



December 18, 2016

As we conclude our study of the Law of Moses, let us consider some ways the Law might properly be used by Christians.

First, the Law may be rightly used to reveal sin to sinners. The Law, when applied to people who are inherently sinful (as is the case for all of us), has a way of stirring up, exposing, and even multiplying sin (Romans 5:20; 7:7-9). Even the Gentiles can benefit from this use of the Law because they have a Law written on their hearts (in their conscience) which reflects many of the Laws given to Israel (Romans 2:12-16). In the end, the high standard of God's Law leaves us guilty and without defense before Him (Romans 3:19-20).

Second, the Law may be rightly used to point people to Christ. While the Law may function like a mirror by exposing our defilement, it has no power to cleanse us! The Law shows us we are guilty and points us to a righteous standing with God freely offered through Christ's atonement (Romans 3:20-22). Paul indicated that the Law is like a school master who leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24). In other words, the Law cannot save us but it does point us to the One who can.

Thirdly, the Law may be used as a teaching aid (II Timothy 3:16). While not under the Law of Moses, we acknowledge its righteousness and holiness. It teaches us about our God. It shows us the love for God and others that God desires in His people. We also understand that as we live under the Law of Christ (love) in the power of His Spirit, we will keep many aspects of the Law of Moses (Romans 13:8-10). The Law of Moses can help us think about the various ways our love for God and for each other might be displayed.

December 11, 2016

In I Timothy 1 Paul told Timothy that there were some who had swerved from love, a good conscience, and unhyprocritical faith and had turned aside to vain jangling "desiring to be teachers of the Law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm." Paul does not disparage the Law of God but he does give Timothy a caution when in verse 8 he says, "But we know that the Law is good, if a man use it lawfully."

So what is the "lawful" use of the Law for the Christian? Before we look at some lawful uses of the Law let us reaffirm that we do not use the Law rightly if we try to put ourselves back under it! In fact, Paul goes on to say that "the Law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient..." Those who live in ways that are "contrary to sound doctrine" (v. 10) are the kinds of people who need the Law. However, Christians who have been taught by the sound doctrine of the Gospel are lead to live righteously and lovingly in the power of the Spirit.

There are a few "lawful" uses of the Law that we will look at more specifically in the next Cultivator. We will consider how the Law is useful for 1) stirring up and exposing sin 2) pointing sinners to Christ and 3) assisting believers to see the kind of righteousness and love the Spirit is producing in us. If used properly, the Law can certainly assist in evangelism, keep us humble, make us thankful for Christ, and strengthen our understanding of the sanctifying work God is doing in us.

December 4, 2016

Over the past several weeks we have considered the reality that as Christians living in this church age we are not under the old Mosaic Law. We are, in fact, dead to the Law. However, this truth does not mean that we are without Law! We are not antinomian (against law).

Paul anticipated this charge when he told the Corinthians that in his evangelism he knew how to be without (apart from) law to those who were without law (the Gentiles). He then followed that up quickly with this statement, "being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21). This is significant because Paul does not say that we are under the Law to Moses. That Law pointed us to Jesus.

But what does it mean to be under the Law to Christ? Perhaps Galatians 6:2 gives us help with this. There Paul says, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." The Law of Christ is the law of love! This is the chief command that Jesus has left us and the very thing that is to define us as His followers.

In Romans 13:8, Paul says "Owe no man anything but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the Law." This is an important statement! While we are not under the Mosaic Law or even the 10 Commandments, we are under a Law that produces the same goal! Those who obey Christ through His Spirit and love others will not do them ill (v. 10). They will love others as they love themselves and the end result of that will be that they will not kill, steal, commit adultery, covet, or bear false witness against them (v. 9).

Actually, the law of Christ will drive us further than merely not doing someone ill. As we are conformed to the image of Christ by the indwelling Spirit we will also deny ourselves to do them good! We will bear their burdens and serve their needs.

November 27, 2016

Psalm 50

Praise ye the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power.

Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.

Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.

Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD.

November 20, 2016

I would like for us to continue to consider what God's Word says about the relationship of the Christian to the Mosaic Law. There are two very important expressions used in the New Testament that reflect in clear terms that the Mosaic Law is not binding on the Christian. Those two expressions are "not under Law" and "dead to the Law".

In Romans 6 Paul is addressing the topic of sanctification and victory over sin. He reminds us that we have died with Christ and now live with Him in new life. In verse 14 he gives a wonderful promise - "sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." Note that the reason why sin will not have dominion over us is because we are not "under the Law". The Law commands but does not empower. The Law condemns and curses but does not save. However, we are not "under the Law". Believers operate under the dominion of grace (God's loving favor)! Our sins are forgiven and God's Spirit indwells us to lead and empower us to live righteously.

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul uses the marriage relationship as an illustration. He reminds us that a woman who is married to a man is bound by the law to her husband. She cannot rightly break that bond. If she leaves her husband and marries another man she will be called an adulteress. However, death can sever the bond in such a way that she is free to marry another. Paul then makes the application that in our union with Christ we died to the Law.

This communicates a powerful break of the relationship! Of course, this does not mean we are free to live as we want. Instead, we have died to the Law so that we can be married to Christ and live in newness of spirit!

November 13, 2016

As we continue to consider the relationship of the Law of Moses to the Christian we should think in terms of Jesus and His fulfillment of the Law. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus stated “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.”

How does Christ fulfill the Law? Certainly we could begin by saying that He fulfills the prophecies, signs, and shadows of the Law. Hebrews 10:1 tells us that the Law had a shadow of good things to come. Jesus Christ is the one who cast that shadow. He is the fulfillment of the sacrifices, dietary laws, feasts, and Sabbaths.

Christ also fulfills the Law because He, as no one else can, kept the Law perfectly. In Galatians we learn that Christ was born “under the Law”. As a Jew born under the Law, He obeyed its commands perfectly. In fact, He is the only man since the giving of the Law on Sinai that has truly obeyed that Law.

Christ also fulfilled the curse of the Law. When He hung on the cross the sins of the world were placed on Him. While on that tree, He was considered accursed by the Law. Paul referenced this reality when he said, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:” (Galatians 3:13).

Christ also fulfilled the Law in the sense that He expounded the true meaning of its precepts. This follows in the context of Matthew 5. Christ moves past the letter to the heart of God’s commands.

November 6, 2016

An important part of understanding our relationship to the Law of Moses is to consider what the New Testament has to say about the Old Covenant with which the Law was connected. There are many passages to which we could turn but II Corinthians 3 will be sufficient. Here it becomes quite clear that the Mosaic Law has been replaced with something better.

In verse 3 Paul contrasts his ministry of the New Covenant as having to do with the tablet of the heart rather than tablets of stone (a clear reference to the 10 commandments). In verse 6, the letter (of the Old Covenant) kills whereas the Spirit (in the New Covenant) gives life. In verses 7-9, the Old Covenant is spoken of as the ministration of death and condemnation,

written on stones in contrast to the ministration of the Spirit and righteousness in the New Covenant.

We should perhaps be expecting it by this point but notice Paul's clear statement regarding the Old Covenant in verse 11. There he refers to the Old Covenant as that which is "done away". The Old Covenant is old! It has been replaced with a Covenant that is better, more glorious, and longer lasting.

Those who are a part of the New Covenant by faith in Jesus Christ are not without Law. In fact, the will of God is written deeply on our hearts by the Spirit of God who indwells us. As people who are led by the Spirit, the righteousness of the Law is fulfilled in us (Romans 8:4). The fruit of the Spirit's leading is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc. (Galatians 5:22-23). We do not live this way because we are under the Mosaic Covenant. We live this way because God's Spirit is in us!

October 30, 2016

As I preach through the book of Deuteronomy we have come to the exposition of the 10 Commandments. Last week, I preached a message that was intended to help us understand how we should approach the Law as New Testament Christians. This is a controversial matter and Christians have not always agreed on the nature of the relationship.

Though it can be difficult to work through, it is an important issue! If you have read the New Testament then you know that a wrong approach to the Law can lead to false teaching (Acts 15:1-2), bondage (Gal. 5:1), and confusion (I Tim. 1:7). For this reason, we must think carefully about how the Law relates to us.

Last week we noted that the 10 commandments are words of a covenant relationship [like "in sickness and in health..." are words of a marriage covenant] (Deut. 4:13). That covenant was made with a particular group of people - the nation of Israel (Deut. 5:2).

God Himself promised a New Covenant with the nation of Israel, one that would be different than the covenant made at Sinai (Jer. 31:31-32). According to the writer of Hebrews, by introducing a New Covenant He made the first one (the one containing the 10 Commandments, Aaronic priesthood, statutes and judgments) old (Heb. 8:13). Now, this old covenant is decaying and ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:13).

Christians come to God in a way that is related to the New Covenant. For this reason, the New Testament calls us to look to Christ and His Apostles for our duties and responsibilities, not to Moses and the Law. We are not without Law, but the Law we are under is the Law of Christ (I Cor. 9:21).

October 23, 2016

Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.

But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.

Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.

For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.

But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.

For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.

But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.

Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.

So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

-Galatians 4:21-5:1

October 16, 2016

When we last looked at the doctrine of election we noted that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world according to His foreknowledge of us. The question I would like to address today is "Why did God foreknow us in Christ before the foundation of the world?"

I believe the simple answer to that question is found in Ephesians 1: 13, " In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also

after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise". Let me make a couple of observations.

First, we were sealed in Christ by the Spirit after we believed. Faith in the Word of truth results in God putting us into union with His Son. We are elect in Christ and we come into Christ by faith in the Gospel. The "us" of Ephesians 1 and therefore the group who was chosen by God are those who have believed the Gospel.

Second, we must always keep this faith in the Gospel in the context of God's grace! God graciously gave us the Gospel. God graciously convicted us and drew us to Christ. God did not "look through the portal of time" and see who would choose Him on their own (as some seem to imply). Spiritually dead sinners cannot believe the Gospel apart from God's grace. Every believer has "believed through grace" (Acts 18:27).

I believe that God elects those who are "in Christ" by faith through grace. God has had perfect knowledge of all who would be in His Son by faith from the very beginning and has chosen those believers to be His holy and beloved people.

October 9, 2016

Do you remember your baptism? I put my trust in Christ and received the forgiveness of my sins just shy of my eighth birthday. Not long afterward, I entered the baptismal waters.

More importantly, do you remember what your baptism signified? Being laid into the water and then coming back out was a powerful picture. Given the way Paul speaks of baptism in Romans 6 it reflects spiritual realities that should govern the rest of our Christian life on earth.

Your baptism was no less than a symbolic burial and resurrection. By faith, the old sinful "you" had died with Christ and so in baptism was laid in the grave. Dead. Buried. Your redemption in Christ accomplished such a powerful and complete break with your old sinful self that it is pictured in the most complete severance we know - death and burial.

Death, however, was only part of the story. As you came up out of the baptismal waters, up out of that watery grave, the pastor probably said the words "raised to walk in newness of life." This is because your baptism pictured the spiritual reality that union with Christ not only involves union with Him in death but also union with Him in life. By that symbol you testified that you were alive unto God, alive unto righteousness.

With this in mind, consider the question Paul asks in Romans 6:2, "How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" Are there sins you are still living in? Does fear, lust, anger, covetousness, envy, lying, pride, selfishness, unforgiveness, or any other sin still

characterize you? May God help us live according to the spiritual realities symbolized by our baptism!

October 2, 2016

Last week we considered that our election is in Christ. We might say that Christ is the sphere of our election. But this raises an interesting question. Before we believed the Gospel, we were not in Christ (Romans 16:7; Ephesians 1:13). How then did God choose us "in Him" before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4)?

The answer to this question is related to a facet of God's omniscience (complete knowledge of everything) called foreknowledge. The word "foreknowledge" in its primary definition simply means "to know beforehand" (see II Peter 3:17 and Acts 26:5 for non theological examples). God has perfect knowledge of everything - past, present, and future.

When used of God, the word "foreknowledge" can carry special meaning. Some have noted that the word "know" both in the Hebrew and Greek can include the concept of love. Others have observed that when used of God, foreknowledge can carry the idea of foreordination (see I Peter 1:20 where the Greek word for foreknowledge is translated "foreordained"). However, these concepts are still related to the basic meaning of prior knowledge. God does not love or ordain apart from knowledge.

So let's go back to the question of how we can be chosen in Christ before we are actually in Christ. In I Peter 1:2 the Bible says that we are "elect according to the foreknowledge of God". Thus, the answer is that God was able to choose us in Christ because He knew us "in Christ" with love and ordaining purposes before the foundation of the world.

September 25, 2016

One very important truth to consider in the doctrine of election is the relationship between God's choice of us and our relationship to Christ. Ephesians 1:4 is especially helpful in establishing this connection. The verse begins with the words, "According as He hath chosen us in Him..." It is to this topic of being elect in Christ that we now turn our attention.

There are some very important (and perhaps often overlooked) observations to be made regarding Ephesians 1:4. First, it should be carefully observed that the Spirit does not say that we were chosen to be in Christ. The "to be" of our election is communicated in the words that follow, "that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." Divine election then is not a choice to put us in Christ.

Second, while the text does not say that God chooses us to be in Christ, it does indicate that our election has reference to that relationship. We might say that being "in Him" is the

grounds of our election. No one is elect apart from union with Christ. All who are in Christ are chosen by God. The question of how God chose us "in Him" before the foundation of the world is related to His divine foreknowledge which will be addressed later.

This election in Christ seems to parallel the election of Israel (both the man and his descendants). While God had made sovereign choices of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, the election finally rested on Jacob and all his physical descendants. To be "in Jacob" by physical relationship was to be elect. Similarly, God has chosen His Son Jesus to be the head of His people. All those who are "in Him" by spiritual relationship are elect to be His people.

September 18, 2016

Last week we considered the truth that God's choosing of us to be a part of His holy and beloved people is a sovereign choice (His choice is not forced and He chooses the criteria). This week we remind ourselves of the reality that our election is gracious. Understanding this should lead us to worship Him better.

In Romans 9:23 those who have exercised faith in the Gospel promise (v. 30-32) and are thus called (named, appointed) the people of God are referred to as "vessels of mercy". God's election is merciful and gracious in at least two ways. First, it is gracious in what it gives us. Vessels of mercy have been "afore prepared unto glory." This is the future glory we will experience as the holy and beloved people of God. It includes the glories of our future inheritance and eternal bliss with God.

Second, God's election is gracious because we do not deserve it. According to Romans 9:25, God calls us His people though we were not His people; He calls us beloved though we were not beloved. There was nothing in or about us that deserved to be a part of God's chosen people. Indeed, our election by God is directly referred to as the "election of grace" in Romans 11:5.

When thinking of election in terms of grace it is important to keep the emphasis where God puts it. Election is not set forth as gracious because it is unconditional. Rather, it is set forth as gracious because it is in contrast to meritorious works. After calling our election "the election of grace", Paul goes on to say in v. 6, "And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work."

September 11, 2016

As we have considered the doctrine of election we have learned that God's purpose in choosing us is to have a holy and beloved people. Today, we turn our attention from the purpose to the nature of our election. It is sovereign and gracious.

Before we move on, it important to note that believing our election is sovereign and gracious does not mean we have to believe it is unconditional (in a Calvinistic sense). One does not have to be a Calvinist to affirm what the Bible clearly indicates - God is sovereign and gracious in choosing us as His people.

God is sovereign in the matter of election. The Bible states that the purpose of God according to election stands "of Him that calleth" (Romans 9:11). A few verses later, Paul states, "It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy" (v. 16).

God is sovereign over His choice. God's choice is not in any way forced. There is nothing outside of God that pressured Him into redeeming sinners and making them His people. We ought always remember that God did not have to do what He has done for us!

God is also sovereign over His criteria. He determines the criteria for understanding who is a part of His holy and beloved people. The Jews thought they were fine because they were children of Abraham and kept the Law. In Romans 9, Paul reminded them that even in their election as a nation, God did not use the criteria of lineage or good works but rather the criteria of the "promise". God has chosen to appoint sinners as His people with respect to their relation to the promise of the Gospel.

September 4, 2016

In recent Cultivators we have begun to examine the Bible doctrine of election. As we have already learned, we have been chosen to be God's holy and beloved people (Ephesians 1:4). Last time we considered God's purpose of having a loved people. Today, we turn to His purpose of having a holy people.

It should be evident that any people of a holy God must themselves be holy. This was certainly the case for God's chosen people in the Old Testament. A part of forming the children of Israel into a nation involved providing atonement for their sins and setting them apart as holy. In a dramatic sign of this, Moses dipped a hyssop into blood and sprinkled the newly formed people of God with blood (Exodus 24:8).

As the elect people of God, we too have been chosen to be holy. In I Peter 1, Peter reminds his readers that though they were strangers (foreigners) scattered throughout the Roman empire, they were God's chosen people. In language similar to that used of Israel he

addresses them as "elect...through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:2). Election happens (in time) by the Spirit sanctifying the believer unto a life of obedience and setting him apart unto the sprinkling of Christ's blood.

This, of course, places a responsibility on us. As the elect of God we must remember that we have been set apart in this world as the holy people of the thrice holy God. As the elect of God, holy and beloved, we are to put on the new man (Colossians 3:12). We are to live obediently to His commands and keep ourselves unspotted from the defilement of this world.

August 21, 2016

As we continue to think about the doctrine of election we need to push further into the purpose for which God has chosen us. Last week we saw from Ephesians 1:4 that God has chosen us in Christ "that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." God has chosen us to be His holy and loved people. In Colossians 3:12, Paul uses similar terms when he appeals to the church as "the elect of God, holy and beloved." Here we have the two marks of God's people in terms of privilege (beloved) and responsibility (holy).

Today we will look at the great privilege to which we have been chosen. Being beloved of God is, of course, a glorious blessing. Paul speaks of this love in Romans 9 where he refers to us as "vessels of mercy, which He hath afore prepared unto glory" (9:23). In verse 25 of the same chapter he indicates that though we had not been a beloved people in the past, we are now identified (called) as "My people" and "beloved". Peter echoes these truths in I Peter 2:9-10 where He reminds us that as a "chosen generation" we have become the "people of God" and have "obtained mercy".

The end of Romans 8 also wonderfully sets forth this love. It is a love that takes away all condemnation so that no one is able to lay anything against the charge of God's elect (8:33). It is a love from which we cannot be separated (v. 35-39). In II Thessalonians 2:13-14 it is a love that is expressed in saving us from end time wrath and giving us the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christian, you are one of the chosen people of God and as such you are the recipient of incredible love! This is a secure love in which you can rest! Do not doubt His commitment to you. You are one of His chosen ones and He will not fail you. You will not face His wrath, there is none to charge you with sin, you will enter into glory, and nothing will separate you from His love in Christ!

August 14, 2016

Last week I indicated that we would be dealing with the topic of election. No, not the political election but the theological election referred to in verses like Ephesians 1:4 - "According as He hath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love."

The word elect simply means to choose. Ephesians 1:4 indicates that the Father has chosen us. The question I would like to address today is "Chosen us to what?" If you choose a political candidate, you choose them to perform their duties in political office. What was the purpose for which we are chosen?

Ephesians 1:4 actually indicates the purpose for which we were chosen. Note the words "that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." God has chosen us to be His holy and loved people. It should be clear that this purpose of election mirrors the election (choosing) of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament (which is also referred to in election terms).

Observe that we are chosen to be the people of God. Though Ephesians 1:4 does not say this directly, it is implied in the words "before Him". We are the holy and loved people who are in His presence. The fact that we are chosen to be the people of God is more directly indicated in I Peter 2:9 where Peter uses the language of Israel's election to say that the church is a "chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people."

Election is also related to the concept of "calling" when that word is used in the sense of appointment, as is the case in Romans 9:11 and (very significantly) in 9:24-26. While I would not deny that election has an individual element to it, I think it important to understand that election ultimately has reference beyond the individual to the whole group who will one day stand before God and sing the praises of Christ (Revelation 4-5).

August 7, 2016

In this evening's message we will see that the Apostle Paul appeals to Christians to live the righteous life of the new man based on their position as the "elect of God, holy and beloved." This designation of believers as God's chosen ones is truly special! However, the doctrine of election is often neglected among some Christians.

There may be several reasons for this neglect. First, the doctrine of election has historically been a matter of controversy between true believers in Christ often producing sharp division (usually in connection with the positions of Calvinism and Arminianism). This historical division may lead to a second reason for neglect in that some may think it is impossible to understand the doctrine at all! Another reason may be that those who disagree with Calvinists in their interpretation of election (as being unconditional) often spend a lot of

time stating their objections but actually (and ironically) neglect to study the doctrine and set forth a clear and biblical alternative.

Over the next several weeks we will be looking at some basic truths regarding our election. In doing this, it is not my intention to enter into controversy. I have been on both sides of the interpretation of election. I have been personally blessed and edified by Calvinists (though I passionately disagree with them) and it should also be said that there are many godly and Gospel minded Christians in our circles who hold to a different view of election than I do but who also do not embrace all of the points of Calvinism.

My purpose in the coming weeks is to do something that I wish had been done for me. I would like to simply set forth a basic, positive, clear, and biblical statement of this doctrine. I hope that by doing so we will be helped and blessed to see the glories of Ephesians 1:4 - "He [God] hath chosen us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love".

July 31, 2016

Today we conclude our look at the local church and some of the ways that we might especially make the most of our role as a member. Though our relationship to the mission of our church is last on our list, it is certainly not least in importance! Our mission involves the spread of the Gospel and the making of disciples among the nations (Matthew 28:18-20). It is important to remember the following:

1. The mission is authoritative. This mission comes to us from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Therefore, neglect of this mission involves disobedience to Him.
2. The mission is both corporate and individual. In one sense, the mission is larger than any one individual or local church. This is a mission that belongs to the true church of Jesus Christ in every generation and wherever it may be found. We enter into this mission by doing our part as a church and by remembering that churches are made up of individuals who contribute personally to the work.
3. The mission is global. We must never forget that God is interested in saving people from among the nations of the earth. The mission of the church is truly a great and global work! Each of us should take an interest in, pray for, and support the work of missionaries.
4. The mission involves preaching the Gospel. While living out the spiritual realities of the Gospel is important, at some point we must also open our mouths and share the Gospel message. People cannot be saved if they do not call on the Lord and they cannot call on Him if they do not hear about Him (Romans 10:14).

5. The mission of the church is larger than just the spread of the Gospel. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 involves not only the sharing of the Gospel but also the baptizing and teaching of new disciples. We should not think we are fulfilling the commission unless we are leading people who are saved to be baptized and teaching them to obey all that Christ taught!

July 24, 2016

As we continue to consider our relationship to the local church we turn our attention to the matter of spiritual gifts. While these are often overlooked (perhaps due to abuses in some circles) they are a biblical means of the church's edification.

1. Spiritual gifts are manifestations of the Spirit (I Corinthians 12:7). For example, while all are commanded to give and show mercy there are those who do these naturally and well by the Spirit gifting.
2. The risen and exalted Jesus Christ gives gifts by His Spirit (Ephesians 4:7-12). What we are talking about are truly gifts! To ignore them is to despise the gifts of our King.
3. Every Christian has at least one spiritual gift (I Corinthians 12:7). The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man.
4. Spiritual gifts are different than talents and other natural skills (I Corinthians 12:7). They are different because 1) they are spiritual and 2) because they are given by the Spirit at the moment of salvation.
5. Spiritual gifts are for the edification of the church (I Corinthians 12:7). Each member with his or her gift is like a member of the body. Each member functions for the good of the whole.
6. Not everyone will have the same gift (Romans 12:6). This is according to God's will. Therefore we should not envy or despise the gifts of others.
7. We should think humbly and soberly about our spiritual gift (Romans 12:3). The body is not helped when we insist we have a gift we do not have. We should identify our gift and use it.

8. Love in the use of spiritual gifts is the excellent way (I Corinthians 12:31-13:3)! Without love - a selfless and sacrificial commitment to the good of others - spiritual gifts can be vain and even destructive!

July 17, 2016

We have recently been considering our relationship to the local church and how we might make the most of that relationship. Today we continue by looking at our relationship to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Perhaps the best way to consider this responsibility is to consider the one anothers of the New Testament.

Be kindly affectioned one to another (Romans 12:10)

Edify one another (Romans 14:19)

Have care one for another (I Corinthians 12:25)

Serve one another (Galatians 5:15)

Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)

Be kind one to another (Ephesians 4:32)

Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)

Submit yourself one to another (Ephesians 3:21)

Forbear with one another (Colossians 3:13)

Teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16)

Comfort one another (I Thessalonians 4:18)

Consider one another (Hebrews 10:24)

Provoke one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24)

Confess your faults one to another (James 5:16)

Pray for one another (James 5:16)

Have compassion one of another (I Peter 3:8)

Use hospitality one to another (I Peter 4:9)

Greet one another (1 Peter 5:14)

This list is a powerful reminder that we have a responsibility to one another! Let me encourage us to remember that we should be gathering together not only for our own good but for the good of our brothers and sisters. Ask God to help you remember these commands, cultivate them, and express them when you gather as opportunities arise. Above all, may God help our love abound!

July 10, 2016

We have recently been considering our relationship to the local church and how we might make the most of that relationship. Today we return to this subject by looking at our relationship with our pastor and teachers.

1. Value the Gift of Pastor and Teachers. The Scriptures clearly indicate that the risen Christ has given gifts to His church. Some of those gifts include those who shepherd the flock and those who teach (Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:6-7). This is for the protection, growth, unity, and stability of the church (Ephesians 4:12-14). No matter how much we have grown, we should still value those who instruct us in the Word.
2. Obey their Instruction from the Word. This is directly commanded to Christians with respect to the ministry of those who "have the rule" over them (Hebrews 13:17). Pastors, due to their responsibility of oversight, must give an account of your soul to God. He cannot do this with joy if you are not hearing the Word and applying it. Though teachers are not given the same position of oversight, they fulfill a similar ministry. The Word of God that we learn from our Sunday School teachers should be obeyed.
3. Support those who teach you the Word. Galatians 6:6 says "Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things". Communicate here has the idea of sharing with the teacher, specifically in ways that support and maintain them. Of course our kinds of churches already do this for our pastors. However, let me encourage you to also find ways to share with your Sunday school teachers. Find a way to meet a need, encourage their hearts, or bless them in some way.

July 3, 2016

In today's Cultivator we will take a break from our series on church life and consider the way the Gospel affects our lives with respect to our nation.

1. We know the God of our nation. The Gospel reconciles us to God and reminds us that He is the one, true God who is over all. He is the One who brings forth nations and determines

their times and boundaries (Acts 17:26). As Christians we acknowledge God's hand in the formation and future of America. We give Him our thanks.

2. We know that in the church nationality does not define or divide us. This is powerfully set forth in the mystery of the Gospel which reveals that Jews and Gentiles are one body in Christ (Ephesians 3:11-22; Colossians 3:11). The church is a new people redeemed "out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

3. We seek to live as good citizens. Through the Gospel, Christians come to understand that God ordains government and that it is our spiritual responsibility to Him to submit to the government we are under (Romans 13). We value obedience and respect to those in authority (Titus 3:1; I Peter 2:17).

4. We pray for our nation and those in authority. Paul prayed for his nation, Israel, that they might be saved (Romans 10:1). We are commanded to pray "for all men, for kings, and for all that are in authority" (I Timothy 2:1-2).

5. We know what our nation (and every nation) needs. We do not put our hope in "princes" or politicians (Psalm 146:3). We know that our nation is away from God because its people walk "in trespasses and sins...according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:1-2). Therefore we know the greatest need of our nation and the only hope of its citizens is the sin pardoning, life giving Gospel of Jesus Christ!

June 26, 2016

As we continue to examine our involvement in various aspects of church life we turn to the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ Himself so we would remember His sacrifice until He returns. The unleavened bread represents Christ's body and the cup represents the blood of the New Covenant. In this meal we have spiritual fellowship (communion) with Christ and His people. With respect to this special meal seek to do the following.

1. Be at the Table. This is an ordinance you should participate in as a Christian and member of this local church. Unless providentially hindered you should be at the table!

2. Examine Yourself. The Lord's Supper provides a regular opportunity for spiritual examination and renewal. While none of us is perfect, we should examine ourselves to see whether we are living in way that is consistent with what we are celebrating in this meal (Christ's sacrifice for our salvation from sin). If we are living sinfully, the solution is not to avoid the ordinance but to repent!

3. Remember Christ. We should always come to the table with a holy seriousness, ready to make spiritual use of the ordinance. When the elements are being passed, meditate on the death of Christ. Use the hymnal or your Bible to meditate on the cross. When you eat the bread, consciously remember the suffering body of our Lord. When you drink the cup, consider His blood that was shed. And of course, remember Him with thanksgiving in your heart to God.

4. Consider the Church. The Lord's Supper is not a private, individual meal. It is inherently corporate! As you partake with others in the church consider that you are not alone in your love for Christ. Consider that the church is united as one body not by our hobbies, personalities, and interests but by our common salvation through Christ. Remember Christ's command for us to love one another.

June 19, 2016

The next aspect of the local church we will consider is our involvement in the ordinances. The word "ordinance" refers to a command that Christ has given and relates to two particular symbolic events that are a core part of church life. These events are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We begin today by considering our involvement in Baptism.

1. Understand Baptism. We will not be able to relate to this special ordinance unless we understand it. Simply stated, Baptism is an event in which a believer publicly identifies with the triune God, illustrates his union with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection to new life, indicates a commitment to walk in new life, and is thus initiated into the life of the local church.

2. Be Baptized. This is how our involvement in the ordinance must begin! If you have put your faith in Christ for the remission of your sins you need to personally obey His command to be baptized. Unless you do this, the church cannot affirm your profession of faith, welcome you into membership, and share the Lord's Supper with you.

3. Be a Witness. If you have been baptized, you play a special role in the life of a new believer as he takes this step. You are a part of the church of Jesus Christ who rejoices to see a public profession of new life! Lovingly encourage those who are baptized. Pray for them as they live for the Lord. In the days ahead ask them how they are doing spiritually and be ready to hold them accountable to their public commitment in baptism.

4. Remember your Own Baptism. For those of us who have been baptized, watching a new Christian go through the baptismal waters should be a time of reflection on our own baptism. It should remind us that we, along with our other brothers and sisters in Christ, have died to our past sins and that we are to be walking in new life.

June 12, 2016

We are currently in a series in which we are looking at our involvement in the local church. Last week we considered our responsibility with respect to corporate worship. Today, we will examine our responsibility in a specific event that occurs in the context of the corporate worship - the preaching of God's Word. I will be drawing observations from Nehemiah 8 and encourage you to read through that chapter.

1. Be eager to hear the Word (v. 1). As the people of God gathered together, they asked Ezra to bring the book of the Law of Moses. Notice that it was the congregation that initiated the connection with the Word. When you come to church, look forward to the times of teaching and preaching. Anticipate hearing from God!
2. Be attentive to the Word (v. 3). The ears of the people were attentive to the book. When the preaching is proper (explaining the sense v. 8), then God's voice sounds forth in all its authority and power. For this reason, we should listen carefully to what He has to say so that we might learn His will.
3. Understand the Word (v. 8). While it is the role of the preacher to cause the people to "understand the reading", it is also the responsibility of the people to do the mental and spiritual work required to understand. When the Word is preached, ask God to help you focus and work hard to follow and understand His truth.
4. Respond to the Word (v. 9, 14-16). The kind of responses we read about in these verses flow from hearts that were submissive to God. When they considered their relationship to the Word read, they wept. When they learned of a specific command they had not been keeping, they responded with obedience. It is the nature of the Word of God to change us. When you listen to preaching be prepared to do what needs to be done in order to fulfill His commands!

June 5, 2016

Last week I introduced a new series for the Cultivator in which we will be looking at our involvement in the local church. We begin today with corporate worship. The corporate worship of God is truly an amazing event that I am afraid we all tend to take for granted. Here are some ways to make this time more meaningful.

1. Look forward to corporate worship (Psalm 122:1). While personal worship is good and ought be a part of our lives throughout the week, we should also cultivate a desire to worship with God's people. Ask God to help you look forward to gathering with your brothers and sisters and praising Him in the congregation (Ps. 111:1).

2. Come prepared to worship. Preparation for worship does not begin during a quiet prayer time at the start of the service on Sunday; it begins on Monday! Corporate worship should flow from a heart that has been communing with God all week long!
3. Be aware of God's presence. While God indwells us individually by His Spirit, He also indwells the church corporately. The church is His temple (1 Cor. 3:16) and when we gather, God is present! Ask God to give you an awareness that He is with us hearing our prayers and receiving our praise.
4. Be involved (Ps. 109:30). Simply put, worship is not a spectator event. We should not gather to watch others worship. Sing His praises when the congregation sings. When someone leads in prayer, pray with them in your heart. When you hear the Word read, listen and respond for God's glory.
5. Worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). The history of Israel teaches us that it is possible to come before God and go through religious motions while our hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). Avoid hypocrisy and worship God with true love and devotion.

May 29, 2016

The church is truly a wonderful invention of our God. It is the bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the flock of Christ, the temple of God, and the pillar and ground of truth. What a spiritual joy it should be for us to be a part of it! Our hearts ought to rejoice at the opportunity to gather with our brothers and sisters as we give glory and honor unto God, hear His Word, and edify one another.

In the next few weeks I would like to address eight aspects of church life that we all experience. The more we understand these the better we will be able to make the most of them when we gather. I hope eventually to turn this into a more detailed study that will be offered in the summer as a Christian growth elective. For now we will confine ourselves to a simple survey of the following:

1. Participation in Corporate Worship
2. Listening to Preaching / Teaching
3. Involvement in the Ordinances
4. Relating to Teachers and Preachers
5. Relating to Brothers and Sisters in Christ
6. Exercising Spiritual Gifts

7. Participating in the Church's Mission

Every one of us bears some connection to these facets of church life. By cultivating these properly we will experience the joys of worshipping our God, building up our fellow Christians, living out the Gospel, and receiving the grace needed for living holy lives during the week for the glory of God.

May 22, 2016

Before we leave the topic of personal devotions, I would like to address one more particular – the matter of personal worship. We may be tempted to think of worship as something that only occurs when we have all gathered together for a service. However, worship can, and should, also take place when you have your devotions.

God is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:24) and as a part of God's new priesthood we are to offer spiritual sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise (1 Peter 2:5). While there are many praises we could give, I would especially encourage you to let your Bible reading direct you.

You may find it useful to think back over the passage you have read and ask yourself the question, "How does this passage exalt God?" Sometimes the answer will be very obvious! There are many portions of Scripture that exalt God's power, love, mercy, and faithfulness. You may see his greatness in the form of direct statements or it may be demonstrated in a narrative.

Sometimes it may not be as readily evident. However, with the Spirit's help we will be able to mine the riches of God's praise out of the text. For example, reading the genealogies in which over and over people beget children and then die may lead you to think of how God never dies! Reading the social rules and regulations of the nation of Israel may lead you to praise God for His thoughtfulness about details and mundane things. Reading of sin may lead you to thank God for Christ our Savior!

Worshipping God daily helps cultivate our hearts toward God. We remember how little we are, how great He is, and how He is deserving of our life, our soul, our all!

May 15, 2016

It was not long after God destroyed the world of men by means of the flood that the descendants of Noah once again manifested rebellion against God. Rather than dispersing across the face of the earth as God commanded, they stayed together and tried to strengthen their identity as a group. Their unifying project was the tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

The God of glory would not allow such rebellion to His will to continue and thus came down and changed their united language to many languages, completely hindering their grand project. From there, He "scattered them abroad...upon the face of all the earth" (Genesis 11:8). These became the "nations divided in the earth after the flood" (Genesis 10:23).

Though they knew God and understood His glorious power and Godhead, they refused to worship Him. They blasphemed His glory by making images and bowing down to them. Due to this false worship, God gave them over to their own lusts and the nations of the earth spiraled in their depravity. The nations were under God's wrath and would eventually face His judgment (Romans 1).

In this context, God called out a man named Abram and gave him special promises. One of those promises concerned the nations - "and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). The New Testament makes it plain that that Seed was Jesus Christ and the blessing was salvation through which men would be turned from their iniquities (Acts 3:25-26). As we begin our missions conference let us remember that God in His rich mercy, has always desired to bless the nations of the earth through Christ! It is our privilege to tell them that good news!

May 8, 2016

Another important part of our devotions is our prayers. After submissively listening to God speak to us through His Word, it is good for us to speak to Him in prayer. If you are wanting to grow in your devotional prayer life, let me encourage you to consider the following guides.

First, let your Bible reading guide your prayers. Think in terms of flowing from Bible reading to meditation to prayer. If you read about and meditated on God's power or glory then begin your prayers by praising God for His power and glory. If you were rebuked about a sin you are committing then speak to God about your failure and ask Him for forgiveness. If you read about a command you should obey, pray to God for grace and strength to do His will.

Second, let Christ's teaching on prayer guide your prayers. In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus taught us how to pray to the Father. This model prayer gives us the basic elements of what we should seek to incorporate when we pray. These elements involve expressing our desire for God's name to be hallowed (revered), expressing our desire for His kingdom to come to the earth, asking for our daily needs, seeking pardon for sins (in keeping with our forgiveness of others), seeking spiritual protection and victory, and expressing confidence in the everlasting nature of His kingdom power and glory.

Third, I want to encourage you to incorporate the prayers of Paul from time to time as you pray for yourself and the church. Paul prayed for the churches he planted and his prayers serve as a powerful example of spiritual intercession. Those prayers can be found in Ephesians 3:14-19, Philippians 1:9-11, and Colossians 1:9-11. It is good to learn to ask God for such spiritual blessing!

May 1, 2016

Related to the issue of reading our Bibles is meditating on what we have read. This is an important connection between reading and applying what we have read. However, due to the usage of this word in our culture, "meditation" needs some explaining.

To understand biblical meditation you must set aside any concept of meditation that is influenced by eastern religions or the culture. Meditation requires no special physical pose or place (like a yoga pose on the top of a mountain). It simply involves thinking, pondering, mentally processing, and considering. The truth that we are considering is the truth we have read in the Scriptures.

A famous illustration of meditation comes from God's creation. It is well known that cows have more than one stomach and that they bring back and chew over and over what they have initially eaten. Such a process allows the cow to gain a greater amount of the nutrients from the grass. This is what we are doing when we think about what we have read.

As you read the Bible for your devotions look for one particular truth that stands out to you. When you are done reading, come back to that one truth and meditate on it. As you do, ask yourself questions. What does the text mean? How is it related to the truths in the chapter you read? How is it related to the rest of the Bible? Does it teach you about God or yourself? Does it convict you of sin? Is it a command to be obeyed? What can you do to apply this truth in your life today?

One last reminder - keep meditating on God's Word even after your devotions. Meditate on His Law day and night (Psalm 1:2)!

April 24, 2016

Last week we looked at the importance of having a plan and reading through a book of the Bible. There is certainly no right or wrong amount to read when you sit down to have your devotions. There are advantages to reading large portions in one sitting as well as advantages to reading smaller portions. When you read for your devotions, I want to encourage you to do two things.

First, read to understand. If there was a part of a chapter that you did not understand, go back and meditate on it. Look closely at the words, phrases, and paragraph. Think carefully about the context (the verses before and after) and how it affects the meaning. It might be good to come back to these passages to study them more carefully outside of a devotional time. If you have questions, ask those whom Christ has gifted to be your teachers in the church. It should be our goal to understand every book, chapter, and verse of the Word!

Second, read to respond. The Bible is God's Word to us. Every chapter will provide you an opportunity to respond in some way. Look for what God wants you to believe - and believe it! Look for what God wants you to do - and do it! Remember, the Scriptures are profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. Does what you read reprove you? Then confess your sin. Does it instruct you in righteousness? Then live according to it.

By God's grace we must avoid reading the Word of the Living God merely to check it off our list or to say we have done it. We must read it to understand and be changed by it!

April 17, 2016

Continuing our consideration of personal devotions, I want to take a few weeks to discuss some of the particulars involved in spending time with the Lord. Though there may be other elements we could examine, I will be focusing on the basics of Bible reading, prayer, and worship. We begin with Bible reading.

To get started, let me encourage you to do the obvious - read your Bible! While devotional books/booklets can be helpful, they should not substitute for the reading of Scripture. If you have been saved for any length of time, you need to be working at reading, meditating, and understanding the Word for yourself. If used exclusively, devotional "helps" can actually hinder your own ability to personally harvest, process, and benefit from the food of the Word.

Having said that, let me encourage you to have a plan when you read. Many Christians lack any organized or systematic approach to their Bible reading. Some simply open up the Bible and begin reading (wherever they happened to open up). Others, start, stop, and change books so often that they do not fully benefit from their reading.

Many good reading plans exist and can easily be found on the internet. I would specifically recommend that you read through a book of the Bible for your devotions. If you are just getting started at this, select a New Testament book (perhaps one of the Gospels) and read a chapter or more every time you have your devotions. Stick with this until you are done

with the book. This approach will help you see spiritual truths developed within their context and give you a better understanding of the Word.

April 10, 2016

As we continue to look at the practice of personal devotions, I want to address the issue of routine. There can be no doubt that we are creatures of habit. We establish for ourselves patterns of life involving work, meals, exercise, and hygiene. Establishing your devotions as a regular routine of life will help you maintain a consistent walk with the Lord. Consider the following helpful thoughts for establishing a routine of devotions.

First, attach your devotions to an already established routine. This is perhaps the easiest way to get started. Find something that you do every day and work at having your devotions around that event. Examples would include having your devotions when you get out of bed, have breakfast, break for lunch, or get home from work.

Second, keep on keeping on! I think most of us are aware that routines take some time to form. Establishing a routine can be like riding a bike up hill. Getting up the hill requires a lot of consistent pedaling. However, the encouraging reality is that at some point you will reach the top (and not need as much effort), and then begin to coast down the other side! Those who just keep working at having their devotions eventually find it harder to miss them than to have them!

Third, watch for changes in the routine. Having a routine has advantages. However, one of the disadvantages is that when a change in routine comes, it can throw us off. If your devotions revolve around your work schedule, you may find Saturdays difficult. If you are a student, you may find the summer time a hard time to be consistent. Holidays can also be difficult. the key is to look ahead and prepare for such transition points.

April 3, 2016

Though it has been a bit hit and miss due to circumstances, I would like to remind us that we have been working through the topic of devotions. The last time we looked at this subject we were considering the practice of devotions and noted that having a set time for devotions is helpful. Today, I would like for us to think about the place of our devotions.

Now it should be remembered that as Christians we have no sacred places. We have no shrines, no holy spots, no places to which we travel, no directions toward which we pray. Our Lord taught us that worship was not to be so much an issue of where (this mountain or that mountain) but an issue of spirit and truth (John 4:21-23).

For this reason, the matter of where you have your devotions will not be a matter of right or wrong as much as a matter of wisdom and prudence. The primary concern that should direct our place of devotions should be the ability to focus on the Lord without distraction. Our Lord gave us example of this when He went up into a mountain alone to pray (Matthew 14:23).

For some, finding such a place will be easier than for others. A retired saint may have many places of quiet from which to choose while a young mother may feel like she has no place she can go to be away from her children! Again, because we are not dealing with right or wrongs each Christian should carefully think about what would work best in his or her given situation. If distractions cannot be completely avoided they should be minimized. If necessary, solicit help. A husband who helps with the children while his wife has devotions will share in the benefit of that spiritual focus!

March 27, 2016

If the time comes for you to suffer for the faith, Will you? Would you be willing to lose your job and thus bring financial hardship upon your family for Christ's sake? Would you be willing to be scorned, misrepresented, and vilified in the media... and among your family and acquaintances? Are you willing to spend a season in prison? Are you willing to suffer... and die for Him?

If you have read of the sufferings of Christians, whether from the book of Acts or from Fox's Book of Martyrs, you may well wonder what enables average Christians to undergo such terrible sufferings for Christ and remain faithful to the end. I would suggest that the event we celebrate today is at the core of such faithful sufferings.

In I Corinthians 15:30 Paul asked a church that was doubting the resurrection of the saints, "And why stand we in jeopardy every hour?" Why face daily peril, as he did, if there is no resurrection and reward? Why suffer torture, not accepting deliverance, if you will not obtain a better resurrection thereby (Hebrews 11:35)? Suffering saints "reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18).

Of course, there is no resurrection of the saints if there is no resurrection of Jesus! He is the Man by whom the resurrection of the dead has come (I Corinthians 15:21). By His faithfulness to death, He has overcome the one who had the keys of death, and has paved the way to glory for us! "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15:58)!

March 13, 2016

As we continue to look at the matter of personal devotions, I want to address the *practice* of devotions. In one sense, personal devotions are just that, *personal*. For this reason, our devotional practices may look very different from one another (and that is ok!) Some may use a computer, phone or tablet while others may use their open Bible. Some may take 15 minutes, others 30, still others an hour. Some may journal their thoughts while others may not.

There are, however, some principles that are generally useful. First, *it is helpful to have a set time for devotions*. People often struggle with consistent devotions when they have no set time frame in which to do them.

Whether that is in the morning, afternoon, or evening will depend on *your particular situation*. Someone who sleeps during the day and works at night may find it best to have their devotions at night before they go to work. “Morning people” may have an easier time focusing on their devotions first thing in the morning. A mother may find it best to have her devotions in the afternoon when the kids are playing.

There is one more thing to consider on this matter of when you have your devotions. Soldiers put their armor on before going to battle. Even if you have your main devotions in the afternoon or evening it will still be beneficial to *pray and prepare your heart* in some way *before beginning your day!* This may involve praying on the way to work. Those who have their devotions at night might write down something to meditate on in the morning while they are getting ready for work.

March 6, 2106

We left off a couple of weeks ago introducing the topic of personal devotions. I would like to return to that subject and help us consider the *priority* of personal devotions.

Luke 10:38-42 records the familiar story of Jesus spending time in the home of Mary and Martha. According to verse 38, Martha received Him into her house and clearly working hard to be a good hostess. While she busied herself serving (presumably serving the Lord Jesus) her sister, Mary, was *sitting at Jesus' feet listening to His words*. As time went on there came a breaking point for Martha. She became frustrated with the Lord and asked “dost Thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?”

Playing hostess to Jesus was good and *important*. However, Martha had become “cumbered” about much serving (distracted and too occupied with her work). Jesus went

on to inform her (and us) that “one thing is needful.” He then indicated that Mary had “chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

Consider the following observation from this text. First, it is possible to be distracted and preoccupied with good things. Second, *one thing* is needful-personally hearing and learning the Word’s of Jesus (something we can do in our devotions). Third, Mary had made a *choice* to sit at His feet and hear His words. Fourth, this was considered *good*. Lastly, what Mary had chosen *would not be taken from her*. Let us consider this account carefully and with Mary choose that one needful thing!

February 14, 2016

As we begin looking at the topic of personal devotions I want us to consider the pattern of devotions that we see in the Scriptures. As we read the Scripture it becomes apparent that godly people developed a practice of devoting time to commune with the Lord.

Such a practice seems to have been “built in” to God’s relationship with Adam and Eve. It is possible that His appearance in the Garden walking in the cool of the day (probably in the form of a man) was a daily occurrence. Imagine walking through the Garden of Eden with God and fellowshiping with Him! This concept of walking with God was also characteristic of Enoch (Genesis 5:22) and Noah (Genesis 6:9)

Consider the single desire of David’s heart as expressed in Psalm 27:4 “one thing I desired of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to enquire in His temple.” The house of the LORD was where *God’s presence* was manifested. While David could not live in the tabernacle, he did pray three times a day (Psalm 55:17) and there were times whe he awoke before dawn to meditate in God’s word (Psalm 119, 148).

Consider also the example of Daniel. Three times a day, Daniel would go into his upper room, open his windows toward Jerusalem and pray to God (Daniel 6:10). Interestingly, that same verse adds the word “as he did aforetime”. This was a settled habit of Daniel’s life!

Perhaps the greatest example in these matters is provided by our Lord Jesus. The Gospels indicate that Jesus was very busy in His ministry among the people. Yet in all of His activity, even Jesus often took time to get alone and pray (Matthew 14:23). If Jesus took time to pray to the Father, how much more should we? Let us consider these examples and, more importantly, follow them!

February 7, 2016

Devotions. For some this word is intimidating. It represents a wonderful ideal that seems out of reach. For others, the word is frustrating. It represents many start-stops and failed attempts. Still others find the word a mystery. While they know they should have devotions they are still unsure as to what devotions involve.

In the coming Cultivators I would like to examine the matter of devotions and encourage you to be diligent in establishing them as a consistent routine in your life. We will look at both spiritual and practical steps you can take to see your devotions improve. We will also consider the spiritual benefits of devotions.

As we begin, however, perhaps we should define devotions. The Miriam Webster dictionary gives this definition for devotions, “prayer, worship, or other religious activities that are done in private rather than in a religious service.” Devotions are those ways in which you manifest your devotion to God outside of the context of the gathered church. These can include prayer, Bible reading, meditation, memorization, and praise.

Another thing that might be said about devotions is that they typically involve time set aside in which we can focus on the prayer, Bible reading, and worship in private. Devotion, as a heart attitude, should certainly characterize our entire day. However, even our Lord taught us the importance of getting alone to spend time with God (Matthew 14:23).

As we begin to focus on this topic of devotions, let me encourage you to ask the Lord to help you see your own devotional time strengthened. If you are not currently having your devotions, plan to devotions, plan to start! If you have been away from them for a while, seek to get back in and grow in consistency. In doing this you will reap the spiritual benefit!

January 31, 2016

After the 1,000 year reign of Christ, God will perform one last work of recreation. Having renewed believers in Christ and transformed their bodies through the resurrection, He will remake the heavens and the earth. This is fitting, since this earth and universe were made by Jesus and for Jesus. He will remake what is His!

Though we are not told a lot about the new heavens and earth, Revelation 21-22 provide some details (please read!). We find, for example, that there will be no more sea. But truly the most remarkable revelation in these chapters is that the Heavenly City (New Jerusalem) will come down from heaven to the new earth!

This city will be remarkable for many reasons. First, its sheer size is overwhelming. Taking the measurements provided by the angel we learn that this city will be about 1,500 miles long and wide. Since the city is as tall as it is wide (like a cube?) it will extend 1,500 miles high

as well! Such a city, if placed down on the United States would stretch from New York to Florida and then all the way to Texas!

The second thing we might say about the city is its beauty. It comes out of heaven like a radiant bride adorned for her husband! The twelve foundations of the city are made of precious gems. Each of the twelve gates are made of a single pearl. And, of course, the streets will be made of pure gold and have the appearance of transparent glass! The glory of the Lord will radiate through all of this in breathtaking way.

By far, however, the greatest part of this city will be the presence of God. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it. There will be no more curse, no more death, no more sorrow, no more crying, and no more pain. May we rejoice today and look in hope for that day in which God will make all things new - "for these words are true and faithful" (Rev. 21:5).

January 24, 2016

The true story of the Bible has an ending. Though we are living in a "chapter" of the story that has not yet been completed it is possible to know the ending because God has revealed it to us. Knowing that ending can strengthen our hope and help us face the troubles of life here and now. It can also challenge us to be busy about the work of spreading the Gospel because the ending is not a happy one for those outside of Christ.

The last chapter of this world will center around the person of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:9-10). This is fitting since the world was made by Christ and for Christ (Colossians 1:16). Jesus will return for His church (both the dead and the living). After this begins a time of Tribulation which we associate with the seventieth week (a group of seven years) of Daniel 9. During this time the Antichrist will be revealed. Through the empowerment of Satan and with the assistance of a false prophet, this man will exalt himself against God, the Jews, and the saints. During this period of judgment, Christ will purify the Jews and deal with the ungodly nations of the earth.

After this period of intense judgment, Christ will return, destroy the Antichrist and his forces, bind Satan, and set up His kingdom for a thousand years. During this time He will fulfill all the promises of the Scriptures with respect to the nation of Israel. He will also reign over the nations of the earth during a time of blessed peace and righteousness. After this thousand year reign, Satan will be loosed, lead one last rebellion which will be quickly brought to an end and Satan will go to his final judgment in the Lake of Fire. The heavens and the earth will be dissolved by fire and recreated. Thus will close the last chapter of this world. Thus will begin, the first and eternal chapter of the next. Next week we will turn our attention to that new beginning.

January 17, 2016

After Christ died for the sins of the world and rose again from the dead, it was time to institute a new time period in world history. From His exalted position in Heaven at the right hand of His Father, Jesus (and the Father) poured out the Holy Spirit upon His followers. In this way, the body of disciples that He had shaped now became a living being – the church! The church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, was united to the Lord in a very special way. It was His body and His bride. It was a Holy Temple that He was committed to building.

The foundation of the church consisted of Christ's holy Apostles who had been with Him from the beginning. These men were personally and prayerfully chosen and sent out by Jesus Himself. They had seen Jesus after His resurrection and thus were able to give a special eye witness account of Him. They were also uniquely assisted by the Holy Spirit with signs and miracles to confirm their new message. Christ also chose Saul of Tarsus (Paul), who had been a zealous persecutor of the church, to be an Apostle. These men, along with the New Testament prophets became the foundation of the church.

The spread of the Gospel (the good news of forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus) was launched from Jerusalem and soon churches began to be established among the Gentile nations. These churches needed instruction and often had matters that needed to be corrected. False teachers often sought to corrupt the church with their works-based salvation teachings. Doctrines from the Deity of Christ to the resurrection of the dead to the very nature of the Gospel itself were under attack by the Evil one who was (and is) suffering the defeat of the cross. These and other needs prompted the writing of the New Testament.

What a privilege it is to be a part of Christ's church, partake in His Spirit, advance His Gospel, and have His revelations!

January 10, 2016

Continuing our overview of the Bible, we come to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Galatians 4:4-5 Paul writes, "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." This verse provides a wonderful overview of the gift of Christ!

In the fullness of time. As we have already indicated, the time period between the creation of the earth and the coming of Christ was filled with sin and rebellion. Sadly, even God's chosen nation Israel was no exception. This underscores the great need of humanity. If the salvation of our souls were dependent on us, we would never be saved!

God sent forth His Son. We are reminded in John 3:16 that this sending was an expression of His love for the world. God was now providing that means of salvation that we so desperately needed and which was foretold by the prophets.

Born of a woman. The Word who was both with God (as a part of the Trinity) and was God became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:1, 14). The Son willingly submitted to His Father's will and became one of us that He might deliver us from sin and death. As one "made under the Law", Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly and thus constituted a perfect sacrifice for our sins.

To redeem. This is why Jesus came. As we remind ourselves at Christmas time, He was born to die. He who knew no sin had our sins placed on His account and was punished with the wrath of God in our place. After finishing His cross work, He arose from the dead and ascended into Heaven to sit at the Father's right hand. Now complete forgiveness, eternal life, and the right to become sons of God are offered freely to all who believe!

January 3, 2016

Today marks the first Sunday of 2016 and thus a good opportunity for us as Christians to consider a few reminders about new beginnings. As you enter this new year, strive for the following spiritual qualities:

1. Thankfulness

The beginning of a new year signifies the close of an old year. This can serve as a great opportunity to remember the blessings and help of God over the past 12 months. In Psalm 65:11, the Psalmist acknowledged that the Lord "crownest the year with Thy goodness." Not only has God been good to us in our blessings, He has also been good to us through our struggles. Consider the goodness and grace of God that He has displayed in your life during your difficulties and trials in 2015 and give Him thanks.

2. Humility

Proverbs 27:1 tells us that we are not to boast about tomorrow because we do not know what a day will bring forth. What is true of tomorrow is certainly true of 365 tomorrows! This coming year may give birth to sickness, health, financial loss, financial gain, blessings, or even death. Because we do not know what tomorrow holds, pride regarding the future is inappropriate! As James told the arrogant businessmen who had laid out there plans, we do not even know if we will be alive to fulfill our plans (our life is a vapor) and we do better to say "if the Lord wills..." (James 4:13-16).

3. Trust

While we do not know what is in the womb of 2016, God does! The believer can go into 2016 with the comforting truth of Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." He has graciously helped us in the past and will surely be with us in the days ahead. We do not cower in fear about tomorrow but move ahead confident of God's loving presence, provision, and help!