

Repentance Leads To Christ-like Character

Recognizing the Soil of Your Soul

The rebellious disobedience and ME-obsession of this culture have deeply infiltrated and compromised the beliefs and lifestyles of so many within "Christian" faith communities. One of the primary reasons for our ministry is to help the followers of Jesus be prepared for a season of societal hardship and distress that will most likely surpass the suffering of the Great Depression—a level of poverty and deprivation most of us haven't experienced in this nation. Added to this period of affliction will be an element our relatives 8 decades ago didn't have to confront: outright hatred because of your faith!

Years ago while we were living in Israel we heard a troubling prophecy about the United States: that the nation would experience a "Holocaust" greater than what occurred during WW II. Jews and followers of Jesus alike would be widely persecuted.

At the time (only 20 years ago!) that idea seemed pretty farfetched. But given the escalating spiral of self-idolatry, rampant immorality as the norm, and open mockery of followers of Jesus and of His Word, is it really so unbelievable? Perhaps the growing intolerance for the "exclusivity" of the Bible and the gospel of Jesus alone as THE Way, THE Truth and THE Life may be the precursor to the Dark Days of Chastisement—an intolerance that's seething even among many who call themselves Christian (Matthew 24:9,10).

The issue for you, your family, and your faith family NOW is for each of you to scrutinize your own lives to determine if your *love for Jesus* and the *love of Jesus* is

at the core of who you are. Prayerfully bring before our Father your desire and will for companions who will join you in serving our Lord as His lights in the darkness.

"Besides everything else, we face daily the pressure of our concern for all the called-out ones" (2Corinthians 11:28).

In the pattern of Paul to his beloved brethren in Ephesus we daily ask our Father for the Spirit's working of **wisdom** and **revelation** (Ephesians 1:17). We are eager to know His will as to what He would have us share and how He would use us to extend His Kingdom. He's lovingly aware of the spiritual need of each person who receives what He gives us to write. So we also pray that He would send forth a **Spirit of conviction** with each of our materials so that you would respond by doing His will and living a life pleasing to Him (Hebrews 13:20,21).

We've found that our ministry is very similar to the seed casting Jesus speaks of in His parable in Mark 4:3-20. Each person reading this e-mail represents one of the various "soils" on which the wisdom and revelation our Father gives us falls. Over the years we've come to recognize three broad categories of people who are presented with what we share:

A. There are those who love and trust our Lord Jesus so much that their lives are being poured out in grateful service to Him. Many now find themselves isolated because it's been hard to find others within their faith community or arena of relationships who walk repentantly and serve their Lord wholeheartedly. Because they are intentionally choosing to make their life choices and decisions with Jesus as Lord of their lives, they have faced rejection within the religious system. At

times they even wonder, "What's wrong with me? Why, when I show love to people and reach out as Jesus would, do so few ever respond with affirmation?"

Our concern is that these faithful ones may develop **cold love** and a **judgmental spirit** because of the evil they see increasing all around them, even within the ranks of Christendom (Matthew 24:12,13). Make sure that if you're among those whose hearts are grieving over the decadence of the world and the unholliness that's so permeated western Christendom, you don't lose sight of the sovereignty of our God and His unchangeable purposes! Continue to gratefully and willingly yield to the Spirit of Christ in you as His representative. As He works in and through and around you, your character will continue to be transformed into that of Jesus, and you'll press on to make the most of every opportunity to reach the lost (Colossians 4:5) and encourage those who are already in Him.

B. There are those who wander from faith community to faith community, whether in congregational settings or house church gatherings. While they are ever searching and asking questions, what they are seeking has much to do with their own preferences and comfort level among other Christians. Seeking to serve our Lord and His Kingdom purposes isn't a factor in their pursuit of people with whom they can "fellowship" (a much-abused term which has degenerated into just feeling good about being with other people of like interests).

With each failed attempt to find a group that suits their taste and meets their perceived needs, they become more cynical and disillusioned. They don't see that they're putting their own interests ahead of their Father's will by desperately

seeking self-satisfaction and acceptance by others. Until they stop chasing rabbit trails and humble themselves before our Father for wherever/however He would establish them with a spiritual family that's lovingly determined to serve Him, their frustration will go on and on.

C. There are those whose faith practices are based on creedal and denominational allegiance. That's often because their parents and relatives were satisfied with that form of religious indoctrination and they don't want to risk alienation by trusting in Christ alone as Lord of who they are. While they may read material such as ours, they resist scrutinizing their own beliefs and faith practices in light of God's Word. Added to this is their fear of being rejected by their religious leaders if they confront them with discrepancies and ask probing questions. And, having little or no experience in hearing from the Holy Spirit, they don't think to ask our Father how He perceives their faith walk. Sadly, while they may bemoan the deteriorating conditions in this nation, their own lives may remain unchanged until it's too late.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

It's all too easy for the pattern of this world's ways to become acceptable and even preferred in the lives of individuals, families and faith communities. But the apostle Paul warns against letting this intrusion of compromise go on if you're intent on following Jesus as your Lord. As with repentance, the *old* — being con-

formed to the world's goals and values — must be cast aside so the *new* — transformation into Christ's likeness — can take place. Only when our minds are renewed can we even perceive God's will and live according to it.

We've written in Lesson 34 of *Discussing How To Restore the Early Church* about how change — in other words, transformation — occurs within faith communities. We'd like to show you how this connects to the *three groups* we discussed above and the *kinds of soil* on which the truths our Father gives us to share falls (see Mark 4:3-20 for the soil parable).

- 1. Innovators** (2% of people) — these are people who hunger for God's will to be done in and through their lives and are willing to pay any cost to serve and obey Him because of their love for Him.
- 2. Early Adapters** (12%) — these people enjoy relationships with Innovators and are also in relationship with those they can influence to press on in obedient trust.

These two categories may be compared to group **A**, above, and the soil that produces *"thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown."* Their personal preparation includes making sure their faith practices are scripturally sound, and scrutinizing their way of life to discern if their decisions and lifestyle are appropriate for our Father's children. Innovators and Early Adapters also demonstrate a noticeable trust in God's sovereignty that overrules any hesitation to be in His will and please Him.

These are the people who would readily get in the wheelbarrow if so directed by their Lord:

Charles Blondin was a tightrope walker who amazed audiences by pushing a wheelbarrow blindfolded high above the ground. A promoter read about him in the papers and wrote a letter saying, "Mr. Blondin, I don't believe you can do it, but I'm willing to make you an offer. For a very substantial sum of money, plus all your transportation fees, I would like to challenge you to do your act over Niagara Falls." Blondin accepted. Weeks later, high above the roaring water the young man started across on the Canadian side, blindfolded and confidently pushing his wheelbarrow. Drums rolled as he easily reached the American side. The crowds went wild! Blondin approached the promoter and said, "Well, Mr. Promoter, now do you believe I can do it?" "Well of course I do. I mean, I just saw you do it." "No," replied Blondin, "do you *really believe* I can do it?" "Well of course I do, you just did it." "No, no, no," countered Blondin insistently, "do you *believe* I can do it?" "Yes," answered Mr. Promoter, "I believe you can do it." "Good," said Blondin. "Then get in the wheelbarrow and we'll cross over together."

The Innovator and Early Adapter adamantly trust in the sovereignty of God. It's that unshakable trust that propels them to take action. This responsive obedience is what distinguishes them from the passivity of the believers in the remaining groups.

- 3. Early Majority** (33%) — people who don't want to be the first to change nor do they want to be last.

This category may be compared to group **B**, above, and the soil of those trapped by *"the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful."* They safeguard themselves by making choices that bene-

fit only them. They're unwilling to personally sacrifice anything in service for our Lord. From God's perspective they're "neither here nor there" when it comes to personal conviction. How tragic for them if their tepid relationship with Lord Jesus brings about this sorry consequence: "...because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16).

4. Late Majority (33%) — people who wait for institutional endorsement before even considering anything new.

Dependent on what their religious leaders say rather than seeking God's will and ways themselves from His Spirit and His Word, they confine their spiritual lives to what takes place under the steeple. The Word of God has resulted in no change in their lives because they received it superficially. Therefore they are unlikely to bear witness of Jesus to others because they don't want to risk being mocked or rejected for His name's sake. Jesus described them like this: "They hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away."

5. Laggards (20%) — people who won't allow themselves to be changed no matter what truths are presented to them.

Sadly, in many Nicolaitan-style congregations in which the church is passive and the clergy rule, Laggards occupy the majority of leadership positions. Fearful that they may be displaced or not needed in their current function, they are easily threatened when anyone proposes change. Their heart soil could be described thus: "As soon as they hear

[the word of truth], Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them."

These last two categories may be compared to group C, above.

The deplorable part about these two groups is that they predominate the leadership of the Christian religious system in this nation. Their personal lives reflect *no need for God* nor any *trust in Him* as the loving and mighty Lord He is. Most who occupy this position are chosen because they've either experienced success from a worldly sense ("nickels and noses") or have the potential to put their congregation on the religious map. The parallel with ancient Israel is unmistakable: "But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward" (Jeremiah 7:24).

An Observation: We've found that wherever the Old Testament is minimized or abandoned in its importance in establishing God's commands as a way of life in Christ, a predominance of Late Majority and Laggards run the congregation. Often these congregations are large—too large for personal accountability or a Matthew 18 confrontation about personal sin. People can feel good about themselves that they've participated in "worship" even if their ongoing sin brings down the reputation of Jesus among the people they encounter every day.

A news report a few days ago cited the strong influence of crowds on people's behavior. A group of about a dozen were sitting in a waiting room silently reading. Suddenly smoke began billowing in under a door. The scenario focused on one particular woman who saw the smoke and anxiously looked around to see if anyone else noticed.

Since no one else responded to the smoke, she said and did nothing. (This turned out to be an orchestrated experiment on the effect of group behavior on an individual, in this case, the woman.) The reluctance to speak up and/or take action clearly depicts a congregation filled with the Late Majority and Laggards. They collectively influence each other to do nothing.

God laments through His prophet how Late Majority and Laggard religious leaders intentionally deceive people: "*They dress the wound of My people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace*" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). These leaders hop from conference to conference trying to learn new techniques so they can keep their people happy and keep their position secure. But to the disservice to all, they rely on the world's ways of achieving success and neglect the path God would direct. He says of them, "*The shepherds are senseless and do not inquire of the LORD*" (Jeremiah 10:21). Although they claim to serve Him, they only serve themselves as they encourage widespread passivity and spiritual lethargy in their flocks!

Throughout this nation in both the political and religious arenas **we do not have leadership that our God would commend**. Except for a small minority, most who are in charge are *managers* of a status quo through which they derive personal benefit and acclaim. True leadership, whether in serving Christ or performing in a political context, puts the interests of others first. Managers, on the other hand, consider only their own well-being and position, doing whatever they can to eliminate anything that would rock or topple their empire.

In Chapter 6 of our book *Restoring the Early Church, Greek Philosophy in the Church—How Did Plato Displace God?*, I [Mike] recount a research paper I was asked to do for a godly older professor during my first semester at seminary in 1978. [As a fairly new Christian I'd gone to an interdenominational seminary to find out why so many denominations and sects exist within Christendom.] At age 32 I discovered I had a lot more life experience in the work world than many of my classmates who'd come directly to seminary from college.

The professor had been teaching seminarians for decades. As the semester progressed he took a fatherly interest in me. In our talks together he learned about my past. Two things caught his attention, prompting him to ask me to do a special class project for him.

During my Navy career I had been a helicopter instructor pilot, training others to fly operational missions. Although this role required a lot of intensive teaching and briefing before each flight, still, the essence of learning to fly is *flying*, using the “see and do” method. Jesus and the apostles used this same model of training. They relied on personal example as they taught their disciples practical skills, which is why Paul advised, “I urge you to *imitate me*” (1 Corinthians 4:16).

In addition to my experience as an instructor, following my third deployment to Vietnam I had been an analysis officer at Naval Air Station Pt. Mugu, California. There I evaluated on an ongoing basis the air station's operational capabilities. I was able to look at a broad picture and analyze whether each of the necessary components was functioning effectively.

In his office that morning my professor asked, “Mike, would you do a project analyzing the fruit of this seminary? I've taught

here over thirty years and I don't know if I've wasted my time." I accepted his request. Through the use of surveys and interviews I studied the many nearby churches at which some of the seminary's pastoral graduates had gone to minister.

When my professor read the results of my research, that elderly gentleman sat in front of me and wept. *None* of the surveyed graduates had demonstrated a vision for what God desired for each congregation. They weren't leading their congregations the way Christ calls for. They had merely maintained the status quo by *managing the system*, more concerned about the quality of their rhetorical preaching, their own job security, and making sure nothing rocked their religious boat. I was deeply touched by the hurt and the sense of failure I saw behind those tears.

For nearly a decade after seminary I counseled clergy who had graduated from a variety of seminaries. That experience further confirmed the findings of my seminary paper: **clergy were trained to manage a system**. Their training never translated into role modeling sacrificial loving service in the name of Jesus. Few ever ventured into the front-lines long enough to model for others how to extend God's Kingdom.

In Teaching E-mail 22. *How Eager Are You?* we wrote how we used to toss a simulated hand grenade into groups of people who came to our retreat center. We wanted them to see who would jump on the grenade so that others might live. The scenario was this:

"You have three seconds before the grenade blows up. One...two... three..."

- 0% of the clergy ever jumped on the grenade. Not one!!!
- 10% of non-clergy men jumped on the grenade.

- 50% of the women and teenagers jumped on the grenade.

The hand grenade scenario gave us valuable insight. We learned from this simulation that the longer males remained within a managed religious system, the less likely they were to sacrifice themselves on behalf of others. From boyhood to manhood, men were being trained to be like the manager-clergyman teaching them: **self-protective**.

When people don't have time to analyze the pro's and con's of giving up their life to save others, their true heart is often revealed. Nobody is born prepared to die for other people. This is an acquired character trait that calls for deep humility and love. Yet dying to ourselves and becoming more like Jesus through His Spirit is essential if a man is to lead others in the Kingdom. Is it any wonder that before you heed a leader's counsel you need to consider how his life has turned out and if his trust in our Lord has endured?

"Remember the ones leading you, who spoke the word of God to you. Reflect on the results of their way of life, and imitate their trust. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"
(Hebrews 13:7,8).

Authentic leaders who walk in the Spirit have the heart of our Lord Jesus. Grateful for their Lord's sustaining grace, they willingly lay their lives down in leading others. The character qualities of Jesus take many years to develop on their journey of transformation. This means that a man who pastors before the age of 50 should be considered suspect!

As for your own life, if you're being taught in a managed religious system, you WILL be seduced into spiritual com-

placency. Taking to heart the interests of our Lord and obeying His commands will seem like a distant concept at best. A Laggard or maybe a Late Majority clergy person is teaching you to become self-protective just as he is. Like the seed cast amid thorns, their "*desire is for other things*" rather than sacrificially role modeling service to our Lord.

Examine your own spiritual life.

Are you being poured out with a grateful and willing heart as you fulfill the purposes our Lord has prepared in advance for you? Or, are you just a passive listener, ever learning but empty of responsive deeds that would bring praise to our Lord? Until you have the heart-burden of Jesus for the lost around you, you're living for yourself and your "faith" is dead. (You might want to revisit the admonition of James 2:14-26.)

If you remain in the organizational religious system, you'll flee the "hand grenade" opportunities our Lord uses to test the humility of your heart. You'll never learn to lay your life down for others, even for those in your own household. You may keep on learning ever more "spiritual" information, but you'll bear no fruit to the glory of our Father. This is also true for those of you who spend too much time watching Christian TV and Internet websites. You've acquired a lot of knowledge but produced little or no fruit. Be careful! One day you'll have render account for your fruitlessness (see John 15:1,2).

The earliest leaders among the people who first followed Jesus were persecuted for their devotion to Him. But by the 4th century when Christianity was seduced into becoming a managed religious system like the pagan Greek and Roman religions, Laggards took over. The ecclesias-

tic managers of the politically empowered system became the major persecutors of the faithful who genuinely followed our Lord. Just read church history. The Reformation provided the opportunity to break away from managed religious systems. But, with the establishment of each new denomination, Laggards and Late Majorities soon rose to leadership—reproducing congregational passivity once again.

If you aren't an Innovator or an Early Adapter in your faith walk, you're going to grow ever more pacified and passive in the "managed religious system" you're part of. Please, prayerfully and purposefully seek the Spirit of Christ with one or two others who will go on with you to bear fruit to our Father's glory. Find out what Kingdom living is like when you fully depend on His Spirit within you!

In our next lesson on repentance we will describe more fully how managers of religious systems produce and encourage spiritual lethargy and resistance to Christlike character development in those who attend services. This is especially true wherever the Older Testament is ignored or neglected. Without the foundation of the Hebrew Bible, today's concept of "grace" has been perverted into a license to go on sinning.

Perhaps you are among those who are bringing into disrepute the Name of Jesus by your rebellious and unrighteous lifestyle. Humble yourself and ask our Father to pinpoint areas of tolerated sin which you've been reluctant to forsake.