

Christianity: A Way of Life



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Christianity has been Western civilization's principal religion for centuries. Yet its influence doesn't seem to have noticeably reduced the ravages of war or curtailed man's inhumanity to man. As a result, millions of people regard Jesus Christ's teachings as impractical and unworkable in the real world. Is their conclusion a valid view of the way of life Jesus taught?

Not at all! On the contrary, statistics gathered through surveys reveal an obvious reason popular Christianity is so ineffective: *Few who profess to follow Christ actually practice what He preached.* To this day the vast majority of professing Christians are followers of Christ in name

only. They simply do not live the way Jesus taught.

America is the most religious of the nations that profess to be mostly Christian. But notice this admission by an educator acquainted with the country's religious trends. In a Dec. 25, 1995, interview—conducted by the Public Broadcasting System's Margaret Warner—Robert

Franklin, director of black-church studies at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, remarked: “. . . Although we learned [from a Gallup Poll] that 96 percent of Americans claim to believe in God . . . I'm not sure that it's bankable information . . . I think that people express belief in God as a kind of badge of membership, a very cheap badge of membership in the civilized society. Americans, in my assessment, have a very high valuation of the aesthetic dimension of religion. We love Handel's *Messiah*, we listen to the Negro spirituals, [admire] the art in the Sistine Chapel, but when it comes to adhering to the Ten Commandments, to the Sermon on the Mount, to the ethics of religion, I find that we've still got a long way to go.”

People hold varying ideas about what constitutes Christianity. But few of them are based solidly on what the Bible teaches. Many polls and surveys of professing Christians indicate they think that as long as they believe in Jesus, attend church occasionally and are basically good people, they are pleasing God.

Religion, to them, is more or less whatever they want it to be. They think that any personal religious preference

or practice, as long as it is motivated by good intentions, is acceptable to God.

Furthermore, many religious leaders teach their flocks to believe that any effort on their part to practice good works as a way of life based on the Scriptures, beyond that of simply “believing,” could be an effrontery toward God. Some even claim that God expects *nothing* of them beyond believing in Jesus' existence, or “believing on Christ's name.” The belief that Christianity should be *a way of life*—that God expects us to *do* something to meet His approval—has practically disappeared.

Is it acceptable to believe we are free to worship God as we wish, to refashion God in our own image? Or has God revealed an approach to life that He *expects us to follow*? Does He care about what we do and how we conduct ourselves? Is He concerned about the way we live? Does His Word define a *way of life* that He expects us to practice? If so, what is it? Does it make any difference in the relationship we are supposed to have with Him? In this lesson we examine the answers to these questions from the Scriptures.

THE GODLY WAY OF LIFE

Is merely believing on Jesus as Lord and Savior sufficient to receive eternal life?

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” (Matthew 7:21-23; compare Luke 9:23).

Although the acceptance and honor of Christ's role in our salvation is essential, Jesus said merely believing on His name does not fulfill all of God's requirements regarding the way we should live. We must also *do* the will of the Father.

Jesus explained that He expects much more from His followers than simply believing that He is the Christ—the Messiah—and calling Him Lord. He also requires that we *change the way we live*.

How did Christ describe the way we should live?

“Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14; compare Luke 13:23-25; emphasis added throughout).



Christianity's influence doesn't seem to have noticeably reduced the ravages of war or curtailed man's inhumanity to man.

George Barna, an American pollster who specializes in observing and cataloging religious trends and behavior, says modern Christianity is *a mile wide and an inch deep*. But mile-wide Christianity is not the path to God's Kingdom. Rather, according to Jesus, it is the highway to destruction.

The way leading to eternal life is the way of *living within the boundaries defined in God's law*. It is not the broad and popular way that approves of any behavioral preference and practice.

What is the source of most people's views on the way they should serve and worship God?

"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:8-9).

"I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in My counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned them from their evil way and from the evil of their doings" (Jeremiah 23:21-22; compare 2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

As it was in the days of Jesus and the biblical prophets, so is it today! Most people put their faith in the words and opinions of the religious teachers they like the most. Few look first to God's words in the Scriptures as the primary basis of their beliefs.

What should be the source of our beliefs and the guide for our behavior?

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17; compare verses 15-16).

"To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

If we really want to follow God according to His instructions, we must honestly evaluate the *origins* of our present worship habits and way of life. We need to ask ourselves whether they are derived *from the Scriptures*. Are our teachers faithful to God's Word? Or are they merely disseminating the ideas and teachings of men? The answer to these questions make an enormous difference in whether God will work with us as His servants or whether He will reject us.

Is worshipping God in vain a recent trend?

"Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'" (Matthew 15:7-9).

"My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express

devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice" (Ezekiel 33:31-32, *New International Version*).

More than 2,500 years ago the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel described the self-serving and ultimately worthless approach to worship the Israelites had taken. The people heard the words of God's messengers, but they *did not practice* what they heard. Later, in New Testament times, Jesus said this approach amounted to worship of God *in vain*—ultimately fruitless and worthless. Little has changed. Our age is the age of disbelief.

How do the Scriptures describe the beliefs and conduct of the earliest Christians?

"... When Priscilla and Aquila heard [Apollos], they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately" (Acts 18:26, *New Revised Standard Version*).

"And about that time there arose a great commotion about the Way" (Acts 19:23).

"But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, 'When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case'" (Acts 24:22; compare Acts 9:1-2; 19:1-2, 9-10).

Members of the early Church often referred to themselves as those who followed *the Way*. Paul refers to their way of life as *"the way of the Lord"* and *"the way of God"* (Acts 18:25-26). In other words, the early Christians, directly taught by Christ's apostles, were recognized by their *deeds and actions*. Their *godly way of life* distinguished them from the society around them.

The way of life of the early Christians was called *the Way* because they lived *the way Christ lived*. They followed His example. They obeyed His instructions. The "Way" was then, and still is, a way of living and thinking that is profoundly different from that followed by the vast majority of humanity.

THE FOUNDATION

When Christ came to earth He explained that this different way of thinking would—through the power of the



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Holy Spirit—produce the fruit of righteous actions and deeds. He taught that God’s way is the way of *giving* rather than the normal, selfish human way of *getting* (Luke 6:38; Acts 20:35).

How did Paul contrast these two ways of thinking and living?

“For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (Romans 8:5-6).



“Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:3-5).

The basics of the way we should live are clearly defined by God in the Scriptures.

The key to living a way of life different from the ways of the world is to allow God’s Spirit to work in us so we *think* like Jesus Christ. Through His Spirit God not only leads us in a different way of thinking, He helps us change the motivations that govern our actions. This focus on *unselfishness* rather than the self-serving approach produced by our natural way of thinking brings, in turn, a dramatic change in the way we live and everything we do.

What are the greatest priorities of our new way of life?

“The thing you should want most is God’s kingdom and doing what God wants. Then all these other things you need will be given to you” (Matthew 6:33, New Century Version).

“For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50).

“. . . He who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:17).

God asks that we reorder our priorities, allowing His Spirit to help us change our thinking. Serving God by doing His will and desiring to be in His Kingdom should be our highest priority. When we put God first He promises to provide ways for us to meet our needs. That, of itself, is a wonderful promise that should

give us confidence and comfort.

Living a godly life is much more than merely calling on God’s name as though that alone will excuse us for doing whatever we please. Living a godly life is doing *what pleases God*. It is practicing what He tells us to do—living a way of life defined by His Word. We need to clearly understand the basics of that way of life!

What other foundational principles did Christ and His apostles teach?

“And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him [Jesus], saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?’ So he answered and said, ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered rightly; do this and you will live’” (Luke 10:25-28).

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

“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13; compare verses 15-17).

Jesus and His apostles taught a way of life based on observing God’s commandments from a *heart of love* that willingly makes personal sacrifices for the sake of others—focusing on *giving* rather than *getting*. It is the way of concern about the well-being of others.

A true Christian cannot base his way of life—his new way of living—on his own ideas about right and wrong. The basics of the way we should live are defined by God in the Scriptures. God’s laws, and Christ’s example of perfect obedience to those laws, set the standards for the genuinely Christian way of life.

Let’s be sure we understand the role of God’s law in our lives. Paul forcefully explains in his letters that no law can ever justify us—that is, it cannot remove the guilt we incurred through our past transgressions (Romans 3:23-25). Justification—the removal of guilt from sins previously committed—is a *gift* God freely gives when we repent and place our faith in Christ’s sacrificial death as payment for our sins. “Therefore,” says Paul, “we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (verse 28)—that is, through faith in Christ’s death in our stead.

But Paul then explains the role the law still plays in our lives. “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (verse 31). The law’s purpose is not to provide forgiveness of sin but to *define* sin—“for by the law *is the knowledge of sin*” (verse 20). God’s law reveals the principles and standards of the godly way of life.

Paul explained the foundation of the life he personally lived: “. . . I confess to you, that *according to the Way* which they [unbelievers] call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, *believing all things which are*

written in the Law and in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14-17). Paul’s way of life was based on what he had learned from the Holy Scriptures.

This is what our lives should reflect—the highest standards of loving behavior according to those same Scriptures. Our behavior should reflect the attitude of wanting to be cooperative and respectful servants of both God and our fellow human beings. As true Christians we are supposed to be a *caring* and *servant* people who are uncompromisingly loyal to the principles taught in the Scriptures.

PRACTICING LOVE, HONOR AND RESPECT

Do the Scriptures summarize the way we should interact with other people?

“Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh” (1 Peter 2:17-18).

“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8; compare 1 John 2:9-11).

As John tells us, God is love. Love sums up God’s character, His motivation, how He lives and how He deals with us. He wants us to show love in all our dealings with others.

How should we regard those over us in positions of authority?

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men” (Titus 3:1-2; compare Ephesians 6:5-7).

“First, I tell you to pray for all people, asking God for what they need and being thankful to him. Pray for rulers and for all who have authority so that we can have quiet and peaceful lives full of worship and respect for God. This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to know the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4, NCV).

“All of you must yield to the government rulers. No one rules unless God has given him the power to rule, and no one rules now without that power from God. So those who are against the government are really against what God has commanded. And they will bring punishment on themselves. Those who do right do not have to fear the rulers; only those who do wrong fear them. Do you want to be unafraid of the rulers? Then do what is right, and they will praise you” (Romans 13:1-3, NCV).

How should husbands and wives interact with each other?

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

“Husbands, love your wives and do not be bitter toward them” (Colossians 3:19).

“. . . You husbands should live with your wives in an understanding way, since they are [physically] weaker than you. But show them respect, because God gives them the same blessing he gives you—the grace that gives true life. Do this so that nothing will stop your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7-8, NCV).

“In the same way, you wives should yield to your husbands. Then, if some husbands do not obey God’s teaching, they will be persuaded to believe without anyone’s saying a word to them. They will be persuaded by the way their wives live. Your husbands will see the pure lives you live with your respect for God” (1 Peter 3:1-2, NCV).

Do the Scriptures reveal that children should show and receive respect?

“‘Honor your father and mother’—which is the first commandment with a promise—‘that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.’ Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:2-4, NIV).

“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not embitter your children, lest they become discouraged” (Colossians 3:20-21).

“For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children” (2 Corinthians 12:14).

It is just as important that parents be considerate, loving, gentle and encouraging to their children as it is for children to learn to respect, honor and love their parents. Mutual love and respect produce good character in children and build lasting bonds between them and their parents.

Respect learned in the home carries over into adult life. One of the causes of the anger and violence in societies is the sharp decline in genuine respect for others in the family—especially for the feelings and achievements of children.

Does God expect us to respond to everyone with kindness and gentleness?

“And a servant of the Lord must quarrel but be gentle to all . . .” (2 Timothy 2:24).

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Ephesians 4:2, NIV; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:6-8).

The godly way of life begins in our attitude toward others. In every area of life we should treat others with kindness, love and respect.

How vital is it that we also sincerely love and honor God the Father and His Son?

“Jesus said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your

God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37-38; compare Malachi 1:6).

“And now . . . what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul?” (Deuteronomy 10:12).



As men and women enter into a marriage covenant in which they promise to cherish one another as husbands and wives, God has promised to enter into a covenant with those who will submit to Him.

honors and respects the other. It is impossible to imagine a genuinely happy marriage in which one partner habitually disregards the feelings and desires of the other.

Yet many professing Christians try to conduct their relationship with God in precisely that manner. They expect God to respond with love and respect of their feelings and needs. But they see no need to respond to God with the same honor and respect. They disregard His Word, spurn His teachings and ignore His commands. They fail to comprehend the *mutual obligations* that must be present in the relationship God expects us to have with Him and with the converted spiritual family He is creating.

How does God view His relationship with those who truly are converted?

“I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My

sons and daughters,’ says the Lord Almighty” (2 Corinthians 6:18).

“He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:7).

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12; compare Romans 8:14-17).

What was God’s relationship with ancient Israel?

“I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Leviticus 26:12).

“Do you thus deal with the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?” (Deuteronomy 32:6).

“. . . You [Israel] will call me, ‘My husband,’ and . . . I [God] will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness . . .” (Hosea 2:16, 19-20, NRSV).

What relationship with God has Christ made available to us through His sacrifice?

“‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (Jeremiah 31:31-33, NIV).

“. . . He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood’” (1 Corinthians 11:25).

As men and women enter into a marriage covenant (Malachi 2:14) in which they promise to cherish one another as husbands and wives, God has promised to enter into a covenant with those who will submit to Him with all their hearts and minds.

The word *new* in New Covenant, in both the Old and New Testaments, implies a refreshed or renewed covenant relationship. It does not imply a radically different covenant relationship.

The New Covenant is a *refreshing*, a *renewing*, of God’s original covenant. We could compare this to the Constitution of the United States. Amendments are added to the original document that explain how the original document is to be interpreted under specific conditions. They modify the original, but they do not abolish it.

In a similar way the Scriptures confirm that a new—

in the sense of a *refreshed*—covenant relationship exists for all who, following repentance and baptism, are transformed by God’s Spirit (Hebrews 8:6, 10; Ephesians 2:11-13). That new relationship does not nullify or exclude the original document on which the old relationship was founded.

However, some aspects of that original document—the Old Testament Scriptures—must be interpreted and applied according to the *spirit of the law* as revealed by Christ instead of the precise *letter of the law* (2 Corinthians 3:6). For example, an adulterer who repents is forgiven instead of being stoned to death. Where there is repentance the old “ministry of condemnation” gives place to the much more glorious “ministry of justification” by which former sins may be forgiven and forgotten (verse 9, NRSV).

The New Testament Scriptures reveal well-defined guidelines for applying the Old Testament Scriptures to the renewed covenant relationship. No text is deleted from the old with the introduction of the new (Matthew 5:17). But some *amendments* to the old are specified in the new.

The most notable modifications are the inclusion of people from all nations, the addition of better promises—including the promise of eternal life—and the active working of God’s Spirit in those who have entered into the New Covenant relationship with God. These and similar modifications dramatically improve the covenant relationship that exists between God and His people.

How is the future relationship between Christ and His Church described in the Scriptures?

“For I [Paul] have betrothed you [the Church] to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2; compare Ephesians 5:25-32).

“Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife [the Church] has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, ‘Write: “Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, ‘These are the true sayings of God’” (Revelation 19:7-9).

When He returns to earth as the King of Kings, Jesus’ relationship with His resurrected saints will be like that of a husband’s to his wife. This means that the present relationship between Christ and the members of His Church is merely the beginning of an *eternal* relationship of trust, fidelity and love.

Our relationship with God can be compared with a growing *family relationship* between a father and his children or to an *endearing relationship* between a husband and his wife. Proper nourishment of this special relationship must involve love, respect, honor, action and effort. Like any relationship, its success also requires a major investment of *time*.

BUILDING HABITS OF PRAYER AND BIBLE STUDY

Good communication is essential to a good relationship. A constant plea from many wives to their husbands is “Talk to me.” A wise husband understands this need and enjoys communicating with his wife. Children need encouragement and instruction from their parents, and parents need to listen to the requests, questions and opinions of their children. The basics of good communication include *talking* as well as *listening*.

The same principles apply to our relationship with our heavenly Father. Good communication between Him and us is a vital aspect of the godly way of life. God speaks to us through His Word, the Holy Scriptures (Jeremiah 10:1; Isaiah 51:7). We talk to Him through prayer. These avenues of communication between God and us should not become one-way streets—by our merely asking for favors but never listening to advice and instruction. They must together become a two-way, interactive communication pathway.

How often should we talk to God in prayer?

“Pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

God wants us to make praying to Him a regular habit. This doesn’t mean we will pray without a pause all day every day. It simply means we must not cease making prayer a habit—we should pray regularly and consistently to maintain contact with God.

What were the prayer habits of some of God’s faithful servants?

“Evening and morning and at noon I will pray, and cry aloud, and He shall hear my voice” (Psalm 55:17).

“Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as was his custom since early days” (Daniel 6:10).

“Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, [Jesus] went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed” (Mark 1:35).

The Scriptures indicate it was a fairly common practice among God’s servants to pray more than once every day. On at least one occasion Jesus arose early from His night’s sleep so He could have some extra time alone to talk to God privately in prayer.

Is God really interested in what we have to say to Him?

“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their prayers . . .” (1 Peter 3:12).

“The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16).

The book of Revelation compares our prayers with the smell of sweet incense wafting up to God (Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4). He is anxious to hear us express our heartfelt concerns. We could compare this to two young people in love conversing often and openly with each other—attentive to every word the other says. God appreciates our having that same enthusiasm and eagerness, that same fervent desire, to converse with Him.

How responsive is God to us when we pray?

“. . . Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them” (Mark 11:24).

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6-7).

“Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 John 5:14).

God has promised to hear and respond to us when we pray sincerely and fervently—*according to His will*—and genuinely put our trust in Him.

Whose prayers will God refuse to consider?

“The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous” (Proverbs 15:29).

“Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

“One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination” (Proverbs 28:9; compare Zechariah 7:11-13).

“You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

Good communication is a two-way street. Not only must we talk to God through prayer, but we must pay close attention to what He has to say to us. We do this by *studying and following His written Word*, the Bible (Psalm 1:1-3; 119:97-100).

God expects us to pay attention to His written Word—especially to His foundational principles, the Ten Commandments—as a prerequisite for His hearing and responding to our prayers. The books of the Bible can be compared to letters from Him, each communicating aspects of His will to us. If we won’t listen to His written Word, our requests of Him are futile. He tells us He will simply refuse to respond (Isaiah 59:1-2).

A comparison can be drawn to a wife expecting her husband to lavish love and blessings upon her even while she openly participates in an adulterous affair. Such expectation is unrealistic. It is equally unrealistic to expect God to answer the prayers of one who has no interest in being faithful to Him, who persistently

refuses to listen to His Word. Of course, when anyone repents God will again listen to his prayers.

Do the Scriptures explain how to effectively study the Bible?

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, NIV).

“My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you, so that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding; yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding, if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2:1-5).

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil” (Proverbs 3:5-7).

A child who pays attention to instruction pleases his parents and makes them happy. In like manner, God is pleased with us when we study His Word in a diligent effort to learn how He wants us to live.

What primary benefit comes from studying the Scriptures?

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

Through the Bible God provides us with doctrine and instruction in His way of life. He reproves and corrects us, showing us where we need to change. He also enables us to grow to spiritual maturity and receive salvation. Bible study is our way of allowing God to talk with us. It is our duty to pay attention to His words, to make them a part of our thinking and to act on what we learn.

Husbands and wives who have grown close to each other in heart and mind often spend hours in intense conversation together. They discuss their goals, fears, joys, wants and needs. A close relationship with God requires the same type of open, effective two-way communication.

Will studying God’s Word help us better understand our own nature and God’s will?

“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

“The entrance of Your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130).

This Bible Study Course was created to help you understand the Scriptures. But don't just take our word for what the Bible teaches. Search the Scriptures yourself! Ask questions; become informed. Look up the verses that precede and follow those we quote. Make sure you become acquainted with the context. Let God talk for Himself. Prayerfully ask for His guidance, then drink in His words. Only then will you know for certain that what you have learned here is the teaching of the living God. (If you have questions you are unable to resolve, please let us know. One of our personal correspondents will be glad to help.)

How else does God communicate His will to us?

“So Philip ran to him [an Ethiopian official], and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him” (Acts 8:30-31).

“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!’” (Romans 10:14-15).

No man is an island. No matter how much we study we need teachers to point us in the right direction. God provides them to edify His people (Ephesians 4:11-13), instructing them in the fundamentals of His Word. This is one of the main reasons we should regularly assemble together—so we can hear spiritually mature elders expound the words of life from the Scriptures.

OBSERVING GOD'S SABBATH

Most nations observe holidays to honor national heroes. For example, Americans observe Presidents' Day, Memorial Day and Veterans' Day to honor some who have served their country. Even in the workplace, respect and honor are displayed through traditions such as employee picnics, Secretaries' Day and Bosses' Day. Honoring family members on Mothers' Day, Fathers' Day or their wedding anniversaries contributes to keeping familial relationships alive and healthy.

If we love God and desire a close relationship with Him, we need to spend time honoring Him and drawing close to Him. M. Scott Peck, in his best-selling *The Road Less Traveled*, comments on the importance of shared time in loving relationships: “When we love something it is of value to us, and when something is of value to us we spend time with it, time enjoying and time taking care of it. Observe a teenager in love with his car and note the time he will spend admiring it, polishing it, repairing it, tuning it. Or an older person with

a beloved rose garden, and the time spent pruning and mulching and fertilizing and studying it. So it is when we love children; we spend time admiring them and caring for them. We give them our time” (1978, p. 22).

Since this principle is applicable to the human beings we love, should it not also be applicable to our relationship with our God?

Our traditions encourage us to take the time to honor those we respect. But how many will take the time to observe the sacred sabbaths and holy convocations specifically designated in the Scriptures for honoring God?

Are Christians instructed to assemble together regularly?

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Do the Scriptures tell us on which day we should assemble to worship and honor God?

“There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly” (Leviticus 23:3, NIV).

“. . . You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you . . . so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy” (Exodus 31:13, NIV).

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8).

God explains to us *when* we should formally assemble to honor Him. He has set aside the *seventh day* of every week for us to come together to improve our relationship with Him. He wants to keep that relationship alive and growing. He has set apart the Sabbath as special holy time for us to privately draw closer to Him and improve our relationship with Him.

Yet most people believe that observance of the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer important to God—that it does not matter which day we observe. By celebrating a day of their own choosing, they ignore that our Creator has *specifically defined* the day for us to assemble to worship Him. In the Fourth Commandment He tells us to observe the *seventh* day of each week.

If we believe we are to live by every word of God, as



Through the Bible, God provides us with both doctrine and instruction in His way of life.

Jesus commanded (Luke 4:4), we simply cannot ignore this Commandment. We cannot honestly say we believe in keeping the Ten Commandments, then immediately contradict ourselves by discarding or changing the Fourth Commandment, which tells us to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

What else does God expect of us on His Sabbath day?

“Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work . . .”
(Exodus 20:9-10).

“If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath and from doing as you please on my holy day, if you call the Sabbath a delight and the LORD’s holy day honorable, and if you honor it by not going your own way and not doing as you please or speaking idle words, then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.’ The mouth of the LORD has spoken”
(Isaiah 58:13-14, NIV).



Most people believe that our observing the seventh-day Sabbath is no longer important to God.

The Sabbath is a time when our normal occupational labor should cease. God has set aside the Sabbath as a special time for extra rest, extra personal prayer and more Bible study and a day to assemble for scriptural instruction and fellowship.

The Sabbath is often falsely portrayed as a burden that Christ came to remove. But God’s Word never describes His Sabbath as a burden or says that Christ abolished it. Rather, the Scriptures describe it as a *delightful* time—a time to build our relationship with God and our brethren in Christ. Those who love God will delight in all of these special Sabbath activities. But those who only pretend to love God may indeed consider the Sabbath a burden. Because of their own attitudes, they will consider it an imposition on their own time.

Why does God say our observance of the seventh day of the week is important to Him?

“For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11).

“Moreover I also gave them My Sabbaths, to be a sign between them and Me, that they might

know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them”
(Ezekiel 20:12).

The seventh-day Sabbath is an *identifying sign* of the people who worship *the Creator God*. The Sabbath reminds us *every week* that the God we worship created the universe and that we must worship only Him—never the things He created. It provides us with extra and special private time to draw closer to Him.

Idolatrous religions, in varied ways, worship the creation instead of the Creator (Romans 1:22-25). Through the theory of evolution much of the academic and scientific world subscribes to and promotes an atheistic religion founded on the premise that the creation is its own creator. It denies the existence of the Creator God. (If you would like solid scientific evidence demonstrating the impossibility of life spontaneously evolving without a Creator, be sure to request your free copies of the booklets *Life’s Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?* and *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?*)

Did our Creator set us an example of Sabbath observance by resting on it?

“And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:2-3).

Did Jesus Christ, our perfect human example, make it His custom to assemble with others on the Sabbath?

“So [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day . . .” (Luke 4:16).

Does Sabbath observance include a command to assemble with others of like belief?

“Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation . . .”
(Leviticus 23:3).

The Hebrew word translated “convocation” here conveys the meaning of a *summons to an assembly*. It implies an *official* summons to worship. The New International Version translates this verse: “There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a *day of sacred assembly*. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.”

Is this instruction for God’s people to regularly assemble repeated in the New Testament?

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together . . .” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

“For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: ‘I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You’” (Hebrews 2:11-12).

Even our relationship with Christ is framed in a setting that includes the assembling of God's children. Meeting with others of like mind to learn more about God through the study of His Word is one of the ways we show God we are interested in Him and His people.

Weekly Sabbath observance is an important part of the kind of life God wants for us. (For a thorough explanation of why and how we should observe the seventh-day Sabbath, be sure to request your free copy of *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest* from our office nearest you.)

Does God want us to assemble on other sacred occasions to worship and honor Him?

"Three times you shall keep a feast to Me in the year: You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread . . . ; and the Feast of Harvest, the firstfruits of your labors which you have sown in the field; and the Feast of Ingathering at the end of the year, when you have gathered in the fruit of your labors from the field" (Exodus 23:14-16).

God tells us to meet to worship Him on the feast days He commands. Although it is beyond the scope of this lesson to cover the importance and meaning of God's annual festivals, they are covered in the next lesson. In the meantime be sure to request your free copy of *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

FAITH AND FIDELITY

How essential is faith in our relationship with God?

" . . . Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6, NIV).

"He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10).

Trust and fidelity—faith in God and faithfulness to His Word—are essential aspects of the way of life of the Scriptures. In the New Testament the words *faith*, *faithful* and *faithfulness* are all derived from the Greek word *pistis*. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* defines *pistis* as "trust, . . . trust-worthiness, . . . what is believed, the contents of belief, the 'faith, . . . a ground for 'faith,' an assurance, . . . a pledge of fidelity . . ." (1985, "Faith," p. 222).

Infidelity—the absence of faithfulness—is a major cause of broken relationships, especially marriages. In any close relationship faithfulness and trust are vital. Most marriage ceremonies contain a statement from each party promising to be faithful to the other—often until death. Fulfilling such a promise involves each demonstrating faithfulness to the other by continual, loving actions.

M. Scott Peck, in *The Road Less Traveled*, concludes that such commitment—such determination to faithfully perform one's vows, promises and relational responsibilities—is essential in all successful relationships. He

writes, ". . . Commitment is the foundation, the bedrock of any genuinely loving relationship" (p. 140).

What kind of faith is ineffective?

"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:19-20; compare verses 18, 26).

Belief in God is not enough. Such faith without "works" is dead. A living faith is an *active* faith. "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (James 1:22-25).

Does God set us an example by His faithfulness to His commitments and promises?

"Therefore know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

"If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13; compare Hebrews 10:23).

How does God expect us to demonstrate our faith, trust and faithfulness toward Him?

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? . . . Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead . . . Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (James 2:14-22; compare Matthew 24:45-48).

Abraham's dynamic example shows what *living faith* in God really is. Abraham not only believed in God, he believed what God said and followed what God commanded. That is the way we also must live.

Since God is faithful to us, He expects us to be faithful to Him. He expects us to believe in His faithfulness—to trust Him with a loyal heart.

How did Abraham demonstrate his faith—his belief and trust—in God?

" . . . Abraham obeyed me and kept my requirements, my commands, my decrees and my laws" (Genesis 26:5, NIV).

Because he trusted God, Abraham *lived the way of life* that pleased God. Since genuine Christianity is a way of

life, God expects us to prove our faith with our actions and deeds. This is the way Abraham lived (Hebrews 11:8-10).

What will ultimately happen to those who are willfully unfaithful?

“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8, NRSV).

Must God’s faithfully obedient servants endure trials and suffering?

“For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:21-23).

“Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator” (1 Peter 4:19).

“And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Romans 5:3-4, NRSV).

Putting God first can require faith and sacrifice. Christians will face trials and suffering just as Jesus and the apostles did.

Peter tells us, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that *the same sufferings* are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, *after you have suffered a while*, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you” (1 Peter 5:6-10).

Such suffering is not at all unusual. Almost everyone suffers in one way or another. But there is a major difference in a Christian’s trials. God’s servants understand that their trials and suffering can help them build and strengthen their character. They “know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

How should faithful Christians view their trials and suffering?

“Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. If you are reproached for the

name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part He is glorified” (1 Peter 4:12-14).

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:2-4; compare Matthew 5:10-12).

Those who have faith in God’s faithfulness are confident they can trust Him to act on their behalf. They know that when He intervenes in their trials to deliver them His intervention will be in their best interest according to His great purpose. They trust in God’s wisdom and fairness and are willing to suffer to prove it (1 Peter 4:19).

Peter sums up the attitude of trust that God’s Spirit leads them to have: “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, *that the genuineness of your faith*, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith; the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:6-9).

BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOR TO OTHERS

One of Christ’s most famous parables is that of the Good Samaritan. In that parable He describes an injured man lying helplessly on a well-traveled road.

At different times two people—both of them religious figures—pass by the injured man and fail to stop to help him. “But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you’” (Luke 10:33-35).

Jesus gave this parable in response to someone who had asked Him, “*And who is my neighbor?*” After giving the parable, Jesus asked, “‘So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?’ And he said, ‘He who showed mercy on him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘*Go and do likewise*’” (verses 36-37).

Is a sincere interest in caring for and serving others essential to the godly way of life?

“Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does,

whether he is slave or free” (Ephesians 6:7-8, NIV).

“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27; compare Matthew 20:25-28).

Jesus did not condemn receiving. But He stressed that a better blessing will come from giving than from receiving (Acts 20:35).

Notice these statements of Jesus to His disciples: “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). “And whoever gives one of these little ones only a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, assuredly, I say to you, he shall by no means lose his reward” (verse 42). “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods” (Matthew 24:45-47).

Giving and serving are simply putting God’s love into practice. Paul wrote: “For you, brethren, have been called to liberty [from being slaves to sin; Romans 6:20-22]; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).

Should our concern for others include those who dislike us?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:43-45).

Where does God reveal to us how to love others?

“For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Romans 13:9).

God’s commandments—His laws—define and explain love. By developing a deep desire to be a blessing to others—whether they love us or not—our understanding and appreciation for God’s commandments and laws will grow immensely “because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit . . .” (Romans 5:5).

ACCEPTING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

In terms of Christian morality, what are some of our fundamental responsibilities?

“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of

greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a man is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Ephesians 5:3-5, NIV; compare Colossians 3:5-10).

“But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband” (1 Corinthians 7:2, NIV).

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral” (Hebrews 13:4, NIV).

God calls His people from all walks of life. No matter the nature or extent of our past sins, God forgives us when we repent and forsake them. To please God, however, we must continue to listen to and follow His instructions concerning what is acceptable behavior.

We need to guard against returning to the evil practices He condemns, to the sins Christ’s sacrifice has covered.

What should we do to avoid the immorality of the world around us?

“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

“. . . Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:1-2; compare 1 Peter 4:3-5).

Our best defenses against the temptation to sin are (1) staying away from circumstances that are especially tempting and (2) keeping in close contact with God through prayer.

Paul said, “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who



Giving and serving are simply putting God’s love into practice.

sins sexually sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18, NIV). To recognize how to avoid being ensnared in sin we need God’s guidance through His Spirit. To receive that help follow Jesus’ advice: “Watch [stay alert] and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). He also said, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation” (Luke 22:40).

Our attitude concerning whether we let sin become attractive to us is important. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Our attitudes, choices and behavior speak volumes about what we are and what we believe. They reveal whether we are sincere and genuine or fakes and charlatans.

Should we shun unbelievers to avoid sin?

“I [Jesus] do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one . . . As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:15, 18).

Jesus never instructed the members of His Church to totally withdraw from those who have not yet repented of their sins. As Paul explained: “I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler” (1 Corinthians 5:9-11, NIV).

We should choose our closest friends and companions from people whose influence will not lead us into sin because “evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33). But that should not prevent us from having good relationships with many people who have not yet been called by God.

Jesus Himself openly associated with people He knew were sinners. He never participated with them in their sins, but neither did He avoid them or consider it beneath Himself to associate with them. “Now it happened, as He was dining in Levi’s house, that many tax collectors and sinners also sat together with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many, and they followed Him. And when the scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with the tax collectors and sinners, they said to His disciples, ‘How is it that He eats and drinks with tax collectors and sinners?’ When Jesus heard it, He said to them, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance’” (Mark 2:15-17).

Remember that God’s Word tells us to “honor all people” (1 Peter 2:17). We can avoid situations that call for our participating with them in their sins without rejecting them as friends. We should always avoid being distant, unconcerned and impolite toward neighbors, relatives and associates who believe differently from the way we do. If they wish to associate with us socially

we should not discourage them, as long as they do not pressure us to compromise with God’s laws.

As a result of our considerate and respectful association with them it’s possible that our example may come to have an impact on their views and behavior (1 Corinthians 7:12-16; 1 Peter 3:1).

Should we pressure others to accept our beliefs?

“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6, NRSV).

“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15-16, NIV).

We must be careful to have respect for the feelings and convictions of others, even when we strongly disagree with them. We should not try to force them to accept our beliefs. Nor should we try to coerce them into hearing or accepting information they have not requested and have no desire to receive. Peter’s instruction is to answer them openly, honestly and politely when they ask us to explain our beliefs. As the Revised English Bible puts it: “Learn how best to respond to each person you meet” (Colossians 4:6).

We should honor their feelings and treat them with gentleness and respect. We should show them the same courtesy we would like to receive should we inquire about their beliefs. Remember, as has been explained in previous lessons, only God can call people and give them the understanding needed for repentance.

If our example and good behavior prompt them to inquire about our beliefs and way of life, we should answer their questions appropriately. But we should never be rude or pressure them to listen to more than they want to hear. There is a wise old saying: A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still. This is generally true. We need to be an *example* of God’s ways and character. If people respect our example, they may inquire about why we live as we do. Then we can answer them—within the limits of their interest.

LIVING AS LIGHTS IN THE WORLD

Paul tells us, “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain” (Philippians 2:14-16). God expects us to be examples to the people of the world.

What else did Christ say about our example to others?

“You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp

and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

We have a responsibility to display the fruit of God’s Spirit and His love toward others through our behavior and example.

Should our desire to be a good example affect the way we dress?

“I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works” (1 Timothy 2:8-10).

“Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel—rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God” (1 Peter 3:3-4).

Dressing and grooming ourselves modestly in styles that show we have a genuine sense of propriety and moderation are important to God. We should avoid extremes that draw undue attention to ourselves or that label us as strange.

Equally important is our attitude—the way we think about ourselves and how sensitive we are to the sensitivities of others. When our thinking is moral and considerate of others—when it reflects the mind of Christ (Philippians 2:5)—it will normally be mirrored in the choices we make in our grooming and behavior. These choices generally tell much about our character.

We need to reach a balance. We need to dress and groom ourselves suitably, appropriate for the occasion, without going to the extreme of drawing excessive attention to ourselves. The main point is that our attire and demeanor should always be honorable and respectable.

What should most distinguish us from the rest of this world?

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4).

“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

“And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit [that] He has given us” (1 John 3:24).

Our lives should be examples of obedience to all of God’s Word in a loving manner that reflects the Spirit of God dwelling in us.

How does Jesus expect His Church to relate to the rest of the world?

“As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:18).

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you . . .” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Besides setting the example of how God wants people to live, the Church must be actively teaching and explaining God’s ways to those who are willing to listen. The public spreading of the gospel is usually the responsibility of individuals ordained and specially trained to effectively communicate Christ’s message to public audiences.

Paul, for example, asked members of the church in Ephesus to request God’s assistance “with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit . . . that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:18-20). Paul had a very visible public ministry, but he also treasured and solicited the



Those who have God’s Spirit working in them are eager to be examples of God’s way of life and to do their part in helping send the true gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples.

Church brethren’s prayers and support. In this way they worked together to accomplish the mission God has given His Church.

Today the members of God’s Church are no different. Those who have God’s Spirit working in them are eager to be examples of God’s way of life and to do their part in helping send the true gospel of Jesus Christ to all peoples.

Does God take special notice of His servants who take the time to communicate and work together?

“Then those who revered the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD took note and listened, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the LORD and thought on his name. They shall be mine, says the LORD

of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. Then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him” (Malachi 3:16-18, NRSV).

Meeting with others of like mind is important. The United Church of God, an International Association, has hundreds of congregations throughout the world that are dedicated to serving God and doing His work. If you would like to visit with one of our ministers, please contact our nearest office below or visit our Web site at www.ucg.org.

At the time we receive God’s Spirit, through the ceremony of baptism, we become Christ’s. From that time forward God has high expectations of us as His children. He expects us to sincerely and enthusiastically follow His way of life as lights in the world.

TO EXPAND YOUR UNDERSTANDING

To better understand the points covered in this lesson, be sure to request the following free booklets:

- *Life’s Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?*
- *Creation or Evolution: Does It Really Matter What You Believe?*
- *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest.*
- *The Church Jesus Built.*
- *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind.*
- *You Can Have Living Faith.*
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- *Making Life Work.*
- *Preaching the Gospel, Preparing a People: This Is the United Church of God.*

For your free booklets contact our office in your country, or the country nearest you, listed below, or access our Web site at www.gnmagazine.org.

Points to Ponder

The following questions are intended as a study aid, to spur further thought on the concepts discussed in this lesson and help you apply them personally. We suggest you take the time to write out your answers to the questions and compare them to the scriptures given. Please feel free to write us with any comments or suggestions, including questions about the course or this lesson.

- Is it possible to worship God the Father and Jesus Christ in vain? (Matthew 7:21-23; 15:7-9).
- Do the Scriptures describe Christianity as a way of life? (Acts 9:1-2; 18:26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).
- Does following God’s way require *doing* God’s will? (Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23).
- What are some foundational principles that make God’s way different from this world’s selfish way? (Philippians 2:3-5; Matthew 6:33; Luke 10:25-28; 1 John 5:3).
- How does the Bible teach us to treat God and our fellowman? (Matthew 22:37-39; Colossians 3:18-22).
- How should we practice two-way communication with God? (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; 1 John 5:14; Proverbs 15:29; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:15-17; Acts 17:11; Romans 10:14).
- What day of the week do those who follow God’s way observe to show honor to their Creator and learn more from Him? (Exodus 20:8-11; Hebrews 10:24-25).
- What is living faith? (James 1:22-25; 2:19-20).
- How should Christians view their trials? (1 Peter 4:12-14; James 1:2-4).
- How should Christians show love to neighbors and even enemies? (James 1:27; Acts 20:35; Matthew 5:43-45; Romans 13:9).
- What example of Christian responsibility does God expect us to set, and how will that example affect those around us? (Ephesians 5:3-5; Matthew 5:14-16; 1 Peter 3:15-16).

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