



Widows Harvest MINISTRIES

In All Things Give Thanks to Our Heavenly Father In Christ Jesus Name | END-OF-THE-YEAR UPDATE 2020

Merry Christmas!

Dear Friends and Supporters:

SO, WHAT'S NEXT?

Maybe this question has crossed your minds given what is going on these days since the Covid-19 virus first hit our shores.

The only answer that I can come up with is this: that it shouldn't matter. As Christ's betrothed, we know our citizenship is now in heaven where we are already seated with him in a heavenly realm. We are now strangers and aliens here, Ambassadors in chains, if you will. And whatever time remains for us as we race towards the finish line, our singular purpose is to demonstrate our love for God with all our hearts, minds and souls and to love our neighbors as ourselves" through offerings of thanksgiving in all things (Ephesians 5:20, I Thes. 5:18) and "as we have opportunity to do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10). Our purpose has always been one of a servant, to serve and not be served and to think more highly of others than we do ourselves.



Widows Harvest Africa Kenyan Widows' Heart's Singing With Joy

OUR PURPOSE DRIVEN WIDOWS

As many of you may know since the first Covid-19 lockdown our widows have not been able to meet in person for their weekly Bible study and widow's prayer time. Instead, they now meet weekly via a telephone conference call, but their prayer focus remains the same: to pray for the church, Christ's bride, to be the "pure and undefiled bride" that God desires her to be. Our widows have come to truly understand the priority of their citizenship in heaven in their daily lives. That Jesus came to fulfill his father's will and not his or any other earthly being or institution.

OUR EXAMPLE

Jesus, by both his life's example as well as his own words, gave us an unmistakably precise model for living out our own lives through both word and deed in such a way that presents a clear and unobstructed reflection of him and all that we have come to believe awaits us.

A LITTLE YEAST

Perhaps though, what we say we believe and accept as the new covenant of grace that Jesus purchased with his own life, thus fulfilling the law and clothing all who accept his proposal of marriage in his righteousness, is not as much of a reality in our lives as we have convinced ourselves that it is. I can honestly confess that I am under no illusion that this is not as true in my own life as I desire it to be. Especially when I read the book of Galatians. No matter how well I think I have been able to convince myself that I really understand grace and therefore reflect grace outwardly, I have come to realize how susceptible I am to deception. That it only takes a little yeast to leaven a whole batch of dough (Gal. 5:9).

GRACE VS. THE LAW

Paul, in addressing a conflict that has arisen in the Galatian church with those Jewish converts who still insist that in order for a man to fully achieve kingdom citizenship he must also be circumcised, reveals those areas that we would likewise try and legislate with our fellow man in areas that might equally indict us as Christians for being guilty of the same. Beginning with Galatians 5:1- Paul, using the confusion over the issue of whether or not men needed to be circumcised is a message that actually should convey to us the much larger truth about grace vs. the law.

ENDURING FREEDOM

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (actual and complete freedom as opposed to limited and weak promises of freedom). Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery (slavery under law).

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor un-circumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you to keep you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you..."

5:13-26... "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. **For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."** If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other (a house divided against itself will fall). So I say, walk in the Spirit (Grace), and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit (Grace), and the Spirit (Grace) is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit (Grace), you are not under the law.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit (Grace) is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit (Grace), let us keep in step with the Spirit (Grace). Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other."

WALKING IN THE SPIRIT MEANS WALKING IN GRACE

Just as an aside, the reason I included "Grace" in parenthesis every place where Paul writes about the "Spirit" is simple, it is meant to remind us that we have God's Spirit, we have been sealed in Christ in the promised Spirit because of Grace. The Spirit is irrefutable proof that we are now under a new covenant of Grace and no longer held captive by the old covenant under the law. "By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear" (Heb. 8:13). The question we have to ask ourselves, though, is whether the proof of God's grace is being accurately reflected by us to both the unbelieving as well as the believing world around us?

According to the standard that Paul presents in Galatians using the conflict that arose over circumcision, warning them that if they allowed themselves to be circumcised Christ would be of no value to them. I fear that much of the church in America today has drawn a line in the sand no less significant, but perhaps far more destructive, because it not only seeks to legislate it's own form of circumcision on believers, but it also seeks to legislate it on those who have no belief in Christ. Thus, making Christ of no value to both us, and unbelievers.

TWICE AS MUCH A CHILD OF HELL

In the "Sermon on the Mount" Jesus makes a somewhat puzzling statement that I really struggled with for years to try and understand. It's found in Matthew 23:15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are." The most common interpretation I have always heard that Jesus meant by this is that the Jewish faith was based on works to achieve salvation. Yet, how can they be a convert but by doing so become twice as much a child of hell as the ones who converted them?

ARRIVING AT AN ANSWER

In that it took me a long time to arrive at an answer that made more sense than just "works based salvation," which has also generally become a standard argument against almost everything about our faith that isn't evangelism. Having said that, I am not certain I will be able to say this in such a way that won't be misunderstood, or not understood at all.

THE YEAST OF LEADERSHIP

Jesus tells his disciples a few verses before this that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat (they have authority), "So you be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach."

In-other-words, Jesus is saying that these leaders have both authority as well as truth, but they themselves do not reflect the truth they preach through their own life's actions. Unfortunately, as Paul explains in Galatians that it only takes a little bit of yeast to leaven the whole lump of dough. Jesus, himself, even uses this same analogy when he warns his disciples to beware of the "yeast of the Pharisees." He was telling them to beware of the power of influence their teachings had on those entrusted to their care.

DECEPTION IN CONVERSION

So what does this have to do with making new converts twice as much a child of hell as they are? It has to do with what these converts were actually being converted to. They, of course, thought they were being converted to faith in the one true God, but what they were actually being converted to was faithfulness to a system that only claimed to worship the one true God, but in practice had become the actual object of its own worship. As new converts they would have been indoctrinated into what is required in order to be a good and faithful member in good standing. Jesus had another way of putting this, though, in Mat. 23:4 "They (the Pharisees and teachers of the law) tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them."

The subtleties of deception go way beyond just making converts twice a child of hell as those who have led them to faith, it will ultimately lead to "the abomination of desolation standing where it does not belong" (Mark 13:14). Not at the doorstep of the church, but standing inside the church and from there spilling out into the world around it.

Perhaps, what might be better understood is to put it this way. We can have the right understanding and belief in Jesus for salvation, and at the same time the completely wrong understanding of Jesus for living out our salvation according to the life he modeled for us leading up to the sacrifice of his own life. Paul literally addresses the plausibility of this reality in II Cor. 11:4 after expressing his fear that the church will be deceived as Eve was by the serpent: "For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, ***you put up with it easily enough.***"

Paul is telling them that just because we have the right Jesus for salvation we can still have the wrong understanding of both the Holy Spirit and the life Jesus modeled for us, or any combination of these 3. And what should really terrify us is what he tells us about how easily we are willing to let ourselves be deceived when he says ***"you put up with it easily enough."***

TWO EDGED SWORD

Knowing the truth of salvation is a two edged sword. We know that salvation is a free gift. That salvation can't be earned, but can only be "received by grace through faith in Jesus, and this is not from ourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast," (Eph. 2:8-9). And at the same time, because we do know the truth, and we are faithfully presenting this truth through the spoken word in order to make more converts, we run the risk of excusing or justifying everything else we add to the free gift of salvation as being based on sound doctrine. Remember what Jesus said, though, in Mat. 15:7-9 "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'"

THE POWER OF LISTS

How many new converts, as part of their discipleship, are given a list (figuratively) of do's and don'ts? There is no malicious intent behind the list, of course. The list is meant to protect us as we grow in our relationship with Jesus. Things like don't hang out with those that might cause you to stumble, join a truth teaching church, faithfully attend and financially support your church, and the list goes on and on. On the one hand there is nothing wrong with "the list," because the intention is meant to give sound and wise advice. That is, until we take a closer look at the long-term effects of the list. Over time, what we have come to believe is a life centered in Christ, has actually become a life centered around Church, which we have also come to believe are one and the same.

OUR LIST CONTRASTED WITH CHRIST'S

But, what if this was the list that was handed to us when we first accepted Christ's proposal of marriage? A job description, if you will, to guide us in our new identity as citizens of heaven. Luke 12:22-34 "Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds. Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest? Consider how the wild flowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you – you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan (gentile) world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

RESOUNDING GONG

Imagine if our newfound faith was introduced to us with these instructions that are Christ's own instructions to his disciples and subsequently to all of us? Imagine if based on these instructions our discipleship going forward was both modeled for us by those whose care we have entrusted ourselves to as well as the messages they bring through their teachings: Faith expressing itself through the faithful fulfillment for what it means to love God with our heart, mind and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The key word here is "love."

I Cor. 13:1-3 "If we speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, we are only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If we have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if we have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, we are nothing. If we give all we possess to the poor and give over our bodies to hardship that we may boast, but do not have love, we gain nothing."

FINAL WORD

As we approach this season of the year to celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, I will end with one of his parables found in Matthew 18 beginning with verse 9. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'Have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'"

Amen.



Andy Mendonsa
Servant