

# The God of the Daily, Trivial, Menial, and Mundane

“I can’t wait to see what God does...”

How often I have heard and read those words, typically followed by “next Summer” or some other time in the future after someone gets accepted to some program or makes a major life decision. I do not think it is wise to parse people’s words and miss their meaning. Yet any time we say things so often they become cliches, we do well to think through them. This cliché, in particular, is one I want to dissect.

This is not because I do not find it normal or even healthy to live in anticipation of what God will do. Yet I feel strongly that the small world in which I am a part of typically undervalues what I call the daily, trivial, menial, and mundane. We long for the mission trips, the big job changes, the vacations, the holidays, the summer programs and events. And we can live in anticipation of these things to the detriment of where over 90% of God’s will is lived: in the day-to-day habits and actions that truly form who we are. To say it one way, that can be taken literally and figuratively, we exalt the wedding over the marriage.

Every Fall as I begin to see people get excited because they find out about their summer opportunities and “what God will do,” one thing I want to shout in response is, “Do not wait for God to start ‘doing’ in 8 months. He is working right now. It may be in something predictable or tedious, but he is working.”



In 2013 I got to serve on the staff of a summer ministry that teaches servant leadership to Christian teenagers called "Truth and Peace." Until I got married those were probably the greatest 17 days of my life—laughing, learning, singing and bonding with adults and amazing teenagers, living the abundant life. Later that summer I got to serve as the evangelist at Camp Hope in Southern Illinois, where I preached ten times in a week and evangelized and counseled many hurting teenagers. I was on Cloud Nine nearly all summer long.

Then it ended and daily life set back in. I'll never forget the Monday after the camp. I had to get my cholesterol checked because it had been high. I had a bunch of dirty laundry I brought home I had to do. I was hungry that night and, not having a car or a lot of money, I ate something out of a can for dinner. And then had to do dishes. To top it off I was still single and on three dating sites and when I got home and checked them, I had nothing happening on any of them.

Later that week I was at my small group Bible study. And I was

complaining to my church brothers and sisters about being single and longing to get married and how I missed Truth and Peace and camp. I kept using phrases like “God’s will” to describe the things I missed and the things I was looking forward to. And a lady in my church, after listening patiently for a while, asked, “Gowdy, what did you do this week?” I said, “I got my cholesterol checked. I did the laundry. I washed the dishes. I even did a Rosetta Stone Polish lesson but did it so badly I had to redo it.” And she said, “Gowdy, why can’t those things be God’s will for your life?”



I do not think I’ll ever get over that question. I tear up thinking about it. To the God who inspired a man to write that whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it for the glory of God, I think her question nails it. Even as a married person now I know that the vast majority of my life with Kayla is not vacations, nice dinners or holidays. It’s doing dishes so the other one doesn’t have to. It’s taking care of each other when we’re sick. It’s conversations about the best way to travel to South Carolina with a 5-month old. It’s often daily, trivial, menial and mundane.

I do not mean to imply that life is boring or dreadful. It is not, most of the time. The real point I want to make here is that when you see God's will in the daily, trivial, menial and mundane, they begin to have a purpose. And that keeps life in the non-events from being lifeless. I've even discovered there are a ton of menial tasks I actually enjoy doing if my daily focus on God is biblical. I love making a strategy of what to eat for the week, buying groceries and cooking. I love doing the Excel spreadsheets for my church's treasury. I love keeping on top of making sure Liam's bottles are clean and ready to be used again. When I am only focused on the big events, however, I find that I am extremely inclined to complain about the daily minutia. Which is exactly what the Israelites did after their vibrant worship service in response to the miraculous Red Sea parting when daily life struggles began.

Jesus likely worked in a carpentry shop for 30 years and did public ministry for only a few. If you were God, would you send the Savior of the world to Earth and let him spend 90% of his life doing blue collar work, and only 10% preaching, training disciples and healing the masses? Now, I get it in one sense: Jesus had to be 30 years old to teach with authority per his religious culture. But God could have directed that differently if he wanted. I think there is a lesson here in Jesus's teenage and young adult life and even in the biblical silence about it: Most of life is trivial, menial and mundane and not worth writing about. But it all still matters. Luke 2:52 captures those quiet years of Christ's life quite well—he kept growing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man. That is what happens in daily life far more than big events.



I am convinced that God cares just as much that you are thankful the second Tuesday in August as the fourth Thursday in November. He cares that we proclaim the resurrection as much on Labor Day as on Easter. And he cares that you are worshiping him just as much at 8 AM Monday morning as at 11 AM Sundays. God cares about it all. He told us to give thanks in all circumstances and to be content in all circumstances. Not just the summer ministries and the major holidays. Even when life is anything but exciting.

This July I will be moving from Chicago to Sesser, IL and starting a new pastoring job. My wife and I are ecstatic about it. Yet I can't wait to see what God is going to do today, as I sit here on my laptop in my Monday-to-Friday life, just as much as what he is going to do then. Because I have six weeks of time to glorify him in grocery shopping, Excel spreadsheets and washing baby bottles. And may we all glorify him in our daily, trivial, menial and mundane.

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# “Be Still, My Soul”

Most of my generation, especially those of us raised in church, will always love hymns. They will forever have a special, unique place in our heart. Many of us also love other genres of music, like Christian Contemporary, Southern Gospel, Country Gospel, or others forms of Christian music, but traditional hymns will always have a unique spot in our life. Recently my friend Gowdy Cannon had a March Madness hymn sing-off in which people could vote for their favorite hymn, and his carefully-chosen list which matched up some of the best-loved songs of the ages was featured. All were winners; excellent choices that have blessed the saints for decades or even centuries, and all deserved to be on that list.

I'd like to put another song on my list of great hymns. I'm not saying this particular song is the greatest ever. Much of that is certainly subjective, and I prefer to say that there are many wonderful songs that have ministered to the body of Christ, and have been the body's vehicle to give praise and worship to the Lord and that there is probably no way to pick the “best-ever.”

I would, however, like to add “Be Still, My Soul” to the list of all-time greats. The music is stellar; written by Jean Sibelius of Finland. It's actually a classical piece “Finlandia,” which is the national anthem of Finland, and tells the story of that European nation. A portion of the music was then utilized to create the hymn. The lyrics were written much earlier by Kathrina von Schlegel, and this is the only hymn she was ever known to have written.

It was translated into English by Jane Laurie Borthwick in 1855 into the version we commonly sing today. The music has

been used for other compositions, such as in Elisabeth Elliot's book *Through Gates of Splendor* about the five martyred missionaries in Ecuador "We rest on Thee, our Shield and Great Defender," and more recently by Gloria Gaither in "I Then Shall Live." The music, of an unsurpassed beauty, lends itself for many poetic compositions.

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My favorite arrangement of "Be Still, My Soul" is that of the group 2nd Chapter of Acts. Converted to Christ during the Jesus Movement, they sang some beautiful compositions, such as "O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus," "The Easter Song (Hear the Bells Ringing"; a song they wrote), and others. I have found their version of "Be Still, My Soul" to be one of my all-time favorite songs.

Unlike some hymns, which are sung in worship to the Lord (think of "How Great Thou Art"), or as testimony songs ("Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine") "Be Still My Soul" is sung to one's self as an exhortation, an encouragement, and a reminder of God's sovereignty and steadfast faithfulness.

Jane Laurie Borthwick's translation is powerful. I recommend you find yourself a good arrangement of the song; I'd recommend 2nd Chapter of Acts' version as I mentioned earlier, and listen to this beautiful hymn. Even more, find a copy of the lyrics and meditate on them.

*1. Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side;  
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;  
Leave to thy God to order and provide;  
In every change He faithful will remain.  
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly, Friend  
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

*2. Be still, my soul; thy God doth undertake  
To guide the future as He has the past.  
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake;*

*All now mysterious shall be bright at last.  
Be still, my soul; the waves and winds still know  
His voice who ruled them while He dwelt below.*

*3. Be still, my soul, though dearest friends depart  
And all is darkened in the vale of tears;  
Then shalt thou better know His love, His heart,  
Who comes to soothe thy sorrows and thy fears.  
Be still, my soul; thy Jesus can repay  
From His own fulness all He takes away.*

*4. Be still, my soul; the hour is hastening on  
When we shall be forever with the Lord,  
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,  
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.  
Be still, my soul; when change and tears are past,  
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.*

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Hymns are nutritious to the soul when we sing them and meditate on their message. The stability, the strength of the believer is found in our steadfast and sovereign God. Our soul can find its rest and peace only in Him. What a blessing to experience this, even in the midst of storms and severe trials! The song "Be Still, My Soul", both in biblically-based lyric and unsurpassed classical music, brings countless Christians assurance and hope. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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**Poles of Tension, Balance,**



# and Nuance: Making Sense of Things When it's Hard to Be Dogmatic

I recently wrote a [tribute here in RE0 to Brother Leroy Forlines](#). There are so many of us who learned so much from him, both by his teaching and possibly even more so from his example.

Mr. Forlines frequently talked about “poles of tension” in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, and probably beyond. This was to illustrate truths that often must be stated in more than one way in order to achieve balance. Mr. Forlines wrote in *The Quest for Truth*:

*Life is not always simple. The complication presented by sin, the shortage of time, money, ability, help, etc. limit what we can do. We cannot do everything we would like to do. Frequently, we need to look at a situation from several different angles, and then make a decision. We are pulled at from many directions. We experience tension. The best is not always possible. We have to prioritize in the light of reality. Proverbs 26:4,5 illustrate for us what I call: “the principle of tension and counterbalance.” The first verse reads, “Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou be like unto him.” The next verse reads, “Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit.”*

*One verse tells you to not answer a fool. The other verse tells you to answer a fool. Obviously, you cannot do both of these in every situation. If that be the case, how do you obey these two verses? What you have to do is to consider what the greatest risk is. If the greatest risk is that you will be like him, you do not answer him. If the greatest risk is that he will be wise in his own eyes, you*

*do answer him. It will not always be easy to decide which of these to do, but you must do one of them. It is a serious mistake to choose one of these and adopt it as your approach to every situation.*

*These verses help us develop an important principle of interpretation: There are some truths that cannot be set forth in one principle alone but must be set forth in two or more principles which counterbalance each other. Here we need tension. There is tension between the different sides or angles of truth. This tension is needed to keep balance. This principle of interpretation guides us in areas where we are dealing with what we might call general truth instead of absolute truth. As is illustrated in Proverbs 26:4 and 5, there is no absolute truth about whether and when to answer fools. This principle is similar to the principle, "There are two sides to the same coin," or "There are many facets of truth." I will call this principle of interpretation: the principle of tension and counterbalance.*

*It is important to remember that there are absolute truths such as the moral teachings of the Ten Commandments. These we must obey. But there are some areas of life for which we have general principles rather than absolute truths to guide us. In these cases, we are by the help of God to make wise choices.*

As Mr. Forlines suggests, the answer is to found in the remainder of each verse. To blindly and thoughtlessly respond as a fool does is to become as foolish as he. On the other hand (v.5) there will be times when you have to call a fool out, because otherwise he will be wise in his own eyes, and assume he is right. The context determines the response.

Balance is frequently the best and wisest way. Or, as my son David likes to say "nuance," to not simply take sides dogmatically. Avoiding extremes. We humans have a tendency to

gravitate to extremes, and not see nuance, or an even slightly moderated position. We attack our opponent mercilessly and allow no room for compromise. We fail to consider time, place, historical perspective, and heart attitude.

Sometimes balance is not the response, of course. The exclusivity of the gospel, for examples, requires a fixed position, because that's what the Scriptures state categorically. "There is no other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved," allows for no deviation. The law of gravity is fixed. Mathematical formulas like two plus two equal 4. But many, if not most, things in life do allow more than one point of view.

By way of illustration, there's an example I would like to share. I have long been intrigued by the phrase "a sinner saved by grace." In fact, one of my favorites of the Gaither songs carries that title.

*I'm just a sinner saved by grace  
When I stood condemned to death He took my place.  
Now I grow and breathe in freedom with each breath of life I  
take.  
I'm loved and forgiven, back with the living,  
I'm just a sinner saved by grace.*

A "sinner saved by grace." Some say we should not use that phrase, that if we are saved we are no longer a sinner, and that we are advocating license to sin by using it. I think we can legitimately use the phrase, as long as it's properly nuanced, and we aren't advocating continuing in sin while claiming grace. (See Romans 6)

1. There is a past and present perspective, or before and after. I was a lost sinner who has been saved by God's amazing grace. Before meeting Christ, I was without God and without hope (Ephesians 2). After I am His and He is mine.

2. Being a sinner saved by grace does not mean continuing in

sin. Absolutely not. At no time in this life am I perfect or sinless. But as a believer, I must, and do sin less.

3. Paul, the great Apostle, refers to himself in I Timothy 1:15 as the "chief of sinners." To me, Paul's referring to himself as the "chief of sinners," even though he is an apostle, church planter, and long-time believer. This shows that it isn't out of place when used properly and given nuance to refer to oneself as "a sinner saved by grace."

4. We are now saints, holy ones. A sinner saved by grace is a saint of God. Both are true. Poles of tension. I am not what I was, though I'm not yet what I long to be. A redeemed, saved sinner, reborn a saint, a child of God.

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James Gray was president of the Moody Bible Institute from 1904 until 1934. He wrote the hymn "Only a Sinner Saved by Grace." (Also may be known as, "Naught Have I Gotten by What I Received.") Gray wrote the lyrics and a member of the music faculty wrote the music. This hymn has been a great blessing in my life over the years:

*Naught have I gotten but what I received;  
Grace hath bestowed it since I have believed;  
Boasting excluded, pride I abase;  
I'm only a sinner saved by grace!*

*Only a sinner saved by grace!  
Only a sinner saved by grace!  
This is my story, to God be the glory,  
I'm only a sinner saved by grace!*

*Once I was foolish, and sin ruled my heart,  
Causing my footsteps from God to depart;  
Jesus hath found me, happy my case;  
I now am a sinner saved by grace!*

*Tears unavailing, no merit had I;  
Mercy had saved me, or else I must die;  
Sin had alarmed me, fearing God's face;  
But now I'm a sinner saved by grace!*

*Suffer a sinner whose heart overflows,  
Loving his Savior to tell what he knows;  
Once more to tell it, would I embrace—  
I'm only a sinner saved by grace!*

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Determining the truth in the most accurate way is vitally important. I'm thoroughly convinced that looking at all sides of an issue, striving for balance in matters that don't require a dogmatic, inflexible stance, and nuanced position is generally the best way to go.

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## **On the End of God's Leash**

We dog sat this weekend for some friends who were out of town for a funeral. We are not "pet people" though at least one of our boys wishes we were. I will quickly add that if we were to get a pet, it would be a dog. We are most definitely not cat people.

We had a blast watching this little creature. She was friendly, playful, and mostly easy to manage. (She decided that our dining room was her personal bathroom, but even that wasn't nearly as bad as it sounds.) The boys loved her and were sad to see her go when the family got back from their trip.

The things I will write from this point forward are not new.

They aren't breaking any new ground. I'm sure many others before me have made this point. Still, I felt like the reminder was important so I'm going to take a stab at it.

I woke up early one morning to take the dog for a walk. She had been inside all night and I was sure she needed to take care of business. I placed her collar and leash on her and out the door we went. Every time I walked her, she seemed overwhelmed by all the new smells and sounds so she had very little desire to answer nature's call. She nosed and sniffed around every plant, fence, rock, and tree. It was cold that morning and we had been outside for about 15 minutes with no luck as far as the necessities were concerned, so I decided to call it quits. I called to the dog. She ignored me and continued sniffing. I called again. She ignored me again. I gave her leash a gentle tug. She refused to budge. I tugged again, a little harder this time. She decidedly paid me no mind. She turned her little head in the opposite direction and made sure to disregard me.

This dog is small. I have no idea how much she weighs, but I'm guessing it's five pounds or less. I could be wrong about that but I'm probably not too far off in my guess. In other words, she is tiny and weak. I looked at her in all her stubbornness and I laughed. Did she actually think she could resist me? Did she really think she could hold her ground if I really wanted her to come with me? How absurd and foolish could she be to believe that she had any say in the matter at all? Long story short, we were back inside the warm house about two minutes later. We came to an agreement. I was a lot bigger and stronger than her and she had no choice but to obey. I was gentle with her, of course, but there was no doubting who was in charge. (I picked her up and carried her to the front yard and she got with the program from that point on.)

When I sat down that morning with my coffee, it struck me how often we behave like that dog in our relationship with God. God wants us to move, to take action, to do something He has

called us to do, and we grow stubborn. We sit. We resist. We turn our heads away from His voice and we pretend that we have any real power in the relationship. Now, I am a firm believer in free will. I wholeheartedly believe that God will allow us to dig in our heels and refuse His leading. I also believe that when we do this, that sometimes God moves matters in such a way as to make our defiance pointless. He moves us even when we do not move ourselves. He closes doors. He pushes us by sickness, loss of jobs, other transitions in our lives. He is usually far gentler than even I was with the dog, but He leaves no doubt that He is in charge.

The prophet Isaiah asks “who can frustrate” that which “the LORD of hosts has planned? Who can turn back on His stretched-out hand?” (Isaiah 14:27). Job questions how anyone could “restrain” the Lord. How anyone could ask Him, “What are You doing?” (Job 9:12). Mary, the mother of Christ, after being told about her upcoming pregnancy says, “He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart” (Luke 1:51). Who are we to say “no” to this God who moves mountains, who shakes the earth from its place, who speaks to the sun causing it to not shine? Ridiculously, foolishly, mind-numbingly stupidly, we say “no.” We pluck up our courage and we refuse to obey.

Yet, God is “slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness.” (Numbers 14:18; Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2.) Over and over, Scripture describes God as “slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.” That is not something we deserve and it is not a license to disobey or refuse. It is a testament to this great God we serve. He is patient even though we don’t deserve it. He is “abundant in lovingkindness.” That word, literally translated from the Hebrew means “covenant loyalty.” His love and kindness, His patience and mercy are based on His promises to us. Those promises are eternal. They are fixed forever. “He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep

of His hand.” (Psalm 95:7).

He can move us if He wants to. He can take that leash and he can pull us, with our feet dragging underneath us. Thankfully, He is gentler than that most of the time. Thankfully, He is patient and kind and He leads and guides more than he pushes and pulls.

I could have overpowered that little dog with virtually no effort, yet God’s dominance and power over me is infinitely greater. Incomprehensibly greater. Yet He is gentle and loving, patient and kind. I forget that too often, to my shame and frustration. I am thankful I was given a reminder this weekend while I waited for that dog to pee.

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## **“You Are That Man!” Accountability and Confrontation in Action**

There is a powerful story found in 2 Samuel 12 detailing the confrontation of King David by the prophet Nathan. I suggest you read it if you have not done so before. David had sinned. He had committed adultery and worse. Nathan tells him the story of a family with one special lamb that is taken away by a rich man. As Nathan relates the details, David becomes increasingly angrier with the rich man and his selfish and greedy behavior. At the conclusion of the story, Nathan asks David to offer his take on the story – his verdict. David wastes no time. He declares that the rich man is guilty and that he deserves to die. (He also needs to make restitution fourfold.) Nathan responds with some of the most powerful and damning words found in Scripture: “You are that man!”



Nathan handled this entire situation masterfully. He laid bare David's sin, his potential for excuses, and any conceivable defense. He confronted David boldly but with wisdom. He did not kick down the palace doors, get in David's face, and yell and scream. He did not point any fingers until it was necessary. We have a lot to learn from Nathan in how we confront fellow believers who are sinning.

Earlier this week, Gordy Cannon [wrote a wonderful piece](#) about biblical confrontation. I agree with his take completely. He outlines our responsibilities at every turn, using practical language. I cannot begin to add to what he wrote or to make it any clearer. What I would like to do today is to add some texture to the conversation. This is not necessarily biblical in the strictest sense, but I do think it holds to biblical teaching and examples. What I am going to relate to you today is a personal story – an anecdote from my life – that will hopefully help provide a practical approach to a situation that is difficult and complicated.

Right before I started my junior year at Welch College, my girlfriend broke up with me. It was quite possibly the most painful and traumatic experience of my life. I loved her. Even then, after only a year of dating, I was convinced we were going to marry. That break-up sent me into a downward spiral of self-pity and sadness. To put as fine a point on it as I can, that next school year was awful. I hated pretty much everything. I hated school. I hated (or seriously disliked) most of the people at school. I was miserable. I was angry. (Obviously, I handled the break-up with class, style, and maturity.) My grades plummeted. I skipped class, chapel, and all sorts of other things. I did the bare minimum, just enough to keep a passing grade in most of my classes. My older brother, fellow REO contributor Michael Lytle, was a graduating senior that year. He would make comments from time to time, trying to get me to stop being so lazy and wasteful with my time. Nothing worked. I was enjoying my anger and

slothfulness.

I have no idea how many people around me knew how miserable I was or how much I was slacking off my responsibilities. I doubt many people except those closest to me realized anything was amiss. I rebelled as quietly and as under-the-radar as I could. I was not depressed or hopeless. I was angry and that anger turned into apathy.

Back when I was in college at Welch, the graduates would give their "Senior Testimony" during chapel. The day my brother was scheduled, I made sure I attended. He did a great job. He was funny, sincere, and concise. (Too many seniors felt it was their duty to go on and on during their testimony.) During his testimony, he thanked me personally – for my "inspiring work ethic" or something very close to that. It got some good laughs, especially from those who knew me best. I laughed. I was to the point that I knew exactly what I was doing and I did not care anymore. However, those words stuck with me. They stuck with me every time someone I barely knew from college would come up to me and make a joke about that line. They stuck with me when some teachers did the same thing. I smiled. I laughed. Deep down, though, it was starting to cut. I had become a joke. I was a punch-line to a lot of people. When people saw me, many of them saw wasted potential. They saw laziness. That did not sit well with me anymore. My brother's words said in fun and with love, stopped feeling like a joke, and more like a subtle and incredibly wise form of confrontation. His words brought back to mind all the lessons I had learned from Scripture about hard work, excellence, and all those other defining attributes of a wise and godly person. I was not living up to any of those ideals.

Here is where things get a little tricky. I have no idea if my brother was going for confrontation when he made that joke in chapel. Maybe he was. Honestly, it does not really matter. It worked as the perfect form of accountability for me. Gentle rebukes were not working. Encouragement was not working.

Telling me to stop being lazy and go to class was not working. Making a joke about my work ethic in front of the entire school worked. It was a turning point for me. It was not the end of my laziness, anger, and misery, but it was the first moment of self-reflection and change. And don't feel too bad about the break-up. We got back together a year later and ended up getting married. We are still married – nearly 19 years later. [You can read more about that story here.](#)

Not to get too hung up on the particulars of this story, but I think there is a lot to learn from both Nathan the prophet and my brother...the prophet. When we live in a community of faith, we will need to confront sin. Scripture is very clear that we must approach these situations with humility, but I think the story of Nathan gives us another angle to our approach. We need to be wise. Blunt and in your face does not work with most people. Too much subtlety is useless. We have to walk a fine line with being direct and bold but not to the point where we burn the bridge before real confrontation even occurs. Obviously, this will take on a new form with each confrontation. That is where prayer and wisdom come into play. Literally, no one else in my life could have made that joke the way my brother did without it making me more angry and resentful. It was disarming coming from him. That is why it is of utmost importance for us to develop strong, intimate relationships with other believers. We need to truly know them to know what works if or when they stumble.

Take this for what it is worth, which might not be much. It is a very specific example from my life. It might not apply to anyone else's life but I am very grateful that it applied to mine. I am glad my brother has a great sense of humor and that he used to it to such a powerful effect on me. He was Nathan to my David. I was "that man" and I needed someone to hold me accountable. I hope we can do that for each other as we walk this road of faith together.

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# Church Discipline: The Form, The Attitude, The Reasoning, and The Goal

While I am positive the Bible runs counter to every culture in the world in many ways, it is how it is countercultural to America that most interests me as a citizen of this nation. Here at REO, we've written about many of them and one that I have not touched thus far due to how nasty its connotation can be is the issue of how churches deal with people caught in sin. What happens when the church finds out about a marital affair? Or a porn addiction? Or that someone has been lying habitually, or dealing with anger in sinful ways?

I realize that orthodox American Christian churches historically have messed up this aspect of theology and practice quite badly at times and that has caused the concept of church discipline to be treated as a profane term to be avoided both in speech and action. I add that I believe my current church in Chicago has actually done this quite well biblically speaking, thanks almost entirely to the other elders I have worked with. This doesn't change the fact that this issue is significantly misunderstood and poorly practiced in some Baptist and Evangelical churches, if practiced at all.

I fear churches avoid discipline for at minimum three reasons. First, people so often in recent church history have done this with so little grace and without reconciliation in mind that it conjures up images of gossiping, self-righteous church members and leaders and scarlet letters. Second, on the opposite end, some churches simply do not judge the behaviors of their membership. Either through a warped view of grace,

because of the fear of man, or a huge overlap of both, they never confront for any reason. These first two demonstrate how easy it is to live in extremes and not in the tension of balanced biblical interpretation and application—in this case, grace and truth[1. Which are not true opposites and need to work together, and that is basically the point of this whole article]. And third, the the current American church culture bends to segregating your church life and your personal life so that church is just a place to worship an hour a week and blend in and not a place to live in transparent, confessional community with other believers every day.

None of these things are remotely biblical.

Today I want to deal with it head on and with as much wisdom as I can. And as alluded to above, I do not come at this with mere head knowledge. I feel like I have been led by other men of God and have through the fire. By the grace of God we have come to understand this area of theology to some level. Having said that, while the best teaching and preaching involves illustrations and personal experiences, I will obviously be avoiding that today out of prudence and common sense. At least for the most part. A simple interpretation of a few Bible passages will be enough to start and these interpretations—and not my own war stories—will be most effective in helping others understand this topic. Jesus and Paul, the main source material for the NT for this topic, both speak very plainly about it.

With these two men in mind, here are four crucial aspects to confronting sin in the church, according to the inspired New Testament authorities:

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## **The Form: Four Steps of Increasing Severity**

In Matthew 18:15-18 Jesus gives a very basic and practical

model to follow when a fellow believer has sinned. First, confront them personally. If they do not listen, take another Christian with you. If that doesn't work, take it to the church. And then if they still do not listen then "treat them as an unbeliever (Gentile, pagan) or tax collector".

There is a lot to unpack there and some of it is open to interpretation but I'll try to be succinct. Disagreement here is welcomed below in the comment section (as well as disagreement with any part of this). The first two steps are pretty simple so I'll skip to the third one. Our church has interpreted "the church" as this being the step when the elders get involved. Not the whole church at large. Not only does the latter seem impractical in our culture, it is our aim to show as much grace and patience in keeping things private until absolutely necessary. I hasten to add here that my church does not practice these steps with a "one and done" approach, meaning we may have several conversations at each step with the person caught in sin, as we try to figure out the truth and how best to serve the person, either through discipline or counseling or something similar.

Once the fourth step comes, then there is no choice. If the offending person shows no willingness to repent or even to meet with the church to present their side, then the person is removed from membership and the church must be notified.

What exactly does it mean to "treat them as an unbeliever or a tax collector"? Well in some way I believe it means you consider them as someone who is not a Christian because they cannot be if they are living in unrepentant sin. Especially after being shown that much grace. That part seems pretty straightforward. And after that? Well, this is where it can get hairy and part of this discussion is affected by how we view certain passages on the topic. I once had a disagreement with another elder at my church about how to treat a person at the fourth step, as far as how to interact with them. Based on 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 I was adamant that this person needed to

be cut off and left to their own selfishness as punishment. No association with them would be biblical. Another elder more graciously advocated for trying to win them back through relationship, since that is what our church does with unbelievers. Isn't that the ultimate end to treating them as a pagan or tax collector? Could Paul and Jesus be in conflict here?

We discussed it for a long time. I admit the other elder was closer to the truth than I was but we both moved some towards the middle. We established that the way we would go about would be to try to maintain a relational connection if possible (in our experience people in stage four often do not want to have any communication with the church), but only to try to win them back with loving and graceful truth. Essentially by evangelizing them. But this does not mean we simply hang out with them as we would any other lost person just to be a friend. I share Jesus with the lost friends I have but not in an aggressive way every time we are together. Sometimes we just get together to watch a baseball game. I may work Jesus into the conversation, but it is not always the main point in the meeting. That is a crucial difference between a Step Four unbeliever and an unbeliever who has never been a part of the church. The former needs to be approached with restoration as the primary goal of the meeting. That is at least where my church landed.

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## **The Attitude: Humble Self-Awareness**

In Galatians 6:1, Paul makes it clear that when we confront someone in sin, no matter which step I would think, it has to be with humility. This can be shown through our word choices and the whole of our nonverbal communication, though I am sure what humility looks like will change from person to person. It obviously isn't weak or passive or apologetic in this context but it absolutely should communicate to the sinning party, "I

am not better than you. I could very easily be caught in sin just as you have been.” Self-righteousness has no place in church discipline. And it is my firm belief that if a Christian is living face down before God in worship, preaching the Gospel to themselves, and seeking forgiveness from God and others daily, then when it is time to confront, they will be able to practice Galatians 6:1 correctly. Isn't this what Jesus taught in Matthew 7:1-3 as well?

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### **The Reasoning: Protect the Body from Death**

Paul gives a significant amount of teaching on this topic in 1 Corinthians 5. But for this article, I want to zero in on one thing he teaches. We practice church discipline and are willing to put people out of membership for a reasonable end: if you do not take sin out of the church, it will spread throughout the church like gangrene in a diseased foot will go to the rest of the body. Amputation can absolutely be the most gracious thing to keep a body healthy. He uses the illustration of yeast in bread but the point is the same; the sin of one person can corrupt the whole church if not extracted. That is just the nature of sin and humanity. If a person sins without repentance and the church lets them stay, other members will be extremely inclined to fall into similar temptations. So by removing the unrepentant former member from the church community, you are actually doing something entirely gracious—you are protecting God's bride, who is supposed to be presented to him as radiant and without spot or wrinkle. This is of course primarily because the blood of Christ makes the church clean, but repentance keeps her clean. A lack of repentance, even by a single individual, can potentially ruin the whole body. Churches must be willing to seem ungracious to that one so that they are being gracious to all.



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## **The Goal: Reconciliation, Always**

Perhaps the biggest sin of Phariseeism is that its self-righteousness makes reconciliation impossible. No matter the teaching in the New Testament, I cannot help but comprehend this topic as one where reconciliation with the one caught in sin and the church as the goal of every step. There is no room in our churches for "You messed up so you don't belong here." Quite often in my experience, people do not say this to the sinning person's face; they just gossip them out of the church. Gossip is about as perpendicular to healthy confrontation, humility and reconciliation as it can be. And as such is listed with the worst sins in New Testament lists (Romans 1:29; 2 Corinthians 12:20).

Instead, we need to be actively seeking reconciliation and restoration with the person caught in sin. That is what Jesus was teaching by giving the steps he gave in Matthew. It seems obvious to me that just looking at those four verses (vs. 15-18) you can see grace being shown by giving the person numerous chances to repent and by giving their sin privacy. But by looking at the larger context of Matthew 18, it becomes even more obvious how essential it is to see the guilty person as someone to be forgiven if they repent. In 18:21-35, Jesus teaches that we forgive over and over and over precisely because God has forgiven us far more than we have been offended.

Additionally, I believe Paul dealt with the offending man from 1 Corinthians 5 in his second Corinthian letter and taught to welcome him back into fellowship. Now I must assume that the man had repented because I do not think you can have reconciliation without repentance. You can forgive without it, but reconciliation takes two people: A forgiving victim and a sorrowful offender. But the fact Paul advises to forgive and accept the man from 1 Corinthians 5 is powerful when you

consider how repulsive his sin was.

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Much more could be said on this topic but part of why REO exists is to foster discussion and not presume to present the final, authoritative word on subjects like these. So feedback even in the form of disagreement is welcomed below.

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## **Early Church Christianity in 2019 and Beyond**

If you have a problem, a simple online search will present you with an almost unlimited array of solutions. Most of these solutions will be of the quick and easy variety. We look for shortcuts to save us time and energy. We call these things “life hacks” or “cheat codes” or “quick-fix schemes.” I am definitely not against finding more efficient ways to handle my problems. There is a catch, though, as these schemes and hacks are often fraudulent or ineffective and they end up creating more problems than they solve.

It can be difficult to navigate a broken and sinful culture. Often, we feel our Christianity becomes more about what we do not do and whom we are not as opposed to what we do and who we are. Instead of presenting the positive side of our faith, we feel that we are constantly labeled by the negative side. (By positive, I am referring to being salt and light to the world. By negative, I am referring to sinful behaviors we rightly avoid.) Our faith is reduced to going to church and avoiding sins.

Obviously, that is not the life Jesus calls us to live. That is not the life the Scriptures exhort us to cultivate. As I stated earlier, we are called to be salt and light – things that preserve, flavor, and shine. So, how can we do that? Is there a cheat code to get from where we are to where we need to be? Yes and no. We have clear directions in Scripture to help us but we either overlook them or ignore them. This is not a quick-fix scheme, but these are all practical things each of us can do to make our Christian walk richer, deeper, and more impactful to the world around us.

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## **1. Love without hypocrisy.**

This is the foundational piece. Our love needs to be real and authentic. It cannot be reserved only for those that love us in return. We need to love and bless those that curse us – our enemies or those people who hate and mock us. We should be known for our love – love for the church and for everyone around us. Our love should keep us humble as we constantly strive to prioritize others. Our love should spur us to greater acts of service, kindness, and generosity – showing hospitality to all. Love should be our defining characteristic.

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## **2. Hate evil and cling to what is good.**

This is easier said than done but it is what we are called to do as believers. The two-part idea here is clear: It is not just about avoiding evil. Our lives should be characterized by good. Clinging brings to mind holding on for our lives. We are drowning people and we are clinging to the hand of our Master who walks on the waves.

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### **3. Be diligent and hard working in our service to the Lord.**

This is where it hits me the hardest. It is easy for me to work hard if it is something I love. It is not so easy to work hard if it is mundane and boring. Often, my job is mundane and boring. That should not matter. My work ethic should point to Christ. If it does not, then I am failing in one of the key Evangelism tools I have at my disposal.

I fail too often.

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### **4. Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice – even in difficult times.**

How often are we commanded to be filled with joy? To look pain, suffering, and loss in the eye and rejoice? Too many to count. We live with hope, unlike the world that has none. So even in times of great trial and loss, the hope that is in us should shine out the brighter.

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### **5. Be peacemakers.**

How easy is it to “hate” that person on the news (a person you do not even know) who is espousing some insane political/social/ethical stance with which you completely disagree? How easy is it to dismiss your neighbors who are boorish and loud? How easy is it to lose your temper when driving in horrible traffic, yelling at the drivers around you? These are not the actions of a person of peace – a child of peace. So far as it depends on us, we should be at peace with everyone. It is not a suggestion. It is a command.

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Bonus: We should be devoted to prayer. This one is self-explanatory. We all need to pray more often and more fervently.

For what it's worth, these are not my ideas. I did not come up with this list on my own. I repackaged the second half of Romans 12. We read that passage this Sunday morning in small group and it hit me hard. I have not been able to take my mind off of it all week. I figured God was keeping it in my mind for a reason so I decided to share it with the REO audience. Go read the passage yourself. There is much more I barely hinted at. If we start living this passage every day, everything would change. I am 100% sure of that. I do not live out this passage as I should. That changes now. Will you join me?

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## **How Firm a Foundation: A Tribute to the Seniors of Cofer's Chapel**

For the past three years, it has been our privilege – and a real joy – to work with the senior adults at Cofer's Chapel. From the days when there was the "50+" group, until more recent times when all the seniors became one fellowship, we have observed this special group of people. When we first joined Cofer's in 1999, Bro. Eugene Waddell, a former senior pastor of the church, as well as Foreign Missions Director, worked with them. For as long as we have known this congregation, many senior adults have labored in the church, into their 70s, 80s, and even 90s. One of our seniors, now

inactive, will celebrate her 100th birthday this month. Many have gone home to Heaven over the years.

As I thought about this group who love their Lord, their church, and each other, I'm reminded of the old hymn "How Firm a Foundation." How its truths comfort and assure us, taken as they are from Scripture. While one senior might walk every day, and seemingly have an inexhaustible supply of energy, another may be bent by age, chronic back pain, and have to walk with a cane or a walker. One may have a mind and memory as sharp as when he or she was 50, while another is retreating inexorably into the darkness of dementia. It's hard to understand. Yet, the Lord cares for each one and is at work in the life of every one of His children.

*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,  
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!  
What more can He say than to you He hath said—  
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

The foundation of the believer is the Word of God. He has spoken, and His word is true, His promises are sure. We who have fled to Him for refuge (trusted Him for salvation) are resting on a sure foundation.

*Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;  
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,  
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.*

Based on Isaiah 41:10, we are admonished not to fear nor be dismayed. He is our God, and He will do all for us. We are held securely in His mighty hand.

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;  
For I will be with thee thy trouble to bless,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

Isaiah 43 says when we pass through deep waters, they will not overflow us, and when we go through the fire we will not be burned. Sustaining grace through all of life. Cofer's seniors exemplify that every day.

*When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not harm thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*

This stanza pairs well with the previous one, with its reference to fiery trials. I love the line "my grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;"

*E'en down to old age all my people shall prove  
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love.  
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn  
Like lambs shall the still in my bosom be borne.*

This is the stanza that my heart bequeaths to our Cofer's seniors: Even in old age we prove His "sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love." Even though the hairs of our head turn white, He will still carry us like lambs in his bosom! Wow! (Isaiah 46:1-4) Psalms 71 and 92 both reference the strength and presence of a God who will not forsake us in old age, and can still make us fruitful. Seniors can serve! Do not make the mistake of writing them off. I have noticed, as one who's recently entered that group, that retirees tend to not be included or invited to minister as before, and that's a mistake, in my opinion. Knowledge, wisdom, sound judgment, and discernment generally characterize my age group better than younger groups. Obviously, we have to make adjustments, and can't do as much as we used to, but we can still contribute!

*The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose,  
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;  
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,  
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

The hope and mighty assurance for all of us, regardless of age.

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## **How are Good Works and Salvation Connected?**

People love the idea of earning stuff. There are trophies awarded in sports for winning a competition. Money earned by doing some sort of work. Students get a good grade for doing well on a test. The list goes on and on. Most of the time earning what you get is not wrong at all. In fact, much of the time it is good, right, and biblically-based. However, the mindset of needing to earn rewards explains why it is so hard to accept how salvation really works.

### **What All Christians Need to Accept**

As indicated, we didn't and don't earn Salvation. That's a very good thing because it would be impossible for any human to actually do so. It is equally true, however, that now that we have been saved, we should be compelled to do good works for the person and cause of Jesus. Scripture tells us that a faith that does not result in good works is dead (James 2:14-26).

### **Accepting What You've Already Accepted**

Sometimes this is a truth that is hard to really accept even for those of us who have already supposedly accepted it. Sometimes, if we are not careful, we who have known this truth for years can drift into backward ways of unbiblical thinking.



Biblical Christian thought goes against the natural way most of society thinks today in so many ones. This idea that we don't have to and can't earn this really good thing, this salvation, is just one of those things. Like so many other Christian counter-cultural thoughts, we will likely be struggling with this issue for the rest of our Christian lives.

Accepting the counter-cultural teaching of Scripture is something I have had trouble with in the past. Not just this particular truth, but many other biblical truths as well. If we are not careful and alert, unbiblical "spiritual" practices and ideas can become a lazy habit. For myself, sometimes along the road of the Christian life, while I thought I had fully accepted a truth, the Holy Spirit will lead me to take a long look at myself and show me that, no I hadn't actually and fully accepted it yet, just some of it and that that some of it needed to be revitalized and more fully rounded. This kind of spiritual growth is what happens on the lifelong climb of sanctification.

### **The Short Story of Salvation**

The whole need for human salvation in the first place started in the Garden of Eden. There was one particular tree there known as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This tree was exactly what its name implies. It embodied our free will to choose good or evil, to either willfully obey God or to willfully disobey Him. Adam and Eve, the first couple, chose evil, sin, disobedience of God's one rule. Therefore, through them all humanity from that day forward was sentenced to death, eternal death.

The entirety of the rest of the Old Testament is God's path toward the redemption of mankind through Jesus in the New Testament. We're talking His own beloved Son here – His only Son. God the Father sent His only Son to die for a people who

spat in His face and deserved exactly what they got. He did this so that we could be reunified with Him and have access to everlasting life (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-9). Doing what God did would be an unthinkable, mind-boggling sacrifice for any parent—and this was our Creator!

After he arose from the dead, Jesus went to heaven to intercede on our behalf before the Father. For our benefit, he left the Holy Spirit to guide His believers to the end. We did not deserve access to the Holy Spirit; He was freely given (Titus 3:4-5).

Yes, acceptance of this sacrifice of God's Son Jesus was and still is the **only** way for us to begin on that Holy Spirit-led path. As Romans 3:23 points out, all of us have sinned and therefore fall short of the glory of God. Because of this, we are completely unworthy to stand in the presence of God. Accepting the sacrifice of Jesus cleanses our sin and makes us able to stand in His presence. It is then that the Holy Spirit leads us up the road of salvation. It will prove to be an up and down road for us, with lots of hills and valleys, but thankfully His work on our behalf does not depend on our constant spiritual highs. His infinite love and grace have got our back.

### **The Final Answer**

Going back to that first question about the connection between good works and salvation, while the two are definitely connected, it's not like one might first assume. Salvation is nothing any human will ever earn by doing good. It was given to us. We were freely given the gift of salvation through the death of Jesus (Romans 6:23). With an authentic salvation experience, we are now bound for heaven, on the road of sanctification with the guidance of the Holy Spirit to the end of final glorification in the eternal presence of God. And how does that authentic salvation experience work? It is by fully

confessing complete and lifelong acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior in you're heart and through your mouth (Romans 10:8-9). That is how salvation comes about. Now we do our good works not to earn salvation, more salvation, or continued salvation, but because Christ saved us, because He commanded us to do so, because we love, honor, and praise Him for everything He has done for us and for humanity. Now we do so for the rewards awaiting us after this life with Jesus in eternity.

Now we obey His words and do our good works because He is truly our Lord today and forever (Luke 6:46).

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## **Reform the Line: Finding Purpose in Failure**

Whether it's due to upbringing, past influences, or sensibilities developed over the years, I do my best to keep my eyes and ears open to truth that can help shape me into something better. That is not meant to be a pat on the back. From an early age, I have been blessed to learn from much wiser people the importance of examining everything I consume – whether literature, music, or movies. I was taught that everything I take into my mind needs to be filtered through the light of God's truth and grace.

It is that context that sets the stage for so many of my most valuable lessons. I've written about a few of them for *Rambling Ever On* already which you can read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And while this particular moment of revelation was once again provided by Tolkien and his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, this time it was delivered through the film adaptation

by Peter Jackson. To make any sense of this story, I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes as I do my best to provide context, and that will require a bit of storytelling and ground laying on my part. I promise it has to be done for any of this to make sense.

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At the outset of *The Return of the King*, the third movie in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the people of Rohan are going to war against Mordor, the great evil of the world. Their spirits are high after a hard-fought battle at Helm's Deep. They had won the day through courage, determination, and the perfect timing of a wizard. The sun rose in the east and brought with it new life, new hope, and a complete routing of their enemy. Now, Gondor, their great ally to the southeast, has called for aid, and Rohan answers. The Rohirrim – the great cavalry of the Rohan people – rides to fight in the great war of their time. With them ride Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and hero of Helm's Deep, along with Legolas Greenleaf and Gimli son of Gloin, elf and dwarf warriors of renown. The odds are not good but with these mighty warriors at their side and a little luck, perhaps they will win the day again.

That is the scene that Peter Jackson's epic conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents to the audience. *The Return of the King* further stacks the deck against our heroes. On the eve of battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli make the difficult decision to seek another road to Gondor, leaving the Rohirrim to ride to battle alone. It is a huge blow to the morale of the soldiers. Aragorn had given them hope. His presence inspired renewed courage. Just like that, he was gone and with him, their courage. They lose hope and they openly question the wisdom of riding to war.

Théoden, King of Rohan, has lived a long and mostly unfulfilled life. For too long, he was an ineffective leader.

For too long, he sat by as his country and his people suffered. After Aragorn departs, one of Théoden's soldiers speaks aloud that which all others are thinking, "He (Aragorn) leaves because there is no hope...We cannot defeat the armies of Mordor." They know they cannot win this fight. It is at this moment of despair, that Théoden truly becomes the king he has always desired to be. He responds with such resolve that it calms the hearts of his soldiers and prepares them for what they must do. "No we cannot. But we will meet them in battle nonetheless." Théoden recognized the hopelessness of their situation, but he recognized something even more important: the absolute rightness of their task. The righteousness of it all. They would ride to war and die in war because it was the right thing to do.

In what is possibly the crowning cinematic achievement of the film, the Rohirrim arrive at the Fields of Pelennor, outside the walls of Gondor's capital city, Minas Tirith, to find a host of enemy warriors swarming as far as the eye can see. It is a veritable ocean of orcs, trolls, and other creatures of darkness and evil. Théoden calls to his troops. He rallies them with his chant of "Death!" They charge, building speed as they take arrow after arrow, and finally, triumphantly, they break through the line of terrified orcs. They completely turn the tide of the battle. They rally the armies of Gondor. They bring hope and courage to the free peoples of Middle Earth. The orcs flee in fear knowing that they cannot stand against the righteous fury of the Rohirrim. It is a beautiful sight.

It is then that the Rohirrim realize that Mordor is stronger than they realized and another army had been held in reserve: an army of oliphaunts (giant elephants) prepared to lay waste to anyone still on the battlefield. Hope turns sour and despair sets in again.

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It is easy to give up when faced with failure. It is not an

uncommon thing to give our best and watch it fall apart in front of our eyes. This inevitably leaves us feeling dejected and discouraged. We have all been there. We have poured our hearts into something so important and so precious, only to see it blow away in the cold winds of failure. I would wager that most of us have experienced this in some form or fashion. Many of us are experiencing it right now.

Life can feel unfair. Things go wrong – many times in ways that leave us broken. Often, it goes bad due to our own failings or flaws, though that is a separate conversation for another day. The failure I am discussing now is a different thing altogether. We can diligently live out our purpose and calling and still see it crumble at our feet. We can know, without a doubt, that we are doing the right thing and still be crushed by disappointment. We can do the righteous thing and receive suffering, loss, and even death as our reward.

Take the real-life story of Jim Elliot and the Ecuadorian missionaries. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint were brutally killed by warriors from the Waodani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. This occurred after months of trying to connect with the tribe. In fact, a few days before they were martyred, they had met with a small group from the tribe and were thrilled that God had finally opened this door. They had been led to the Waodani tribe. They knew the risks, as their correspondence and writings would later attest, but they also knew that if this was the will of God, they had only one choice: obey. By any human standard, their mission was a total failure.

Their friends and family were heartbroken when they received news of the attack. Instead of hating the Waodani tribe for what they did, some of the remaining family members, Jim's wife Elizabeth in particular, chose to continue the mission. In place of fear, anger, and hatred, they went back to the Waodani and showed them courage, peace, and the love of

Christ. Their ministry, and the memory of what the five young martyrs did change the Waodani people forever.

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That is the lesson *The Rohirrim*, King Théoden, and *The Return of the King* had for me on my most recent viewing. Mordor was too strong and too powerful to defeat. Théoden and his soldiers knew this. They had done the unthinkable and broken the line on their first, desperate charge. For a few brief and glorious moments, they thought they had turned the tide of the battle and won the day. To the east, the line of oliphaunts and the second army from Mordor shattered that dream. Once again, they were faced with the futility of their task. They rode to Gondor's aid knowing that death would be their only reward. But they rode nonetheless. Théoden, having already found his courage, sees the new army approaching and the fear it inspires in the eyes of his men, and he stands resolute. He quickly rallies his men and they respond as they have been trained to do from their youth. He yells the line that struck me with such force that I quietly gasped. "Reform the line! Reform the line!" The line reforms and the Rohirrim once again charge, courageously, hopelessly into the gaping maw of a much stronger army.

The outcome is irrelevant. They march because it is right. They march because it is the only honorable and noble choice left to them. I doubt we will be faced with such a choice – a life or death decision. But we are faced with difficulties throughout our lives. We serve in thankless and overlooked ministries. We sow the seed and never reap the harvest. Some of us deal with sickness and infirmity. Some of us deal with tragedy, more than it seems fair for one person to bear. We labor and sometimes, it feels in vain. That is our reality. We see this story play out in Scripture repeatedly. Moses not crossing into the Promised land. David not being allowed to build the Temple. Joseph and his continual setbacks and trials. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. All the martyrs

throughout the pages of Scripture.

My takeaway from all of this is pretty simple. God does not promise us an easy road. He does not guarantee success, by any earthly definition. His plan is greater than all of that. He requires but one thing: obedience. That is a lesson I need to hear often. I need to see results. I need to see the Lord move in my church in a mighty way, but at times, it feels as if we are dying a slow and prolonged death. All of this even though I am convinced we are doing exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Perhaps it is His good will to let us serve out our days and never see tangible results. Faced with that possibility, what are our options? Do we seek greener pastures? Do we compromise in hopes that it will benefit us in the long run? Or do we “reform the line” and do exactly what we believe the Lord has for us to do?

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Jim Elliot wrote this prior to his death, and though not as famous as his “He is no fool” quote, this speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, “Rest in this: it is His business to lead, command, impel, send, call or whatever you want to call it. It is your business to obey, follow, move, respond, or what have you. I may no longer depend on pleasant impulses to bring me before the Lord. I must rather respond to principles I know to be right, whether I feel them to be enjoyable or not.”

Failing is not enjoyable. Suffering is not enjoyable. Sometimes though, it is right and righteous. Sometimes, failure is exactly what is being asked of us. Théoden and the Rohirrim charge the new army and hope rekindles. The good guys win the day as Aragorn arrives at just the right moment with an army all his own. Théoden never sees that victory. In the midst of the battle, Théoden is mortally wounded and as he lies dying in the arms of his beloved niece, he is finally at peace. “I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company I shall



not now feel ashamed.” He did what was right, no matter the results. No matter the consequences. That is our calling. That is our purpose. Obey. To do the right thing no matter what. To “reform the line” as many times as it is necessary. This is no fairytale, where heroic deeds are rewarded with victory upon victory. We live in a broken and fallen world where oftentimes, God uses our brokenness and failures for His glory. We fail, but there is beauty and redemption in those failings if they flow from humble and obedient hearts.

As followers of the living God, we too will pass on from this life to the next and if we are faithful and obedient to our calling, we too will have nothing of which to be ashamed. No matter the earthly successes or failures of our lives, our ultimate reward is waiting for us in the arms of our Savior who will welcome us with the best words imaginable, “Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!”

***“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” – Jim Elliot***