thoughts milling in my own mind in a much more cohesive manner. Thomas Merton writes the following:

"The saints are, as a matter of fact, much more keenly aware of the gulf between themselves and God than are those who live always on the periphery of sin. As we advance in the interior life it generally becomes less and less necessary for us to stir up in ourselves this feeling of exile and of spiritual need. The soul that is only dimly enlightened by God has very little conception of its own indigence. The most serious faults seem to it to be quite harmless. Habitual self-complacency is almost always a sign of spiritual stagnation. The complacent no longer feel in themselves any real indigence, any urgent need for God. Their meditations are comfortable, reassuring and inconclusive. Their mental prayer quickly degenerates into day-dreaming, distractions or plain undisguised sleep."—Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction & Meditation*; pp. 81-82

I'm not sure of the context that Merton is describing saints, so I'm not sure I fall into his categorization or not, but there are some things I do know. I know that for forty some years I have journeyed a rocky and convoluted path on my way to following Jesus in wholeness and in truth. I know when I was not seeking Him with my whole heart and full attention I was pretty much a man following a path that "seemed" right. I found out time and time again that path would lead me to discouragement, disillusionment, and ultimately... death (Proverbs 14:12). Throughout my four decades of on-again-off-again Christianity, I always wanted to "fit" Jesus into my plans rather than allow Jesus total control of my life so He might "fit me" into His plans. With each attempt that I made and with each alteration of course on my homespun version of discipleship, God refused manipulation through my methodology. What made me think that I might be able to shoe horn a so-so moderate "dose of Jesus" into my life; enough to make "me" better, but not enough to destroy my "self-envisioned" ambitions for attaining happiness on this side of eternity? I was "dimly enlightened" as Merton states.

What I have learned over the past decade of striving for the crucified life is this: The more I seek God in truth and in spirit, the more of Himself He reveals to me. The more of Himself He reveals, the more wretched I am aware that I am. The more wretched I am aware of myself, the more I am driven to Him (Matthew 5:3-5). This attitude about "me" seems "self-defeating" and it is, but that is not a bad thing. What is bad is the desire to "save self" (Luke 17:33).

The title of this post is “we don’t know what we don’t know, or what you don’t know can hurt you.” So many of my brothers and sisters do not know what is hurting them. Their lack of desperate hunger for their Creator is taking them down a path of deception; apathy is death and without a desire to fan into flames the gift of faith within us, we will slip further away from Him...even without realizing it.

The majority of my life can be described as the person that Merton speaks of...“little knowledge of my desperate need.” “Serious faults seemed to be quite harmless...” “I didn’t have an urgent need for God.” Let me clarify; I’m not talking about when I was openly living my life outside of the way of God, I’m referring equally to the time when I was living inside the walls of the church. My guess is that I was not alone in my half-hearted faith journey. Ask yourself if your ambition reflects the heart of the psalmist (Psalm 42); does your desire long for God as the deer pants for water? In this same spiritual song, the writer tells us deep calls to deep... meaning that God draws us (our spirit) unto Himself. Do you sense this drawing? Do you respond to it or push it aside? The psalmist recognizes how barren his soul is and turns himself back to the God who saves. I sensed this same call; I heard the same voice (going on ten years ago) when I decided to stop trying to force God to dance with me and learn to follow His lead. Since that time, my ambition has been wrecked and remade. I no longer see myself as OK and all my complacency is gone. There is one thing and one thing only that drives me... Jesus, and the process of becoming more like Him... completely and utterly His disciple. Nothing else is as important as knowing my God, my Savior, and my King. May it be so, and may I be even more consumed by Him. Amen.

Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased. –C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

If you’ve got fifteen minutes, [try this video](#) of Francis Chan...

Pick Your Own Jesus -- 04NOV2010

Random Question: Do you believe Christianity, or Following Jesus, is an “all or nothing” proposition? If you are willing, please explain your answer in the comment section at the end of this post or through the [contact me link here](#).

My mind is “ripping and tearing” this morning... My thoughts were already stirred from several ideas I was contemplating; and like fuel to fire, a couple more ideas were thrown into the mix and my brain is ablaze with thinking. If you are a regular reader of the *icrucified* blog, you’ll remember the posts from the last few days. If you are not or haven’t caught up with the most recent posts, you should catch up with these in the following order:

- [The Kingdom of Heaven is Like](#)
- [Interior Life only Skin Deep](#)
- [We Don’t Know What We Don’t Know](#)

The prevailing burden of my heart is the dualistic existence of so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Duality in this case means having “two minds” and/or “two hearts.” My making the distinction of “two minds” and “two hearts” is itself indicative of part of the problem. Our society and current culture are, to some degree, victims of modernity; indeed, the age of reason ushered us into the age of “*Too Big for Our Own Breeches*.” And, while I call us victims, we are still responsible for the choices we make and the actions we take. What am I talking about? In a nutshell, I am talking about non-eternal, material and trivial obsessions, and the pursuit of perceived happiness (which is most often just another form of immediate narcissistic self-gratification). More on duality in a moment...

Why am I worried about this and why is it my concern? I am obsessed with a hunger for the Heart of God and I believe it is the Spirit of God who has stirred my own soul with these concerns. The bottom line is this: God cares; and because God cares, I care. Hundreds, thousands, and millions of people are living and dying **far from God** and either category culminates with the same final chapter; eternally separated from God. Ironically, [recent polls indicate ninety-five percent \(yes 95%\)](#) of Americans believe in God (*Duality plays into this incredibly high percentage of people professing belief in God*).

The reason that ninety-five percent of Americans can profess belief in God is this; a certain (**group one**) percentage believe in a god of their own definition and not the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who is Jesus Christ. Another large percentage (**group two**) of this ninety-five percent profess belief in God with their words, conceding belief by virtue of their knowledge of God and their ability to be conversant with that knowledge. Their belief is that salvation comes through confession of knowledge and concession that affirming belief in God is sufficient to bear the title of Christian. The remaining percentage (**group three**), however small it might be, are likely to be Christians by definition of the Bible... that is people who are forsaking themselves and striving to grow closer to God and allowing Him full reign over their lives. The problem is the overwhelming numbers that comprise groups one and two. An even greater problem is how many people think they are in group three, but are really in groups one or two ([see post *We Don't Know*](#)).

There are quite a few passages of Scripture that teach us about the exclusivity of our relationship with God through Jesus. It would seem to me that anyone professing allegiance to God, the God of the Bible, (especially those professing to bear the title of Christian) would perform their due diligence in understanding what the terms of our relationship with God are. I don't want to make this post about quoting a truckload of those Scriptures, although I would be more than happy to discuss those at length should that be the desire of anyone. My focus in this post is to point out the absurdity of professing alliance with Jesus Christ, but failing to live as he lived (1 John 2:6).

(Note: redefining how Jesus lived to suit your lifestyle does not count as living as Jesus lived. An omnipotent and omniscient God who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow is the God we follow... This God, Jesus Christ, does not need our help in making Him relevant through our own reinterpretations. God has sufficiently interpreted Himself and fully revealed Himself in the Person of Jesus Christ... there is nothing else necessary for us to add.)

This lack of acknowledgment or refusal to pursue exclusivity in our relationship with God through Jesus Christ perpetuates our dualistic tendencies. We want both worlds; we want the world of eternal perfection with God and we want the world of temporal self-gratification in the here and now (the Bible refers to this as lusts of the flesh or being in love with the world...not knowing what we want and/or being double minded). Somehow, someday... a horrendous number of "christians" have convinced themselves this is not only okay, but that God fully approves of it. Try as I might, and I am not a prude, I cannot find anything that alludes to this ideology from my Bible reading. My intent is not to sound harsh, intolerant, and/or all fundamentalist, my intent is to sound an alarm and say that if you think we can "serve two masters" please read the Bible again.

Jesus tells us that He will send us and give to us His Spirit, He prays that we will actually share the Triune Nature (in this world, while we exist in this fleshly body –see The Gospel of John chapters 13 through 17). Peter writes that we have been given all we need to live godly lives, even sharing in the Divine Nature of God Almighty. I could go on... The point here is this: How can we pursue two paths? So much of what we do in our world today is incongruous with the life of a disciple of Christ. I wrote yesterday about apathy and spiritual sloth. If we bear the indwelling and Living Spirit of the Almighty God within us... leading us in Truth and Revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ and rallying us toward exalting Him

with all glory and praise, how can we be apathetic about the mission of God? How can we be duplicitous in our worship and service to God? How can we not be concerned with the things God is concerned with? How can we (a professed 95% Christian nation) veer so far from the precepts of God?

I looked at a [blog posting this morning](#) that described several groups of “ex-christians.” While reading about the defining categories of each of these groups, I wondered how each had defined God in their heart-mind. Apparently, their own definitions had not met their own standard of God. Sadly, they walk away just as the [Rich Young Ruler](#), and end up following themselves.

I wonder; in a day and age when we are persuaded and hypnotized by the media into believing we are the center of our universe, when we rank in the top five percent of all the wealth on this planet, how we might be saved from ourselves. Jesus tells his disciples, “While it might be near impossible for the rich to enter into Heaven, nothing is impossible for God.” There is hope. Our first step is to empty ourselves *of ourselves* and seek the true infilling of God’s Holy Spirit. Presently, for the majority of us, there is no room for God to speak into our lives... much less take up residence in it. I am reminded of a story I read not too long ago that follows:

Once upon a time, an ancient story tells, the master had a visitor who came to inquire about Zen. But instead of listening, the visitor kept talking about his own concerns and giving his own thoughts. After a while, the master served tea. He poured tea into his visitor’s cup until it was full and then he kept on pouring. Finally, the visitor could not bear it any longer. “Don’t you see that my cup is full?” he said. “It’s not possible to get anymore in.” “Just so,” the master said, stopping at last. “And like this cup, you are filled with your own ideas. How can you expect me to give you Zen unless you first empty your cup?” --Excerpted from The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages by Joan Chittister, O.S.B.

I end this post as I began; asking the question, “Is Christianity an all or nothing proposition?” If the answer is “no,” then I have been mistakenly reading from the wrong Scriptures or failed entirely in my understanding of them... (I do not believe this to be the case, but would invite conversation if you should think otherwise). If, on the other hand, the answer is “yes,” then we must awaken from our slumbering dreams of self and make straight our way on the narrow path (Matthew 7:13-23). Perhaps the real question is "Have we adapted the rules of our faith so that we are allowed to 'pick our own Jesus', or *are we our own Jesus?*

It’s a (tare-able) thing to miss the *Truth*... --- 05NOV2010

I began my week with a study of chapter thirteen from the Gospel of Matthew (The Kingdom of Heaven is Like). I finished the week with a meditation on the sum of the whole. This morning, before reading, I prayed from my Wesleyan Prayer Book the following:

From distraction in the midst of the sacred reading, save me, good Lord. From presuming that I already know the meaning of the Scriptures that are about to be considered, spare me. Pry open both my mind and my heart and in the place of their pretense and coldness put the fullness and fire of your life-giving Spirit; for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

I started my reading with Jesus’ explanation of the [Parable of the Wheat and Tares](#) (also known as the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds). It should be noted that this entire chapter thirteen is relevant within the context of this particular meditation today. I find it very interesting, this collection of parables and sayings of Jesus... I don’t think I’ve been as keen to what I noticed this morning. I think in some way the Parable of the Sower sets the stage for the entire chapter; I believe there is a certain connection with the metaphor of the Sower in general, but more important (to my thinking) are Jesus’ words to “Listen.”

“You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. To those who listen to my teaching, more understanding will be given, and they will have an abundance of knowledge. But for those who are not listening, even what little understanding they have will be taken away from them.” (Matt. 13:11-12).

Right on the heels of this Parable of the Sower, Jesus tells another parable (the Wheat and Weeds-Tares). In the parable, we see the weeds growing alongside the wheat. When asked by the “workers” should the weeds be removed, the farmer says, “No.” He advises the workers to allow the weeds to continue growing with the tares; ultimately, the tares will be separated and destroyed. (Pause)

Before explaining the meaning of the parable, Jesus (appears randomly, but he’s God...so not random) breaks out with a couple of *Kingdom of Heaven is like...* ([see my earlier post from this week](#)) word pictures that describe the effect and influence of the Kingdom of God. This is important; *pay attention to how you listen and hear...* “I will speak to you in parables. I will explain things hidden since the creation of the world” (Matt. 13:34).

Don’t be a weed; It doesn’t end well...

It is at this point the disciples ask Jesus to explain the meaning of the Wheat and Tares to them. He goes on to explain the following:

“Just as the weeds are sorted out and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the world. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will remove from his Kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. And the angels will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in their Father’s Kingdom. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!” (Matt. 13:40-43)

Then, seemingly as abrupt as his previous interjections about *the Kingdom of Heaven is like...*he launches into another couple of *Kingdom of Heavens*: “*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!*” (Matt. 13:44-46). We now have five very specific word pictures about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Excluding the “Wheat and Tares” Kingdom of Heaven parable, two of our Kingdom of Heaven word pictures tell us that the Kingdom of Heaven overtakes and overwhelms what it comes in contact with ([my words](#)). The second Kingdom of Heaven word pictures tell us the Kingdom of Heaven is more valuable than anything that exists in the material world, so much so that it would make perfect sense to sell or give up all you had in trade of it. This is important; *pay attention to how you listen and hear...*

Random Ponder Moment: I wonder if weeds know they’re weeds or if fish know what kind of fish they are...

Speaking of fish... Jesus begins his sixth parable about the *Kingdom of God is like* telling his disciples *it is like a fishing net that was thrown into the water and caught fish of every kind*. He completes the parable with the following:

“When the net was full, they dragged it up onto the shore, sat down, and sorted the good fish into crates, but threw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the righteous, throwing the wicked into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Do you understand all these things?” (Matt. 13:48-51)

Not a pretty picture; not for the weeds, not for the “bad fish.” Pay attention to how you listen and hear; do you understand all these things?

I asked some questions at the beginning of the week about the value of and the effect of the Kingdom of God on those it comes in contact with. I have come to realize that, true to Jesus’ words, God is our food and our drink. He is the air we breathe and without those mandatory elements we die. It was not always the case with me, but I am often stricken with the sense that (1) I do not have enough of God in my life, and (2) the more of God’s Presence I do have in my life, the more I desire of it. This is in keeping with four of Jesus’ examples of the Kingdom is Like statements... I think. I believe I understand what the apostle was trying to convey when he wrote to the church in Galatia the following words:

“As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, *my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world’s interest in me has also died.* It doesn’t matter whether we have been circumcised or not. What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation.” (Galatians 6:14-15)

As I pondered in yesterday’s posting, I wonder how many of my Christian brothers and sisters identify with this sentiment? I wonder how many are “*paying attention to how they listen and hear...*” I am afraid that many are not paying attention. I think for many, many people the world they live in is on hyper-acceleration with the volume turned up to the max. The scenery of God’s invitation to abundant and eternal life is a blistering blur in most people’s rear-view mirror and His verbal invitation to the same is drowned out by the infantile screaming of people’s daily schedules. Most people are just simply too busy with their own life to be troubled with the *Kingdom of God is like life.* Besides, God is love and God is grace...he only hates those things called tares and bad fish...not people, and certainly not me. Right?

Close, but no cigar...

The chapter is closed out by a narration of Jesus’ return to Nazareth. We read the following passage:

When Jesus had finished telling these stories and illustrations, he left that part of the country. He returned to Nazareth, his hometown. When he taught there in the synagogue, everyone was amazed and said, “Where does he get this wisdom and the power to do miracles?” Then they scoffed, “He’s just the carpenter’s son, and we know Mary, his mother, and his brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. All his sisters live right here among us. Where did he learn all these things?” And they were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. (Matt. 13:53-58)

What caught my attention in this passage was how close the people were to truth... like the tares (weeds) and bad fish. They were close; they recognized it for a fleeting moment, “*Where does he get this wisdom and power?*” Sadly, the people quickly dismissed Truth; “*Then they scoffed... and were deeply offended.*” I think we fail to recognize the urgency of God’s Kingdom message. I think we too, are prone to scoffing, or we don’t recognize we are weeds and not wheat. Some of us (christians) are just bad fish. Some of us need to examine ourselves (2 Corinthians 13:5) and see if Jesus is truly among us. Are we passing up the “Pearl of Great Price?” We might be swimming along with good fish or blowing in the breeze next to wheat.... But oblivious to understanding the first bit of Truth because we have failed to pay attention to how we listen and it is a *(Tare)-able* thing to miss the *Truth.*

Prayer & Meditation [07NOV2010]

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scriptures has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. –Jesus (John 7:37-38)

- ¹ O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you.
My soul thirsts for you; my whole body longs for you
in this parched and weary land where there is no water.
- ² I have seen you in your sanctuary and gazed upon your power and glory.
- ³ Your unfailing love is better than life itself; how I praise you!
- ⁴ I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer.
- ⁵ You satisfy me more than the richest feast. I will praise you with songs of joy.
- ⁶ I lie awake thinking of you, meditating on you through the night.
- ⁷ Because you are my helper, I sing for joy in the shadow of your wings.
- ⁸ I cling to you; your strong right hand holds me securely.

(Psalm 63:1-8)

O God, how happy are those whose strength is in you, those who while going through the barren valleys of life make them places of springs. In their hearts are the highways to Zion. Cause us to be numbered with them, to find in you our dwelling place. Now and hereafter, grant us the delight of living in your house, ever singing your praise. Amen.

–This Day: A Wesleyan Way of Prayer

Father, I am seeking: I am hesitant and uncertain, but will you,
O God, watch over each step of mine and guide me?

–Augustine

Divine Reading (Lectio Divina) --- 08NOV2010

³ *‘Does anyone remember this house—this Temple—in its former splendor? How, in comparison, does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!’* ⁴ *But now the LORD says: Be strong, Zerubbabel. Be strong, Jeshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people still left in the land. And now get to work, for I am with you, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.* ⁵ *My Spirit remains among you, just as I promised when you came out of Egypt. So do not be afraid.’*

⁶ *“For this is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: In just a little while I will again shake the heavens and the earth, the oceans and the dry land. ⁷ I will shake all the nations, and the treasures of all the nations will be brought to this Temple. I will fill this place with glory, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ⁸ The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ⁹ The future glory of this Temple will be greater than its past glory, says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. And in this place I will bring peace. I, the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, have spoken!”* **Haggai 2:3-9 (New Living Translation)**

The Word to me:

- *"It must seem like nothing at all..."*
- **The Lord Says:**
 - *(1) Be Strong*
 - *(2) Be Strong*
 - *(3) Be Strong*
- **The Lord Says:**
 - *Get to work...*
 - *I am with you...*
 - *My Spirit remains among you, just as I promised...*
 - *Do not be afraid...*
- *The silver is mine and the gold is mine...*
- *I, the Lord of Heaven's Armies have spoken*

My situation over the past couple months has been stretching me. I have trusted (and continue to trust) what God is doing in my life and the life of my family. I look forward to what He will do in our future, but that does not detract from the daily testing of our faith. During my reading this morning, one of the passages of Scripture that I was moved to meditate on throughout the day was from the Prophet Haggai. This is not a Book that I read from very often...and considering that it is only a couple chapters in length, I haven't given it much meditation that I can remember in the recent past. Today, that changed. I was moved to consider it throughout the day, as I mentioned. It wasn't until I was halfway through the day almost that elements of the text began to clarify for me (see above).

Here's my takeaway:

Things have a way of looking somewhat bleak and empty when we filter them through unmet expectations; "it must seem like nothing at all..." What we see though is not always what is happening at the "God Level;" He tells us that His ways are not like our ways... they are much higher than what we can think or imagine. A reminder from the Spirit tells us "Be Strong," "Be Strong," "Be Strong..." Think He means it??? If the command to "Be Strong" is not enough, He tells us why and with good reason; "Get to work (stay focused), I am with you... My Spirit remains among you as I promised, so do not be afraid." This is incredibly encouraging...although I'm a little thin on resources and how to accomplish what I believe God will have me to do... "No problem, He says; the silver is mine and the gold is mine." "I the Lord of Heaven's Armies have spoken." No argument here. Thank you Jesus! All praise and glory to God. Amen

Confession [10NOV2010]

Deeply Tapped into the Root of Jesse...

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

2 The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

3 and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears (Isaiah 11:1-3)

The last couple of days have been somewhat difficult for me. I am sometimes stricken with doubt and second-guessing myself. I can go days, weeks, even months it seems and never be swayed from or persuaded to veer from my confidence in the course I am following for Jesus. Then one day it seems I look up from the path I've been so earnest and diligent to follow and I am all alone... nobody there with me... and it's quiet, and it's scary, and I wonder if I should turn back and run or try another path. I think I'm not the only one who experiences this.

In the midst of my doubt and in the midst of my feeling alone, *something else* also *occurs* within my soul and I wonder how many other believers share the experience. This "something else" is faith; enormous faith and huge confidence. My feelings of desolation may go on for days (sometimes weeks), but my faith is renewed and I am capable through a strength beyond my own to persevere and continue on in the direction I believe I was called. I may not "see" or "sense" Jesus with the same degree of intensity and clarity as I was in previous moments, but I know He is near and I know He upholds me...and because of this knowledge and confidence of heart I press on with renewed fervor.

I don't know if this experience is being shared by the rest of my Christian brothers and sisters. I see so many people blown about by the winds of circumstance and enticed by the scintillating distractions that are the faith-wrecking siren songs played at max volume each day of our lives in the media-frenzied world in which we live. It takes a special resolve, and faith that has been nurtured, in order to stand in the midst of desolation and trial, and ultimately...emerge strengthened, refined, and even refreshed.

What does it take to nurture a strong faith? Trust and discipline are the first things that come to my mind, at least in the context of my personal experience. In the circles I have traveled I have often heard the phrase uttered, "Our congregations are a mile wide and an inch deep." Translation: *the Christians we know are shallow or immature*. This sounds somewhat arrogant, condescending, judgmental, harsh, and just plain not nice. The truth of the matter is that it is true and it's not a phenomenon relegated to this particular era or restricted to Westerners (specifically North Americans). In fact, the writer of the New Testament Book of Hebrews said as much almost two thousand years ago; see the following:

There is much more we would like to say about this, but it is difficult to explain, especially since you are spiritually dull and don't seem to listen. You have been believers so long now that you ought to be teaching others. Instead, you need someone to teach you again the basic things about God's word. You are like babies who need milk and cannot eat solid food. For someone who lives on milk is still an infant and doesn't know how to do what is right. Solid food is for those who are mature, who through training have the skill to recognize the difference between right and wrong. (Hebrews 5:11-14)

The path of the Jesus follower does not flow from belief + conversion = maturity. There are also the integers of practice and process, neither of which bring with them overnight success. Jesus talks about his followers being the branches to him as the Vine (John 15:4-5). Thinking about this a few days ago in conversation with my family during morning devotions, and I began thinking about trees and their root systems.

There are a lot of trees that look healthy on the outside, but it's hard to tell how hearty they are by what they look like on the outside. I think there is a high percentage of Christians that are like trees. Jesus also describes a similar scenario in the [Parable of the Sower](#). I'm not a farmer and I don't know a lot about trees, but I've seen what happens when storms and dangerous winds hit big, pretty trees with shallow roots. They get uprooted, they get toppled, and they die; sometimes they do significant collateral damage to the objects and/or people they "fall" upon. In either event, the outcome is never pretty. Some of the things I read about shallow (flat) root trees are that some varieties are quick growing because the root systems, although shallow, are quick to grow and spread. They cover a lot of ground and feed the early stage growth of the tree to the point that it is capable of producing early fruit. I think some Christians are like

this too, getting a lot of pertinent and [necessary information](#) capable of producing some fruit, but maybe not enough to produce a lasting harvest (of thirty, sixty, or [one hundred fold](#)). Sadly, because a deep root has not been formed, these early blooming shallow root “trees” often tragically fail the testing of their faith (1 Peter 1:6-7).

It takes discipline and determination to push into the hard soil of life and develop the deep tap root needed to persevere and endure the storms that will rail against our faith. When the soil of our life is dry, when the soil is hard, and when the nutrients needed for our survival do not seem like they are there...we must resist the temptation to look elsewhere or satisfy our need with something altogether different. True enough, it may satisfy for a season... but our roots continue to grow flat and remain shallow when we opt for this alternative. Instead, God’s Word draws us to burrow “deep” press down into the source of eternal water from the springs that never dry. It is here we find the life-giving nutrients for a tap root of our soul and our faith is anchored strongly. We produce seasons upon seasons of harvests. We produce shade for those in need of rest. We provide haven for creatures to take up safety and residence in our care. We become a tree of Life because we are grafted in to the deep tap root of Jesse, the Lord, our Messiah Jesus.

Psalm 37

³⁻⁴ Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.

Delight yourself in the LORD and He will give you the desires of your heart.

⁵⁻⁶ Commit your way to the LORD; and He will do this—

He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
the justice of your cause like the noon day sun.

⁷⁻⁸ Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for Him.

—Do not fret...

—Do not fret...

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ The days of the blameless are known to the LORD,
and their inheritance will endure forever.

They will not be disgraced in hard times; even in famine they will have more than enough.

²³⁻²⁴ If the LORD delights in a man’s way, He makes his steps firm; though he stumble,
he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with His hand.

³⁴ Wait for the LORD and keep His way;

put your hope in the LORD and travel steadily along His path. (Psalm 37)

Confession [11NOV2010]

I know with all my heart and in the most confident-to-my-core sense, there is nothing that I would not give up for Jesus. I have had the prayerful conversations with Him and wrestled with the idea of multiple scenarios about this. Book learning, while a great joy, is nothing without Jesus. He is the One who brings substance to the learning; therefore, it would be a ridiculous trade to keep learning through books without the Master Tutor to make them relevant. The way I serve Jesus and in the degree to which I serve Him is completely in His hands...my greatest dilemma is putting myself to work in a capacity (while God glorifying) is not the place that brings Him the most glory... You will remember the coffee cup illustration maybe??? Laurie told it (I think) one time at a ladies retreat; the cup filled with pencils functioning perfect in that role only to realize its supreme purpose was being a vessel for steaming hot drink...

I know there have been few and rare instances in my life where I can say I have truly felt I was serving in the way I was created to serve. This is not to infer that I have not been blessed, or others blessed, God glorified, and the Kingdom advanced... but there is "something" that continues to press me and draw me; it is so difficult to explain. I simply know that I am not doing and I'm not where God wants me to be and to do. Everything, **everything**... is on the altar for the sake of following my Lord to **that place** ...even if I never find it on this side of eternity. And, I don't have delusions of grandeur about this quest. It does not matter if I am a "third shift" janitorial custodian or an author contracted with a major publishing company... if I have not the peace of Christ in my life pursuits, it is all for naught.

Please do not misinterpret what I say. My soul is filled with the peace and presence of our God. At the same time, there is significant unrest that brings an almost constant "squirming" to my soul. I have considered the possibility might be because I long for eternal communion and nothing short of that will truly satisfy. I wrestle with this too, but feel (for now) that is a minor part of my unrest, the primary unrest comes from this inexplicable urging to keep searching and moving... I have had others tell me what I already know: my calling is Abrahamic, with heavy doses of prophetic (the life of Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Amos) calling thrown in.

In our society, there are so many ways to "serve" and "minister" ...literally infinite. I think the Spirit gives us unique ways to do express His indwelling, so it not only brings God the greatest glory, but it also nurtures the souls (both the ministering agent as well as the one being ministered to) who partner with the Spirit in this Divine mélange of circumstance, situation, location, timing, listener, speaker, and Holy Spirit. Too often, our perceived paths to enlightenment and maturity in the Jesus way looks more like one of those little modular, Plexiglas bubble hamster cities... the bigger our ministry vision, the more modules and plastic bubbles... occasionally we will add a new doo-dad or toy to the complex assortment of plastic bubbles, but the end result is all the same. At the end of the day you have a bunch of little "warm fuzzies" running in circles on wheels that don't go anywhere and carefully protected from too much outside influence. I know God is not calling me to this...there are enough of those structures and more than enough "leaders" for them.

No, there is nothing standing between me and Jesus or the journey He calls me to. I continually check my motivation and desire for this and I am confident that my conscience is clear. Thank you for continuing prayer; I ask that you would please continue. I do meet today with a couple who is serving as spiritual directors for the pastors and leaders in the Pacific Northwest Conference for the Free Methodist Church. The Superintendent wanted me to connect with them. Pray that God speaks clearly in our meeting, so we might hear... **"Pay attention to how you listen..."**

(...written in response to questions from DJE)

A Meditation in Personal Devotion [14NOV2010]

Consolations and desolations; these are the ebb and flow of the spiritual journey. These "Seasons of the Soul" are the growing pains experienced as we follow the path of growing in maturity of God's grace and knowledge. Recognizing these seasons and learning to discern God's shaping and leading through them is imperative to our following the path and Will of God in our life, or so I believe.

It is part of the core foundation of my faith that God speaks to us, God is always with us, God has a destiny for us (here on this earth and not only ultimate), and God wants us to be fully conformed to the image of His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Real belief in these tenets and not just lip service affirmation has significant, life-changing impact on a person; I know it has on me and my family. I have learned to trust the leading of God... and continue to be tested so I learn to trust Him even more. I have learned how to discern the "Voice" of God to me... I have learned with humility how

to test my discernment and I have learned (and continue to learn) that humility is purified and further refined through the testing of our obedience to God as we learn to discern His Will for us and follow Him with complete trust.

I know the LORD is always with me. I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me. (Psalm 16:8)

The past several years have been an incredible exercise navigating the labyrinth of *consolations* and *desolations*. It seems that praise, ridicule, doubt, and faith are some of the typical mainstays of the spiritual diet through this faith maze of life. While it is not for the faint of heart, I am convinced it is the ultimate pat of every true believer... at some level and measure, to forsake their safety in the security of their own making and completely abandon themselves to the ownership and leadership of their God in whom they profess to believe, follow, and obey. A large number of "believers" never do this... at least "believers" that I have known do not. At the risk of beginning a soap box rant, I'll toss out my theory of why this is so for the people in my own backyard, the good ole USA. Many American Christians equate pursuit of the American Dream (the pursuit and right to life, liberty, and happiness on earth) with the Will of God for their lives. Personally, I believe this is a false presumption; and I'll stop there.

No one, has a call simply to a particular place, as good as it may be. The call of God is to the Will of God. Consequently, though every institution mediates the call of God for us, every vocation transcends any particular institution. The question is always: is this group, this place calling out the best in me? Is this where I fit? Is this the place where I can most become what God created me to be? Is this the path on which I see the footsteps of God most clearly in front of me? It is not a matter of one place being better than another. It is a matter of finding our way through life with an eye for turns in the road. It is a matter of always taking the right turn when settling for less would be so much easier. It is a matter of seeing change as a creative possibility in life. —Joan Chittister; The Rule of Benedict: Insights For the Ages

It seems not many days escape me that I do not hear one or more of a number of questions spoken by God (in the Bible) to my own soul. Hearing them makes me fidgety and uncomfortable; I think they are meant to make me feel that way as I consider my truthful responses to them. The questions number more than these, but a few that I seem to hear more often follow:

- Don't you understand even yet? (Matthew 16:9)
- Do you love me more than these? (John 21:15)
- Who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15)

The way we respond with our words, and subsequent actions, speak volumes to these questions. Sometimes the response can lead to consolations and other times desolations. I was consoled with the words of Oswald Chambers' My Utmost for His Highest as I considered some of these this morning.

I being in the way, the Lord led me... (Genesis 24:27)

We have to be so one with God that we do not continually need to ask for guidance. Sanctification means that we are made the children of God, and the natural life of a child is obedience - until he wishes to be disobedient, then instantly there is the intuitive jar. In the spiritual domain the intuitive jar is the monition of the Spirit of God. When He gives the check, we have to stop at once and be renewed in the spirit of our mind in order to make out what God's will is. If we are born again of the Spirit of God, it is the abortion of piety to ask God to guide us here and there. "The Lord led me," and on looking back we see the presence of an amazing design, which, if we are born of God, we will credit to God.

We can all see God in exceptional things, but it requires the culture of spiritual discipline to see God in every detail. Never allow that the haphazard is anything less than God's appointed order, and be ready to discover the Divine designs any where.

Beware of making a fetish of consistency to your convictions instead of being devoted to God. I shall never do that - in all probability you will have to, if you are a saint. There never was a more inconsistent Being on this earth than Our Lord, but He was never inconsistent to His Father. The one consistency of the saint is not to a principle, but to the Divine life. It is the Divine life which continually makes more and more discoveries about the Divine mind. It is easier to be a fanatic than a faithful soul, because there is something amazingly humbling, particularly to our religious conceit, in being loyal to God. –Oswald Chambers; My Utmost for His Highest

"There is a meaning in every journey that is unknown to the traveler..." writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I think this is a great thought to help us remember why it is so important to "pay attention" to how we "pay attention." The Spirit draws and the Spirit teaches to those who have ears to hear. There is much that goes on in our life that we just breeze past and never pay attention to... many of which are whispers and nudges of the Spirit drawing us closer to His path for our life.

And finally, a few closing "one-liner thoughts" from my journal and recent Scripture reading:

--**Matthew 16:23-26** ::::: *Beware of thinking with the mind of man... Reformation of the soul cannot come without repentance.*

--**Nehemiah 13:1-30** ::::: *Radical reformation follows repentance.*

--**Revelation 20:1-6** ::::: *There is a second death...and it is forever.*

Dear Jesus... My name is Jeff and I'm a recovering sinner; I WILL FOLLOW YOU.

16NOV2010

I'm stuck; for the past several days I've got a portion of Scripture lodged in my head that keeps gnawing at me and won't let me go. I've looked at several study Bibles and a few commentaries, but nothing has jumped out to me that helps me resolve what the Spirit is speaking to me... that is; ***we have work to do and we are going to be held to account for the work we have not taken responsibility for.*** Maybe it would help if I shared the snippet of Scripture. The passage comes from the Book of The Revelation and chapter nineteen, verse seven.

*Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready... (Rev. 19:7)*

Now, there are a lot of things to consider here hermeneutically, contextually, symbolically, and otherwise. I think we might be able to find plenty to debate and discuss about what is taking place at this point of the revelation...but that is not my purpose today. My meditation has been on six words and what those six words mean to me, to us... the "following" Church and Bride of the Lord Jesus Christ. ***His Bride has made herself ready.***

Hmmm...***"Made herself..."***

Okay, I'm gonna make a leap here, but I think the passage is talking about the Church, those who profess their belief and salvation through the atoning work of Jesus Christ (that would be us). We are "**herself**," the Church.

His Bride has made herself ready.

The question that begs asking is, "what does it mean to *make herself ready*?" I have often heard that sanctification (or whatever you wish to call it) is a lifelong process that never really completes on this side of eternity. I don't know that my understanding of that process (sanctification) is absolute or comprehensive at this juncture with my theology, but in either event I believe that regardless of whether it is attainable or not on this side of eternity, we should be striving for it in its completion **on this side** of eternity.

¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* ¹³ *Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁵ *Let those of us who are mature be thus minded; and if in anything you are otherwise minded, God will reveal that also to you.* **Philippians 3:12-15**

¹² *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,* ¹³ *until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ* **Ephesians 4:12-13**

As I said, I don't know if sanctification finds completion on this side of eternity or not...but I do believe it is what we diligently strive for with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This, I believe, is giving ourselves over completely to the transforming work of grace that results in wholly recreated, no longer frail and fallen, human beings. What is our work in this?

Herein lies part of the problem; "work" is a four-letter word for many souls belonging to the Church. However, the greater truth (my personal gleanings) I have found in Scripture is that our salvation, while made available and complete only through the work of God in Jesus Christ, is still a partnership. I don't believe God saves us against our will... likewise, I don't believe God sanctifies us against our will. In similar terms, I don't believe that God "whitewashes" the Church or "Bride" against her will or **in spite** of her will. And, I think this is why "**His Bride has made herself ready**" has been grating on me for the past few days.

I think we like to slip our own responsibility in this partnership; we like every benefit we receive in the arrangement, but we prefer to dodge the elements that put the onus **on** us. It is by grace that we have been saved, but it is the discipline and obedience of the follower that works out the salvation to beautiful and sanctifying works of grace that ultimately culminate in a beautiful, spotless, holy **Bride who has made herself ready.**

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ *that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,* ²⁷ *that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.* **Ephesians 5:25-27**

What is my bottom line?

Tough call...this bottom line; I think it amounts to self-examination and a higher standard. What am I doing to make myself ready, or do I expect God to automagically make me ready. I know better than to think that is going to happen. I don't see a single example where God saved, sanctified, or de-spotified anyone against their will in the Biblical narrative; not one. Maybe it happened, probably it didn't...I wouldn't hedge any bet on it, seeing that the majority (if not all) of our

examples show that He doesn't. Likewise, I don't think God is going to do this for the Church. Ultimately, I think we are going to be held to account more for the things that we **did not do** as much as for the things we have done or ever do. I have no intentions of this happening...at least in my life and according to what I am capable of doing. I know God has revealed ~~truth~~ **TRUTH** to me and it includes getting off my "padded side" and exercising the discipline and (dare I say it) **work** that needs to be done on my part for sanctification and renewal of my soul as I work for the sanctification and renewal of the Church and ultimately the sanctification and renewal of all Creation. That's what we are made for and what we are made to do (2 Corinthians 5:17-21).

A complacent church that waits for stuff to happen is not making herself ready. A complacent Christian that waits for stuff to happen is not making himself or herself ready. A person that is not ready is...well...**not ready**. What does that say about us and what does that say to us? It is interesting that I see people of all ages (I used to be one) working diligently and highly disciplined for certain things they consider to be high value ...or things they deem "worth it." Think about it; high performance athletes working for a championship, professional artists, farmers, people working toward a "comfortable" retirement, soldiers training for dangerous missions, and the list could go on. It is interesting that the word pictures in the Bible reflect some of these same examples (1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Timothy 2:3-7).

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, talks about a principle or rule he calls the [10,000-Hour Rule](#). Studies suggest that the key to success in any field has nothing to do with talent. It's simply practice, 10,000 hours of it — 20 hours a week for 10 years. Now, I'm not going to debate the principle here; I do think empowerment and indwelling by God's Holy Spirit weighs in on the Christian in a different light than the sheer weight and numbers of practice hours. However, I think Gladwell's point can be applied if we look at how much time and effort we put into our own discipleship. Similar studies reveal that a large number of professing Christians have [never read through the entire Bible](#) even one time. Many (if not a majority) of Christians have little or no involvement with their faith outside of Sunday worship gatherings. So, let's do some math. If it takes 20 hours a week for 10 years to become successful in something according to the Outlier or 10,000 Hour Rule, what does it take for the "average" Christian who might spend 1.5 hours at a weekend service and 15 minutes of devotional reading 6 days a week (total 3.0 hours per week)? The answer is **sixty four years**. This considers that the person in our example never misses a Sunday service and never misses a 15 minute daily devotional. On the other hand, if our passion is such as David, the Psalmist, who meditates on the Word of God day and night... or the apostle Paul's admonition to "pray without ceasing" we might take a number like 10 hours a day from meditation, prayer, Bible reading, etc. for our figures and we turn out **2 years and 9 months** to become a "high power" Disciple of Christ. Interesting "tale of the tape" there. I don't want these numbers to be some hard and fast formula; as I said, I believe God's Holy Spirit plays the predominant and preeminent role in our developing discipleship. Although, as I also said, we are in partnership with God in this discipleship and our part of the program is willing and passionate involvement in the process that requires sacrifice, discipline, and effort (or pardon my language, but **work**).

"His Bride has made herself ready"

So that I'm not tarred and feathered, let me state that no amount of work on our own can make a person **ready** for Jesus. You can "do all the right things" and your heart still be very far from God; take for instance, the Pharisees of Jesus' day. It's a fine line, but that line is clearly defined in the heart of a man. Jesus said; "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also..." (Matthew 6:21). I think his point, while made about money, can be made about our passion or anything else we place value on. The substance of our faith is not defined by the things we do, but the evidence of our faith is realized by the actions and efforts that our lives follow. We give energy and effort to the things we believe in. How much energy and effort are you putting into your faith in Jesus Christ? If you call yourself Christian, you are a member of the Bride. Are you making yourself ready?