

(Format Note: The #'s are to remind the speaker to advance his PowerPoint presentation).

Theme: Complete In Christ

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Lesson One. We Are Incomplete

Man is both body and soul, physical and spiritual, temporal and eternal. # Ecclesiastes 12:6-7; # Luke 16:19-20, 22-23

Both body and soul require food and drink to live. # "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants ... my soul thirsts" (Psalm 42:1-2).

What is soul food and drink? # Psalm 42:1-2A; # John 6:35, # 53-54; # 7:37-38.

It takes very little to satisfy our body's hunger and thirst. # 1 Timothy 6:7-8.

Life is primarily about satisfying our soul's hunger and thirst. # Matthew 6:25.

If our soul is satisfied we can be satisfied even if our body hungers and thirsts. # # Matthew 4:1-4; # Luke 23:33-34A.

If our soul hungers and thirsts we cannot be satisfied even if our body is satisfied. # Luke 6:25A; # 12:13 KJV, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." # If we remove the words in italics, words supplied by the translators but not in the original text, we have ... "for this the whole of man."

We are incomplete because our soul is starving for spiritual food and thirsting for spiritual drink and we trying to satisfy our spiritual hunger and thirst with things that leave us hungrier and thirstier than ever. What we are doing is the spiritual equivalent of drinking salt water to satisfy our physical thirst. # Ecclesiastes 6:7 # ("soul" "filled"). # "The soul has its hunger and thirst; these desires were built into man at creation ... Augustine said it perfectly: 'Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.' Just as it is normal for the deer to thirst after the water brooks, so it is natural for man to thirst after God. # He may not know that his thirst is for God, and he will probably try to satisfy that thirst with a substitute that will leave him with more thirst. But a thirst for God is what it is, just the same. God has put eternity in our hearts, and the temporal cannot satisfy" (Wiersbe).

We know something is missing. "We Americans have more to make life easy than any people who have ever lived. We live in the finest houses, wear the nicest clothes, and eat the best food that any generation has ever known; yet, at the same time, today we have more suicides, more divorces, more people in jail, more mental illnesses than any people of all time. For many people, life is a grim, desperate, unhappy affair" (Charles Allen).

We are trying to find what is missing. As Pascal put it, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end ... They will never take the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every man."

We are not finding what is missing. And by "we" I mean everyone, Christians and non-Christians alike! If we are being honest, we must admit that what was true of the children of God in Jeremiah's day is just as true of

the children of God in our day. # Namely, that "from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain" (Jeremiah 8:10).

This series of lessons is for the lost and the saved; for the young, middle-aged, and the old; for men and women; for red and yellow, black and white because God wants to complete us, whether we know it or not we want God to complete us, but few of us are letting Him complete us.

What does it mean to be complete in Christ? From just the passages we already referenced it means not being spiritually hungry, never being spiritually thirsty, being so spiritually satiated that from our innermost being flows rivers of living water, contentment, not worrying, blessedness, satisfaction, wholeness. From other passages it means fulfillment, joy, peace, the abundant life, etc.

Brethren, does the phrase "complete in Christ" accurately describe us? Is there a stark contrast between us and unbelievers or is it fair to say that when it comes to contentment, blessedness, satisfaction, wholeness, joy, peace, and the abundant life that most people couldn't find a dime's worth of difference between us and the world?

If we ask believers today how they are doing what kind of response do we typically get? "Well ..." What kind of answer should we get? Consider the following adaptation of Psalm 23.

How am I doing? The Lord is my shepherd! I will never want for anything. He richly provides me with spiritual food, water and rest. He restores my soul and then continues to guide me in the paths of righteousness. And He does these things, not because of who I am, but because of who He is. I deserve damnation. He has given me salvation!

How am I doing? Even when the paths of righteousness lead me through times of darkness and death, I fear no evil because God is with me. He is more powerful than all my foes and He is constantly watching over me. Such thoughts fill me with so much comfort that I never cower before my enemies but always glorify God in their presence.

How am I doing? God is so good to me and He loves me so much that my cup overflows and it will remain this way for the rest of my life on earth and when I die I will go to heaven and be with my Lord forever.

How am I doing? Why do you have you ask? It's obvious in everything I say and do!

How many of us can sincerely say that ...

We have life and have it abundantly?

We are anxious for nothing because we have the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension?

We rejoice in the Lord always?

We do all things without grumbling?

For us to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Instead of letting the sun go down on our wrath, we pray for our enemies, saying "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing?"

We make some pretty lofty claims in the songs we sing. Are they really true of us?

"All that I need is You Jesus all that I need is You. From early in the morning to late at night all that I need is You."

"When I am dry You fill my cup. You are my all in all."

"I've got joy like a fountain."

"I want You more than gold or silver only You can satisfy."

"Content, whatever lot I see. Since 'tis God's hand that leadeth me."

"Now I walk redeemed and whole."

If we think we can sincerely say these things and sing these songs, is there anything we could lose that would stop us from doing so? Take a moment and imagine your worst nightmare. Would we respond like Job? Job 1:21-22; 2:10. Even Job had to work to perfect the application of his words. I strongly suspect we do too.

The genesis of this series of lessons was a great personal loss, several months of dissatisfaction, and the epiphany I had when I read and finally began to grasp the meaning of Colossians 2:10A.

Do we want what Stephen had? Acts 7:58A, 59-60.

The only thing that stands between us and having the peace of God that surpasses all understanding is us! We must consider our ways (Haggai 1:5-6), come to our senses (Luke 15:17), and be made complete in Christ (2 Corinthians 13:11A).

As I've studied this subject I've come to realize that being made complete in Christ is really not about us enjoying the abundant life. Rather, it is about us glorifying the God who wants to give us the abundant life. Enjoying the abundant life is not the end we seek, but a consequence of doing all to the glory of God.

So please don't think for a moment that this is a self-centered series of feel good lessons. I intend to demonstrate the seriousness of rejoicing in the Lord always; that it's a command, not an option; that its neglect will cost us our souls if we don't repent, to plea for us to once and for all start acting like people who have it all because we are children of the God who wants to fill all in all.

Having learned that we are incomplete, over the course of this week we will learn that our Heavenly Father wants to make us complete, three ways we are stopping Him from doing so, and what we must do so He can do as He desires.

If we are not complete in Christ, by the end of this series of lessons I hope we know it, have resolved to be it, have the tools to do it, and are on the way to becoming it.

Lesson Two. He Who Fills All In All

In Lesson One we learned that we are missing what everyone is seeking, namely contentment, blessedness, satisfaction, wholeness, fulfillment, joy, peace, the abundant life.

In Lesson One we also learned why and that's because we are not giving our soul the food and drink it needs before we can possibly be content, blessed, etc.

In Lesson 2 we are going to learn that there is no reason for any of us to deny our soul the spiritual food and drink for which it so desperately hungers and thirsts. While God won't force it on us, He wants to, can, and if allowed will give us all we truly need to be complete, lacking in nothing.

Consider six "P"s about God - He Who Fills All In All

1. His penchant. Psalm 34:8-10; Jeremiah 31:25 ("fill"); Colossians 1:28; 2:9-10A; Colossians 3:11. God wants to, can, and if allowed will # take souls that are dry and barren deserts and turn them into # lush and watered gardens.

A. Christians should be fully satisfied. John 4:13-14; Matthew 5:6. In the Greek, "satisfied" is "a very strong and graphic word, originally applied to the feeding and fattening of animals in a stall. In Revelation 19:21, it is used of the filling of the birds with the flesh of God's enemies. Also of the multitudes fed with the loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:20; Mark 8:8; Luke 9:17). It is manifestly appropriate here as expressing the complete satisfaction of spiritual hunger and thirst" (Vincent).

B. Christians should be utterly happy. John 15:11.

C. Christians should be completely at peace. 1 Peter 1:2B; 2 Thessalonians 3:16A. As used in these passages the word peace "describes perfect welfare, serenity, prosperity and happiness. The ... greeting ... does not only wish a man freedom from trouble; it wishes him everything which makes for his contentment and his good ... peace does not describe only the absence of war and strife; peace describes happiness and well-being of life" (Barclay).

2. His provision. Ephesians 4:10-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; etc.

3. His power. 2 Corinthians 9:8. God's power exceeds our:

- A. Weakness. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.
- B. Weariness. Isaiah 40:28-31.
- C. Poverty. Hebrews 13:5-6.
- D. Persecution. 2 Corinthians 7:4B.
- E. Anything! John 16:22; Philippians 4:11B-13!

4. His proof. Psalm 107:9. Examples:

- A. Abraham. Genesis 25:8A.
- B. The children of Israel in the wilderness. Deuteronomy 2:7; 33:23A.
- C. David. Psalm 63:5A.
- D. Mary. Luke 1:53A.
- E. The four thousand. Mark 8:4, 8.
- F. The apostles on the limited commission. Luke 22:35.
- G. The early disciples. Acts 13:52.
- H. The Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 1:4-5A, 7A.
- I. Paul. 2 Corinthians 6:10B.

5. His petition. Isaiah 55:1-2. # "'All things are ready,' Come to the feast! Come, for the table now is spread; ye famishing, ye weary, come, and thou shalt be richly fed."

6. Our portion. Psalm 73:25B; Psalm 73:26B. What is utterly amazing is that we are God's portion! Deuteronomy 32:9; Ephesians 1:23.

Lesson Three. The Emptiness Of Godlessness

In Lesson One we learned that we are incomplete because we are not giving our soul spiritual food and drink for the soul. In Lesson Two we learned that there is no reason for this since God is willing and able to give us all the soul food and drink we will ever need.

The world has a different answer. It says we don't need God. It says what we are missing is just more of what we already possess. "If I could just find the right person and get married, then I would be happy ... if I could just just find the right job, then I would be happy ... if I could just get a new house or a new car or a new boat ... if I could just get pregnant and have a baby ... if I could just have another baby ... if I could just lose weight ... if I could just quit my job and stay home with my kids ... if I could just afford retire ... if I could just move closer to family ... if I could just travel more ..."

Is the world right? Can we possibly be satisfied without God? It is a vital question all men need to carefully consider and which Solomon answers in Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:23.

In this section of scripture King Solomon, using all his unprecedented wisdom and wealth, did what # John Lennon asked us to do in his famous song and imagined there was no God, no heaven, no hell, no religion - just people living for today.

The result was anything but what John Lennon imagined. Instead of all the people living life in peace, # it was "vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, 'vanity of vanities! All is vanity'" (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

The Hebrew word translated "vanity" is hevel which means "emptiness, futility, vapor ... Whatever disappears quickly, leaves nothing behind and does not satisfy is hevel, vanity. One ... defined hevel as ... whatever is left after you break a soap bubble" (Warren Wiersbe).

Imagine waking up, getting ready for the day, walking out the door and immediately being back in bed. Now imagine endlessly repeating that same cycle over and over again. Would that be a fulfilling life? Certainly not. Why not? It would be purposeless effort! We would find no satisfaction in constantly getting ready for a day that never comes.

This well describes earthly life without God and the afterlife.

First, is ultimately purposeless. # Ecclesiastes 1:3-7

Second, it is ultimately unfulfilling. # Ecclesiastes 1:8

Just living for today, i.e. not living for God and the afterlife, makes life as futile as "the toil of dropping buckets into empty wells, and growing old in drawing nothing up" (William Cowper).

But many will say, "There is purpose in life without God and the afterlife! Look how much mankind has changed earthly life for the better!" Really?

First, has earthly life really changed? # Ecclesiastes 1:9-10

Obviously we have developed new ways of doing things, but Solomon is saying we have not developed any new things to do.

For example, regardless of whether we do it face to face, by smoke signals, drums, letters, telegraphs, telephones, or computer, we are just doing what we've always done and will always do, i.e. communicate. While perhaps not in the same way, the reality is that people today do what people have done since the Garden of Eden and what people will continue to do until the second coming of Christ.

"The only people who really think they have seen something new are those whose experience is limited or whose vision can't penetrate beneath the surface of things. Because something is recent in form, they think it is new in essence; they mistake novelty for originality" (Warren Wiersbe adapted).

Second, are we really more satisfied?

Solomon makes it clear that the novelty of doing old things new ways quickly wears off. # Ecclesiastes 1:11

Depressing? Absolutely, but God expects us to consider such things so we will understand that He and the afterlife are the only things that give earthly life purpose # Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

Third, Is the world really a better place? Frankly, no. # Ecclesiastes 1:15

The problem with new ways of doing old things is that they don't change the people who use them.

Consider technological change. In and of itself it is neither a blessing or a curse. That depends entirely on how it is used it and given today's headlines it is clearly not being used to make the world a better place. "A century ago, when the United States was starting to experience prosperity and expansion, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau warned that men were devising 'improved means to unimproved ends.' He should see our world today. We can send messages around the world in seconds, but do we have anything significant to say? We can transmit pictures even from the moon, but our TV screens are stained with violence, sex, cheap advertisement, and even cheaper entertainment" (Warren Wiersbe).

Yes, because of the efforts of past generations, people live longer than ever, but are they really better off for it? For most the answer is no. Why?

First, they have more time than ever to contemplate the purposelessness of earthly life without God and the afterlife.

Second, they have more time than ever to seek fulfillment in ways that leave them more and more dissatisfied.

Solomon confirmed these conclusions by looking at just living for today from every possible angle.

First, without God does the pursuit of earthly wisdom—the pride of life—ultimately fulfill? No! Ecclesiastes 1:16-18

Second, without God does the pursuit of earthly pleasures—the lust of the flesh—ultimately fulfill? No! # Ecclesiastes 2:1-2. "If you live for pleasure alone, enjoyment will decrease unless the intensity of the pleasure increases. Then you reach a point of diminishing returns when there is little or no enjoyment at all, only bondage. For example, the more the people drink, the less enjoyment they get out of it. This means they must have more drinks and stronger drinks in order to have pleasure; the sad result is desire without satisfaction. Instead of alcohol, substitute drugs, gambling, sex, money, fame, or any other pursuit, and the principal will hold true: when pleasure alone is the center of life, the result will ultimately be disappointment and emptiness" (Warren Weirsbe).

Third, without God does the pursuit of earthly possessions—the lust of the eyes—ultimately fulfill? No! # Ecclesiastes 2:4-11

Yes, there can be joy in the doing of great projects, but what happens when the task is finished?

Solomon found delight in all his labor (2:10); but afterward, when he considered all his works without a view to God and the afterlife, he saw only "vanity and vexation of spirit" (2:11).

The journey was a pleasure, but the destination brought pain. "Success is full of promise until men get it," said Henry Ward Beecher, "and then it is a last-year's nest from which the birds have flown."

Work alone without eternal purpose cannot satisfy the human heart, no matter how successful that work may be (Isaiah 55:2). This helps us to understand why many achievers are unhappy people. Ambrose Bierce called mere human achievement "the death of endeavor and the birth of disgust."

This is often the case. The overachiever is often a person who is trying to escape the futility of life by becoming a workaholic, and this only results in further disappointment. When workaholics retire, they often feel useless and sometimes die from lack of meaningful activity. Solomon tested life without God, and his heart said, "Vanity!" (Warren Wiersbe adapted).

Will anyone ever be able to exceed the scope of Solomon's experiment?

No! # Ecclesiastes 2:12

Yet most people, generation after generation and with far less resources, still endlessly conduct the same experiment stubbornly clinging to the utterly debunked idea that they will be fulfilled once they finally have more of what they already possess.

But isn't there some advantage to wisdom? Yes, but not enough to make life meaningful without God and the afterlife! # Ecclesiastes 2:13-15

But can't we make a positive and lasting difference for our descendants?

First, in just a few generations our descendants will not even remember who we were much less what we did so how much of a positive and lasting difference can we really expect to make? # Ecclesiastes 2:16-17

Second, the odds diminish with each successive generation. # Ecclesiastes 2:18-21

So, if there is no God or afterlife, what is the conclusion when all has been heard? # Ecclesiastes 2:22-23

But aren't any unbelievers fulfilled?

First, some unbelievers have not indulged in sin long or deeply enough to learn that it doesn't satisfy. Ultimately, however, they will.

Second, to whatever extent unbelievers are truly fulfilled it is because they are doing what God says without giving Him the glory.

In Ecclesiastes 2:24 Solomon switches gears and for the rest of the book shows us how life on earth is fulfilling if we abandon the vain imaginings of people like John Lennon and start living for God and the afterlife.

First, he assures us that life is not an exercise in futility. Why? Because there is a God and an afterlife and they make everything we do infinitely meaningful.

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26A

Ironically, even those who don't live for God and the afterlife serve a meaningful purpose for those who do but not for themselves. # Ecclesiastes 2:26B

Yes, earthly life is a cycle, but not the result of random and meaningless chance, but by the deliberate choice of God and it is purposeful in every respect.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11A

As boot camp is a carefully designed means to an end and essentially the same for all because everyone who wants to enter the military needs to complete the same basic training, so earthly life is a carefully designed means to an end and essentially the same for all because everyone who wants to enter heaven needs to successfully complete the same basic training. We are not in "a 'closed system' of endless monotonous cycles ... Christians live in this world as pilgrims, not prisoners, and therefore are joyful and confident" (Warren Wiersbe).

Second, he assures us we can't possibly be fulfilled unless we live for God and the afterlife.

Ecclesiastes 3:11B

For "yet so that man" the New American Standard Bible footnote supplies "without which man."

In other words, God made us so that we know in our heart of hearts that earthly life is absolutely meaningless without Him and the afterlife and that we cannot possibly be whole without them.

Psalm 63:1

"The world has inconsolable longing. It tries to satisfy the longing with scenic vacations, accomplishments of creativity, stunning cinematic productions, sexual exploits, sports extravaganzas, hallucinogenic drugs, ascetic rigors, managerial excellence, etc. But the longing remains. What does this mean? C. S. Lewis answers: 'If I

find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world" (Piper).

"The heart of the unbeliever, though it was created with a hunger for God, tries to satisfy itself with 'that which is not bread.' Jeremiah 2:13 says it most vividly: 'they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water'" (Warren Wiersbe).

If we imagine otherwise, Isaiah 29:8

"It is only as a man takes account of that which is over the sun as well as that which is under the sun that things under the sun are seen in their true light" (Morgan).

Third, he assures us that by God's grace we can and should rejoice in all circumstances of life. # Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

Fourth, he assures us that if we don't rejoice in all circumstances of life we will answer to God for our arrogant dissatisfaction. God has made everything appropriate in its time!

Ecclesiastes 3:14-15

The New King James Version translates the last phrase, "and God requires an account of what is past."

"Scholars have a difficult time agreeing on the translation of this phrase. It literally says 'God seeks what hurries along.' Solomon seems to say that time goes by swiftly and gets away from us; but God keeps track of it and will, at the end of time, call into account what we have done with time" (Warren Wiersbe).

Four Applications:

The world is wrong. If we are not fulfilled it because God is missing from our lives, either completely or because we are not fully living according to His will.

When it comes to fulfillment, we must take heed who we hear.

The world is desperately seeking satisfaction. Self-help books abound. Some can definitely help us understand and apply the wisdom of God, but if we aren't careful some can definitely lead us astray. Jeremiah 6:13-14

The fields are white unto harvest. People are desperately trying to fill the holes in their hearts with things that will never make them whole. The first three chapters of Ecclesiastes are excellent texts to use in personal evangelism. It speaks so directly to the longing of every human heart.

There should be a stark contrast between us and the fields. We must be complete in Christ so we can effectively help other people be complete in Christ. Matthew 5:14-16

Lesson Four. The Insatiableness Of Covetousness

In Lesson One we learned that we are incomplete.

In Lesson Two we learned that there is no reason for it – God can, wants to, and if we allow Him will fill all in all.

In Lesson Three we learned one reason why we are incomplete, namely because some people foolishly believe they can be complete without God.

Tonight in Lesson Four we will learn a second reason why we are incomplete, namely because of the insatiableness of covetousness.

When it comes to fulfillment, the formulas for unbelievers and believers are different, but the results are the same.

The unfulfilled unbeliever says, Everything - God. But what does that really equal? # Nothing! Think Matthew 16:26A. If unfulfilled unbelievers pictured the fulfilled life as a puzzle, # they would include every kind of piece but God # 8. But as we learned in Lesson 3, as long as God isn't in the picture, their life will never complete, something will always be missing.

The unfulfilled believer says, God (we know we need Him to be fulfilled) + Something (we think we need more than God to be fulfilled). But what does that really equal? # Still nothing! Think rich young ruler – Matthew 19:20B-22.

Why? Because whatever we think we need in addition to God to be satisfied will never fulfill us. Ecclesiastes 5:10; Jeremiah 2:13; Luke 12:15. Thus, if we need anything more than God we will always be incomplete.

"A study ... asked people how much money they thought they needed to be happy. Everyone, no matter what they made, thought they needed more. People who made \$20,000 thought \$30,000 would do it; folks at \$45,000 were convinced \$65,000 was the magic number, people at \$100,000 were sure \$200,000 was it. The only thing that changed was that as people's income grew, their magic number grew exponentially" (Ryan).

"The person who loves money cannot be satisfied no matter how much is in the bank account - because the human heart was made to be satisfied only by God (Ecclesiastes 3:11)" (Wiersbe).

This is not only true of money but of anyone or anything in which we seek satisfaction besides God. Consider physical beauty. "If I just this or that, then ..." Wrong! In "a book done by photographer Francis Scavullo ... he photographed the world's most beautiful women. There they were, page after page of breathtaking women, teamed with comments from the women themselves. Not one of them was satisfied with the way she looked. Everyone complained about something: their nose was too big, hair too thin, mouth too wide ..." (Ryan).

If unfulfilled believers pictured the fulfilled life as a puzzle, they would definitely see God as a piece of the fulfilled life. # But their life will never be complete because God is not a piece of the fulfilled life, # He is the only piece, the whole picture.

God's formula for satisfaction: God + Nothing = Everything. Think Colossians 2:10, "In Him you have been made complete."

What does the Bible call it when we desire to have more than God and what He provides in His time? COVETOUSNESS!

The Meaning Of Covetousness.

What is covetousness? The Greek word is pleonexia, a compound of pleon, more, and echo, to have. Thus, pleonexia is literally "a desire to have more" (W. E. Vine). Pleonexia usually refers "to the desire to have more, to seeking to possess what is not possessed" (Trench).

Is it always wrong to desire to have more? No.

When is it wrong to desire to have more?

First, it is wrong to desire to have more if we want more than God provides. Exodus 20:17; Ecclesiastes 9:9.

Second, it is wrong to desire to have more if we are dissatisfied until God provides more. Luke 3:14; Numbers 11:4-6, 10, 33-34 (lit. "the graves of greediness").

Third, it is wrong to desire to have more if we are dissatisfied when God provides more.

Pleonexia means greed, avarice, covetousness, insatiableness" (NIDNTT, emphasis mine).

Plato, in his commentary on this word, likened covetousness to trying to fill a bucket with a hole in the bottom. It's fulfillment ever sought but never found.

Covetousness is the 97th Ferengi Rule of Acquisition, "Enough ... is never enough."

The Scope Of Covetousness.

Colossians 3:5 is a regression analysis of sin: sexual immorality (fornication) - first mistake? No, before that impurity (uncleanness) - first mistake? No, before that passion (vs. self-control) - first mistake? No, before that evil desire - first mistake? No, before that greed (covetousness)!

Now consider a regression analysis of righteousness: abstinence but first purity (dressing for spiritual success - not provocatively; greeting one another with a holy kiss - letting kisses reveal the heart not hormones) but first self-control but first good desire but first contentment.

So the first step off the strait and narrow way is not desiring evil, but being discontented with good. This makes perfect sense. If we are contented with good we won't desire evil. We only desire evil if we first choose to be discontented with good.

We should now be able to see why the love of money or # greed or covetousness is literally described as a root of all the evils in 1 Timothy 6:10 - the KJV is not as far off as we imagined! It may or may not be the ONLY root of all the evils, but it is definitely A root of all the evils. Franky, I challenge anyone to name even one sin that isn't rooted in covetousness, i.e. discontentment with good.

We should now also be able to see why # covetousness is idolatry. Colossians 3:5.

Whether we realize it or not, if we are not satisfied with God and what He provides we are saying that someone or something can provide us what He can't.

Thus, we elevate that someone or something to the level of God and serve him, her, or it as if it were God.

God takes idolatry very, very seriously. Exodus 20:3, 5A.

Our pluses (G + S) are idols!

Application. So what is our plus? What do we foolishly think we need in addition to God to be complete?

There are many possibilities and we can certainly have more than one.

I recently found a book entitled "American Idols" which recognizes that Americans are idolaters even though they don't worship graven images.

The table of contents # is full of potential pluses: consumerism, naturalism, individualism, celebrity, instant gratification, humanism, experience, success, sensuality, sexual freedom, choice, appearance, comfort, money, and busyness.

My plus has been the approval of people. However, I have repented and I am trying hard to perfect the application of the following thought: "If I am trying my best and that's not enough for people, I am content because I know it's enough for God and that God is enough for me."

So what is your plus? # Remember the math: "Everything - God = Nothing," "God + Something = Nothing," "God + Nothing = Everything!"

Like the rich young ruler, we must do whatever it takes so nothing comes between us and being complete in Christ!

Lesson Five. The Faithlessness Of Hopelessness

In Lesson One we learned that we are incomplete.

In Lesson Two we learned that there was no reason for it—God can, wants to, and will if permitted (He won't force Himself on anyone), fill all in all.

In Lesson Three we learned one reason why we are incomplete is because some of us foolishly believe we can be complete without God.

In Lesson Four we learned a second reason why we are incomplete is because some of us foolishly believe we need something more than God to be complete.

Tonight we will learn a third reason why we are incomplete is because some of us foolishly believe that we can never be sure of our salvation.

If you are a faithful Christian and I asked you if you would go to heaven if you died right now, what would you say? Would you immediately and confidently answer "Absolutely!" or would you hesitate and doubtfully reply, "Well, I'm sure trying to get there"?

Many faithful Christians are incomplete, not because God is not enough for them, but because they are afraid that no matter what they do or how hard they try it will never be enough for God.

The path of true security lies between two falsehoods—# one is false hopefulness that says once we are saved we are secure no matter what, # and the other is false hopelessness that says once we are saved we are never secure no matter what.

It is my conviction that in our zeal to oppose false hopefulness that we have neglected to teach about true security and this has led some to accept false hopelessness and become miserable, give up, and/or fill the void with the very errors of false hopefulness we so rightly oppose.

I hope this lesson will help faithful Christians be as hopeful as they ought to be. I know I won't address every issue on this subject. It is an exceedingly broad topic with many meaty matters that must be carefully and prayerfully considered. But I do hope to say enough that those who are doing exactly what God wants them to do will finally start trusting in the promises of God.

Also, if you think I am saying something wrong, please tell me. Above all I want to understand and teach the truth on this matter.

1. What is hope?

According to the dictionary, hope is "a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen." Thus, Hope = Expectation + Desire. Illustrations:

When I was growing up, I didn't hope for spankings.

I don't hope for my hair to be dark and thick like it was when I was young.

I do hope to spend Christmas with my family in Texas.

2. For what should faithful Christians hope? Faithful Christians should hope - expect and desire - to be with Jesus in heaven.

3. How strong should faithful Christians' hope be?

Faithful Christians' hope should be fully assured (Hebrews 6:11), abounding (Romans 15:13), and continual (Psalm 71:14).

Faithful Christians should hope to such a degree that they: (REFERENCE ONLY)

1. Don't despair and are not disturbed. Psalm 42:5.
2. Have composed and quieted their souls in the face of adversity like a weaned child resting against his mother. Psalm 131:2-3.
3. Are comforted in affliction. Psalm 119:49-50A.
4. Patiently wait for the Lord. Psalm 130:5-8.
5. Are confident and boast of their hope. Hebrews 3:6.
6. Rejoice. Romans 12:12.
7. Are strong and courageous. Psalm 31:24.
8. Use great boldness in their speech. 2 Corinthians 3:12
9. Eagerly wait for its realization. Romans 8:25

4. If we are faithful Christians, how does our hope compare?

Faithful Christians should know they are going to heaven (1 John 5:13).

As one has said, faithful Christians must quit living like people who are trying to get to heaven and start living like people who have been promised heaven.

Or, as another put it, faithful Christians are not citizens of this world trying to make their way to heaven; rather, they are citizens of heaven trying to make their way through this world. They are to live as those on a journey home; a home they know will have the lights on and the door open and their Father waiting for them when they arrive.

Brethren, we can never be good enough to deserve heaven, but we can do enough to get to heaven.

To have the kind of hope God expects faithful Christians to have # we must understand why faithful Christians sin, what God expects them to do about it, and what He will do in response. In other words, we must understand the basis of a faithful Christian's hope.

I'll now attempt to provide such understanding by asking and answering a series of questions which lead to necessary inferences I believe we desperately need to draw.

1. Do righteous people sin? In other words, are people righteous because they live above sin?

Ecclesiastes 7:20.

If we are saved and trying not to sin (1 John 2:1) and "we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

Romans 3:23 is one of the most misquoted passages of scripture. It is not, "All have sinned, and have come short of the glory of God" (or something to that effect). Rather it is, "All have sinned" (past tense) "and fall short of the glory of God" (present tense).

2. Why do righteous people sin?

Righteous people do not sin because they have to sin. 1 Corinthians 10:13.

Righteous people do not sin defiantly. Otherwise, they would not be righteous. Hebrews 10:26-27, 29.

Righteous people do not sin because they are not trying hard to not sin, but because they are still ignorant and weak. Hebrews 5:1-3; Numbers 15:27-31; Ezekiel 45:18-20

When people first sin after they are saved does that mean they are no longer repentant, that they are no longer resolved to wholeheartedly turn away from sin to righteousness? It is possible, but highly unlikely. Rather, it almost certainly means they are trying very hard not to sin, but they still have a lot to learn and do before they completely lay aside the old self, are completely renewed in the spirit of their mind, and completely put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24).

What is true of righteous new converts is true of all righteous people. They are all trying very hard not to sin, but they still have a lot to learn and do. 1 Corinthians 8:2; Philippians 3:12.

Faithful Christians are not righteous because they are perfect, but because they are perfecting. The Colossians were faithful brethren (Colossians 1:2), chosen of God, holy and beloved (Colossians 3:12), yet they were still works in progress. Though they were seeking things above (Colossians 3:1), they still had things to set aside (Colossians 3:8-9) and things to put on (Colossians 3:10, 12-14).

The more I learn the word of God, the more I come to understand that the realm of evil works I must not do and the realm of good works I must do are far greater than I previously imagined.

Put another way, the more I study, the more I realize that the gap between what I do and what I must do to be holy just as God is holy is wider than I previously thought.

Practically applied, the standard for what we should do is what Jesus would do if He were in our place (1 Peter 1:14-16). At the end of any given day, how many of us can look back on it and honestly say that we did exactly what Jesus would have done?

The bar of righteousness is extremely high. Ephesians 3:14-19; Matthew 12:30-31; Galatians 5:19-23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; 16:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; etc. The demands of righteousness pervade every aspect of our lives – our words and deeds (Colossians 3:17) as well as our thoughts and intentions (Hebrews 4:12-13).

3. Can righteous people remain righteous? 2 Peter 1:4-7, 10; 1 John 1:7; 1 Kings 15:5; Psalm 25:7A; Psalm 73:22-24

4. What must righteous people do to remain righteous?

A. To remain righteous, righteous people must ...

1) Remain repentant. Romans 6:1-2, 6, 11; Psalm 19:12-14.

If we are repenting of sins of ignorance, we are gaining knowledge. The children of Israel were not "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6) because they did not know everything, but because they quit learning.

If we are repenting of sins of weakness, we are gaining strength. The church at Ephesus was not going to have its lampstand removed because its members were imperfect, but because they quit perfecting (Revelation 2:4-5).

If we are not repenting, sins of ignorance and weakness are sins of defiance that separate us from God!

But how do we know if we are gaining enough knowledge and strength to please God? That is not an appropriate question. What we must do is repent. We know whether or not we are repenting. If we are repenting then whatever amount of knowledge and strength we are gaining is enough to please God!

2) Confess their sins of ignorance and weakness. 1 John 1:9. Why? We can't repent of sins we don't admit we commit.

3) Ask God's forgiveness on a daily basis. Matthew 6:11-12.

B. If righteous people are doing these things, they maintain their relationship with God. This is the basis for scriptural security that lies between the false extremes of "once saved, always secure no matter what" and "once saved, always insecure no matter what."

C. If we say that doing these things is not enough for a righteous person to remain righteous, we either demand prayer at the expense of everything else, eliminate scriptural hope, water down sin, or speak where the Bible does not speak.

1) Unless we must have perfect knowledge to go to heaven, people who have been saved would have to constantly pray to remain saved for as soon as they ask forgiveness they immediately need to ask again because they are still sinning out of ignorance and even if they aren't they don't know it for sure (1 Corinthians 8:2) so constant prayer is the only means of security. This eliminates study, sleep, and anything else but prayer. This is just not the way the scriptures picture a righteous person's life.

2) This would eliminate hope because it would reduce salvation to a matter of time and chance, to the absolute need to die between the time we have asked forgiveness and the next time we sin regardless of any other consideration. I am in no way suggesting that God will overlook even a single unforgiven sin, but that He can and does forgive our sins by looking at the way we walk and not necessarily by a single step we take. Frankly, all fair minded people do the same and we'd be indignant if they didn't. To suggest that God cannot righteously handle sin in this manner is not a necessary inference. Frankly, it would more likely call His righteousness into question if He did handle sin in this manner.

3) To offer any real hope of salvation this would require lessening the demands of righteousness to a point where people could go "weeks without sinning." No, we don't have to sin, but the demands of righteousness are so high that we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us if we say we have no sin—everyone falls short of the glory of God! The model prayer is a daily necessity because as we daily need bread so we daily need forgiveness (Matthew 6:11-12).

4) Otherwise, to offer any real confidence of salvation this would require God to not allow an unforgiven child of God to die before they have had time to ask forgiveness. But, there is no book, chapter, and verse for this. We must be silent where the Bible is silent.

5) People absolutely think about these things in these ways and we absolutely need to talk about these issues!

But how do we avoid false hopefulness? Matthew 7:21-23.

To avoid false hopefulness, we must:

1. Do what we think we must to go to heaven, i.e. live in all good conscience before God and men. Acts 24:15-16.

2. Allow for the possibility that we may be wrong. 1 Corinthians 4:4.

3. Love truth above everything else. 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12.

4. Study the scriptures. Romans 15:4.

5. Pray for enlightenment. Ephesians 1:18A; Psalm 119:116B. The psalmist isn't suggesting God would ever let him-down. Rather, he doesn't want to discover that he only thought he had hope and end up like the people of Matthew 7:21-23.

6. Believe that if we seek as we ought, God will help us find as He has promised.

A. The true hope of heaven is the result of God's grace and mercy. 2 Thessalonians 2:16B; 1 Peter 1:3.

B. God wants to be found. He wants us to have a true hope of heaven! Jeremiah 29:11, 13-14A; Matthew 7:7-11.

7. Do not worry! Since worrying is an unproductive and counterproductive sin, we must not waste a moment of time or an ounce of energy being anxious.

8. Do thorough and honest self-examinations. 2 Corinthians 13:5.

A. If we pass the test we should move on and trust God.

B. If we fail the test we should obey the gospel plan of salvation and then move on and trust God.

APPLICATIONS: In this lesson we have learned everything faithful Christians can and must do to be secure and therefore not only desire to go to heaven but to fully and constantly expect to go to heaven.

If we are doing these things, it is enough.

If we are doing these things, when asked if we are going to heaven let us immediately and with all confidence say, "Absolutely!"

If we are doing these things, let us forsake false hopelessness and be complete in Christ.

Otherwise we are not questioning our faithfulness, but the faithfulness of God!

Lesson Six. The Beatific Blueprint

People without Christ and many people within Christ are incomplete. For a variety of reasons they have an unmet spiritual hunger and thirst that keeps them from the satisfaction, joy and peace they so desperately seek and God so desperately wants them to find.

With this lesson we begin the "how to" phase of our series of lessons. In other words, we will now begin exploring what we must do to be complete in Christ.

We'll have three such lessons each based on Matthew 5:3-12 where Jesus in these eight beatitudes describes people who are blessed, who have fullness of life, who have an inner joy that is untouchable by the outer world. That is why they are called the Beatitudes, because they reveal God's plan for man's "supreme blessedness" or "state of utmost bliss."

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

1. "Blessed are" tells us of God's desire.
2. "In spirit" tells us the nature of blessedness. It is a spiritual matter.

Contrary to the false teachings of health and wealth theologians, God does not satisfy us by fulfilling our temporal desires. Rather, he satisfies us by teaching us how to be fulfilled regardless of our external circumstances.

Wholeness is not about what happens out there, it's about how what happens in here. It is not about our position, but our disposition; not about our circumstances, but our character; not about what we have, but who we are.

Yes, it can definitely be humiliating to admit that we are responsible for our dissatisfaction, but it's liberating because it means we can learn how to rise above any circumstance and be content therein.

Someone once put it this way. "For you to have the gall to stand up there and suggest that ... no one can hurt me without my consent, and that I have chosen my own emotional life of being miserable – well, there was just no way I could buy into that. But I kept thinking about it. I really went inside myself and began to ask, 'Do I have the power to choose my response?' When I finally realized that I do have that power, when I swallowed that bitter pill and realized that I had chosen to be miserable, I also realized that I could choose not to be miserable. At that moment I stood up. I felt as though I was being let out of San Quentin. I wanted to yell to the whole world, 'I am free! I am let out of prison! No longer am I going to be controlled by the treatment of some person'" (S. R. Covey quoting a woman who attended one of his seminars).

Someone aptly described the bondage of victimhood thusly, "You will never be free until you free yourself from the prison of your own false thoughts" (anonymous). # Jesus is our get out of jail free card! John 8:31-32, 36.

3. "The poor" tells us that we can't be blessed without God.

Two Greek words are translated "poor" in the New Testament. One describes a person so poor he must earn his bread by daily labor. The other describes a person so poor he must resort to begging for a living. The former has nothing more than he absolutely needs, the latter has nothing at all. In Matthew 5:3 "poor" is the latter word.

Mankind is utterly destitute when it comes to fulfillment. We are ignorant (Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12; Isaiah 55:1-2, 7, 8-12), doomed (Romans 6:23A), and powerless (John 15:5).

4. "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven" tells us that if we want to be blessed we must choose to believe that Christ alone can fill our soul to overflowing.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED.

Paradoxically, to be happy we must first be sad. Ecclesiastes 7:3

To be blessed, we must take responsibility for and deeply grieve the consequences of our choosing not to trust in Jesus for blessedness. Namely, that we have been cursing God, other people, and ourselves.

Why? For then and only then will we repent and choose to trust Jesus for blessedness. 2 Corinthians 7:8-11.

"The original word for mourning indicates a sorrow that begins in the heart, takes possession of the whole person, and is outwardly manifested—too deep for concealment" (Thomas). "The Greek word translated 'mourned' means 'to mourn as for the dead'" (Wiersbe).

We must not merely nor primarily mourn how we've been denying ourselves blessedness, but how we have been cursing God and other people as well as ourselves.

Consider, for example, the curses of covetousness.

Covetousness curses God.

1. Covetousness is spiritual adultery. Imagine being married and having your wife tell you that she needs you, but since you don't completely satisfy her she is going to start having extramarital affairs. That's exactly how God feels when we tell Him, in our deeds if not in our words, "You are not enough for me." Ezekiel 16:28-30, 38; Jeremiah 5:7-9.

2. Covetousness reflects poorly on God.

"Unhappy religious people reflect poorly on their religion and their Creator ... unhappy religious people pose a real challenge to faith. If their faith is so impressive, what aren't these devoted adherents happy? There are only two possible reasons: either they are not practicing their faith correctly, or they are practicing their faith correctly and the religion is not conducive to happiness. Most outsiders assume the latter reason. Unhappy religious people should therefore think about how important being happy is – if not for themselves, then for the sake of their religion. Unhappy, let alone angry, religious people provide more persuasive arguments for atheism and secularism than do all the arguments of atheists" (Dennis Prager, *Happiness Is A Serious Problem*, 1998, p. 4).

The best thing parents of prodigal children can do for them is to be complete in Christ in spite of their unfaithfulness.

Brethren, completeness is not optional and it's not about us. It's a command (Philippians 3:1; 4:4) and it's about glorifying God and helping other people do the same. As Piper put it, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him" (Piper). Philippians 2:12-15.

Covetousness curses other people.

1. Covetousness takes advantage of other people. Micah 2:2; 2 Peter 2:3A; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6A.

2. Covetousness asks too much of people. Genesis 30:1-2; me and disciplining my kids; parents who won't let their children leave and cleave; etc.

3. Covetousness damages the effectiveness of our service to other people. "In general, people act more decently when they are happy ... Do you feel more positively disposed toward other people and do you want to treat other people better when you are happy or when you are unhappy" (Dennis Prager, *Happiness Is A Serious Problem*, 1998, p. 4).

4. Covetousness make other people miserable. "We owe it to our husband or wife, our fellow workers, our children, our friends, indeed to everyone who comes into our lives, to be as happy as we can be. This does not mean acting unreal, and it certainly does not mean refraining from honest and intimate expressions of our feelings to those closest to us. But it does mean that we owe it to others to work on our happiness. We do not enjoy being around others who are usually unhappy. Those who enter our lives feel the same way. Ask a child what it is like to grow up with an unhappy parent, or ask parents what pain they suffer if they have an unhappy child (of any age)" (Dennis Prager, *Happiness Is A Serious Problem*, 1998, pp. 3-4).

Covetousness curses us.

1. It makes us miserable. 1 Timothy 6:10. Frankly, it is miserable to be vulnerable to every ill wind that blows - to anger, bitterness, fear, insecurity, doubt, anxiety, depression, and the like.

2. It damns our soul. Ephesians 5:5-6.

As I said in our first lesson, this is not a self-centered series of feel good lessons. If we aren't rejoicing in the Lord always we are sinning, we should be deeply sorry, and we should whole-heartedly repent.

BLESSED ARE THE GENTLE, FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH.

We can believe that Christ alone can fill our soul to overflowing and deeply regret how our unhappiness curses God, other people, and ourselves, but we will never be satisfied until we do what God says we must to be complete in Christ. Isaiah 48:18A.

Gentleness or meekness is not weakness or timidity. Rather, it is harnessing power and that takes real strength. Proverbs 16:32. "If you think meek is weak, try being meek for a week."

If we want to be complete in Christ, we must:

Learn what He actually says and accept it. James 1:19-21.

Do it. James 1:22-25.

Not make excuses. Colossians 1:28-29; Philippians 4:11B-13.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE SATISFIED.

Admittedly it is one thing to start out on the road to blessedness, but another thing entirely to stay on the road until we get there. We can all travel this road, but it is not an easy journey nor is it quickly trod.

Change takes time. 2 Peter 2:14.

Change takes effort. "We must struggle to be happy. Happiness is a battle to be waged and not a feeling to be awaited. The notion that happiness must be constantly worked at comes as disconcerting news to many people. They assume that happiness is a feeling that results from good things that come to them. Thinking they have little control over how they feel or what happens to them, they conclude they have little control over their own happiness. Thankfully they are wrong. "Happiness is largely ... determined by us—through hard work (most particularly by controlling our nature) and through attaining wisdom (i.e. developing attitudes that enable us not to despair). Everything worthwhile in life is attained through hard work. Happiness is not an exception" (Dennis Prager, Happiness Is A Serious Problem, 1998, p. 5-6).

So, to hold out like start out we must want hunger and thirst after righteousness as intensely as people who are starving to death want food and as people who are dying of thirst want water.

By implication the fourth beatitude "lays down the main reason why so many Christians aren't blessed. They simply do not have enough desire to do what it takes to be happy. It is the experience of life that, if a man desires a thing sufficiently, he will get it. If he is prepared to bend every energy, to sacrifice everything, to toil with sufficient intensity, to wait with sufficient patience, to long for it as a drowning man yearns for a breath of fresh air, then he will succeed in getting that on which he has set his heart. The great barrier to our becoming fully blessed is our failure to desire it enough, our deep-rooted unwillingness to pay the price of it, our fundamental desire not to upset life, but to keep it as it is" (Barclay adapted).

Job 23:11-12.

1 Peter 3:10, 11; 2 Peter 3:14 (middle). "It is clear that ... peace is something of infinite value; and it is clear that its attainment on the human side is no easy task ... [It, tdn] must be intensely desired and strenuously

sought. So the NT uses three great words for man's part in the search for this peace ... The word for to seek ... means to make peace the object of all our endeavour. The word for to pursue ... means to hunt down as a hunter might. The word for to be zealous ... meant to seek for a thing with a burning enthusiasm ... peace ... does not come easily or automatically, but when we desire it with our whole hearts, when we seek it with our whole minds, when we strain every faculty to find and to maintain it, then God opens his hand and most abundantly gives" (Barclay).

Notice hunger and thirst after righteousness, not blessedness. Blessedness is not something we can directly seek for ourselves, It is something we indirectly find by seeking it for God and other people.

Since the road to blessedness takes time and effort, we must:

Trust God. Psalm 145:16, 19A; Psalm 145:15, 17.

Wholeheartedly repent. Isaiah 61:10.

Be patient.

It will get easier. 1 Peter 2:2-3.

It will work. Galatians 6:9. If we aren't seeing results, we must keep on keeping on. If after an extended period of time we still aren't see results, we should reexamine our understanding and application of God's will, but never doubt God or His plan.

Study. Romans 15:4

Pray. Psalm 90:14; John 16:24; 2 Corinthians 13:9B.

So what must we do in relation to God to be blessed? We must:

Believe in Jesus, not ourselves or anyone or anything else.

Sorrow our unhappiness unto wholehearted repentance.

Learn what we must actually do and do it.

Want righteousness more than food or drink.

Lesson Seven. Running Over With Agape Love

People without Christ and many people within Christ are incomplete. For a variety of reasons they have an unmet spiritual hunger and thirst that keeps them from the satisfaction, joy and peace they so desperately seek and God so desperately wants them to find.

In tonight's lesson we are continuing the "how to" phase of our series of lessons. Last night we began a three part series of lessons on the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 for in them Jesus reveals the blueprint for blessedness, fullness of life, inner joy that cannot be touched by the outer world.

So far we've learned that to be blessed ...

We must allow the kingdom or rule of heaven to rule over us. That can only happen if we fully appreciate how utterly incapable we are of being truly happy any other way.

We must be comforted from the curse of sin. That can only happen if we mourn our sins so deeply that we completely turn away from them.

We must use the earth as God intended. That can only happen if we completely relinquish our power over to the control of God.

We must have our deepest longings satisfied. That can only happen if we desire righteousness as desperately as people dying of hunger and thirst long for food and drink.

Tonight we will study the fifth beatitude ...

BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY

Mercy is vital to blessedness. Isaiah 58:10-11; John 13:3-5, 12-17

Agape love is vital to blessedness. Ephesians 3:17B-19

In the Beatitudes some vital aspects of blessedness are implied not specifically mentioned. As faith is implied in poverty of spirit and repentance is implied in mourning, so love is implied in mercy.

Love is the wellspring of mercy. Ephesians 2:4

Love and mercy are so connected that they are sometimes used interchangeably. Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42; 6:35-36; 10:27-29, 36-37

Why is love vital to blessedness?

Fred illustration. God made dogs to run with a pack and they are incomplete unless they do so.

Beaver illustration. God made beavers to work with water and wood and they are incomplete unless they do so.

God is love. 1 John 4:7-8. "God is love ... means more than God is loving; it means that love is of the essence of his being ... The statement 'God loves' ... might stand alongside other statements, such as 'God creates,' 'God rules,' 'God judges'; that is to say, it means that love is one of His activities. But to say 'God is love' implies that all His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of His nature, which is—to love" (Morris).

God made us in His image. Genesis 1:27. One way He did this was to make us to love and we are incomplete unless we do. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

If I asked you define the agape or love of God, could you do so confidently and without hesitation? We must if we ever hope to be fulfilled.

The agape of God is divine love that always chooses to fully want and do what's truly best.

The agape of God acts as described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. "Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love suffers well. It doesn't blow up, complain, get even, or give up. It knows these things are not best. Rather, it stays calm, finds the good in the bad, blesses, and gives up on anger not persons—divine or human.

Love responds to the suffering of other people well. It sees suffering, is emotionally touched by it, wants to ease it, and does so whenever possible.

Love does not allow zeal to run amuck. Ironically, instead of bringing people closer to God and one another, those with great zeal for God often produce strife, disorder, and every evil thing. Love wants the right things for the right reasons in the right ways no matter who gets them done.

Love only boasts about God. Love does not brag about what it does for other people in hopes of getting them to do for it. Love does not give to get. Love keeps no record of what it does right, any more than it keeps a record of what other people do wrong. Love does not see itself as doing other people favors. Rather, it sees itself as being favored because it is allowed to do for other people. Love knows that boasting is hurtful, not helpful; repulsive, not attractive. Love is content with the praise of God.

Love does not think more highly of itself than it ought. Love knows that it is only doing what God has enabled it to do and what it should be doing. Love knows that it's not too good, that it doesn't know it all, and that it always has service to render.

Love knows it is not only possible but essential to be right without being rude, graceless, tactless, or disrespectful. Love is courteous, gracious, tactful, respectful, mannerly and polite. Love knows that how something is said and done is just as important as what is said and done.

Love does not ask what's in people for it. Rather, it asks what's in it for people. Love understands the great paradox that the best thing it can do for itself is to lose itself in the service of God and other people.

Love is not irritable, easily ruffled, quick-tempered, or touchy. It does not get exasperated with people. It takes frustration in stride, accepting it as part of life.

Love always keep a record of the many kindnesses it receives, but never a record of wrongs done to it. Love does not nurse grudges.

Love finds no joy in the prospect, practice, or consequences of sin.

Love finds its greatest joy in the prospect, practice, and consequences of truth.

Love covers the faults of others as much as possible without encouraging sin. Love does not delight in exposing the sins of other people. Love agonizes over and condemns wickedness, but always yearns to protect people who fall. Some people find pleasure in telling or hearing about other people's shortcomings. Love finds no pleasure in either.

Love gives the benefit of the doubt. It assumes the best not the worst.

Love is an optimist not a pessimist. It looks on the bright side not the dark side of things. It focuses on the silver lining not the cloud. It expects the best not the worst. It does not take failure as the last word. Love always looks for something better. Love knows that God can do great things with anyone and does all it possibly can to encourage everyone to live up to their God-given potential.

Love never collapses, gives up, or fails—and not because it merely resigns itself to the necessity of putting up with life's hardships, but because it views problems positively—as valuable opportunities to grow and develop as it struggles against them and to prove the infinite worth of love.

Clearly, love isn't easy.

We must make radical changes. Matthew 9:16 (the second “patch” is “Lit. that which fills up” per NASB footnote). To love as God loves we can't merely patch up the old man. Rather, we must put the old man to death and we must build an entirely new man with new motives, thoughts, words, and deeds.

We must sacrifice everything. John 15:13.

We must love everyone. Matthew 5:43-48.

"Christian love is not something which simply happens; it is something which has to be sought, desired, pursued, something into which a man must pray and discipline himself. So far from being an automatic possession, it is the supreme achievement of life" (Barclay).

CONCLUSION:

The path to completeness is divine love. Acts 20:32-35.

Love isn't easy, but it's definitely worth the effort.

John Powell relates a story that's told about the apostle John. It is said that at the end of his long life he would sit for hours with his younger disciples gathered at his feet. One day one of his disciples complained: "John, you always talk about love, about God's love for us and about our love for one another. Why don't you tell us about something besides love?" John is said to have replied: "Because there is nothing else, just love ... love ... love."

Powell then concludes, "The agape of God is a long and hard road; it is an altar of sacrifice; it asks an enormous price in self-forgetfulness; it must seek nothing for itself. Love is the only way to our human destiny and to the feet of God, who is Love" (John Powell).

Lesson Eight. It's An Inside Job

BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD.

God sees things we can't see with our physical eyes or understand with our limited intelligence and finite perspective. 2 Kings 6:15-17; Isaiah 55:8-9

To be blessed, we must learn to see things as God sees them through the eyes of faith. Ephesians 1:18-19A.

To do this we must purify our hearts. Sin is like a spiritual cataract that keeps our hearts from seeing things as God sees them. Titus 1:15-16

BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS, FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF GOD.

Peace is a relationship word. It describes the way we should to relate to God, other human beings, and ourselves. Peace is not merely the absence of conflict. Eirene, the Greek word for peace, describes "the perfection of relationships ... It is far more than a negative state in which trouble has temporarily ceased. It describes ... welfare and security, perfect serenity and tranquility, a life and a state in which a man is perfectly related to his fellow-men and to his God" (Barclay).

In Galatians 5:22 "love, joy, peace" is not accidental for love produces joy or blessedness by building relationships.

Abraham Lincoln put it well, "The better part of one's life consists of his friendships."

James Dobson did too, "I have concluded that the accumulation of wealth, even if I could achieve it, is an insufficient reason for living. When I reach the end of my days, a moment or two from now, I must look backward on something more meaningful than the pursuit of houses and land and machines and stocks and bonds. Nor is fame of any lasting benefit. I will consider my earthly existence to have been wasted unless I can recall a loving family, a consistent investment in the lives of people, and an earnest attempt to serve the God who made me. Nothing else makes much sense."

Relationships that bless must be made and maintained, they just don't happen. The gospel supplies the plan and the power to make and maintain blessed relationships. Proverbs 16:7; Romans 12:18, 20-21.

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN PERSECUTED FOR THE SAKE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE INSULT YOU AND PERSECUTE YOU, AND FALSELY SAY ALL KINDS OF EVIL AGAINST YOU BECAUSE OF ME. REJOICE AND BE GLAD, FOR YOUR REWARD IN HEAVEN IS GREAT; FOR IN THE SAME WAY THEY PERSECUTED THE PROPHETS WHO WERE BEFORE YOU.

The word of God does not always make friends. Sometimes it makes enemies. 2 Timothy 3:12; Luke 6:26; John 16:33

So what must we do to make as much peace as possible in a world so full of sin?

First, we must trust that God knew what He was doing when He made the world the way He did. Ecclesiastes 3:1, 9-11; 7:14A.

But how can we possibly do that when there is so much evil in the world, when so many bad things happen to so many good people? Murders, rapes, child abuse, disease, war, famine, crime, divorce, death, pain, corruption, natural disasters and a host of other horrible things are common place. We hear of shootings at schools so regularly they barely register any more. Why does God allow it? Why didn't He do a better job creating us so these things don't happen? How can we possibly be blessed in such a cursed world?

"I would issue a challenge to those who feel that God should have created a better world: how would you design such a world? What would you do that would be different than what God has done? Someone will say, 'Well, I'd create a world with no war!' That is a marvelous idea, but how would you do it? Would you cause anyone who picked up a weapon to die? Would you cause anyone who thought a violent thought to drop dead? Would you destroy any religious or political system which in any way involved force to promote its ideology? Would you make men's minds so that they could not think a violent or destructive thought? I would suggest to you that to eliminate war, you would have to eliminate man's ability to plan, create, reason or advance!!! As long as man can dream, create, design and imagine, the potential for bad things to happen is there!!! Only if man becomes an android—like a robot or puppet, incapable of engaging in evil or advancing in good—can one conceptualize a world without the potential for war.

When one really gets down to basics, everything positive in our existence is dependent upon our ability to choose. Love is only possible because we have the choice of not loving. If there was no choice, love would be impossible. Doing something nice to someone only has meaning because we have the choice of not doing something nice. Giving only has meaning because we have the option of not giving. Every act we do consciously has meaning because we have the choice of not doing what God has told us to do. The admonition of work out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12) has special meaning because it is our choice as to whether we wish to follow God's plan or not.

At this point, another principle comes into play. In Galatians, we read, For every man shall bear his own burden....Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. The meaning of the passage is clear. If we jump off a bridge, we are going to hit the bottom. If someone pushes us off a bridge, we are still going to hit the bottom. One might say, 'Well, why doesn't God intervene in these cases? Why doesn't God catch the person who falls or jumps and prevent the damage from occurring?'

What kind of a world would it be if such a plan were in effect? It might sound beautiful at first glance, but if you keep thinking, you will see that the end result would be very negative. Any consequence of anything we did would be good. Nothing we ever did would be wrong or bad, and there would be no need of improvement. No building would be built so poorly that it would collapse because God would always repair the damage. No one would need to do a good job of flying or building a car because God would prevent all consequences. No marriage would be special and no one would need to make an effort to bring joy and beauty into someone else's life because any bad things that might happen would be prevented. No one would need to worry about fixing a meal properly because food poisoning or special needs would not exist. No doctor would need to worry about his competency or surgery because God would rectify all his mistakes. We would live in a boring, meaningless haze of indifference. In cultures that have become reasonably affluent and successful, that

attitude and climate has in fact developed. Many of our problems in the United States today and all our apathy and indifference in the Church is related to this very situation" (John Clayton).

Ecclesiastes 3:14.

Second, we must not confuse punishment with persecution. 1 Peter 4:14-16. "We must be careful to distinguish between persecution and punishment. We are punished by good men for doing evil, and we are persecuted by bad men for doing good. Peter knew the difference ... Sad to say, some believers do not know the difference between being offensive and 'the offense of the cross' (Galatians 5:11) ... If I get into trouble because I talk too much or because I meddle this is not persecution. If I am promoting my own cause and men reject me, this is not persecution. If I am arrogant and abusive in my attempt to witness for Christ, and people want nothing to do with me, this is not persecution. But if I seek to do His will and honor His name and I suffer, then this is persecution" (Wiersbe).

Third, we must look at things the way God wants us see them.

Ecclesiastes 3:16–12:14 teaches us how to see things from a divine perspective so that whatever our lot we may say it is well with our soul.

Brethren, we desperately need to study Ecclesiastes on a regular basis. It practically teaches us how, as one entitled his commentary on the book, to "Be Satisfied." It is the James of the Old Testament.

So how do we contentedly face ...

Injustice. Ecclesiastes 3:16-17

Rivalry. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Ingratitude. Hebrews 6:10

Hypocrisy. Ecclesiastes 5:1

Bureaucracy. Ecclesiastes 5:8-9

Poverty. Ecclesiastes 5:12

Riches. Ecclesiastes 6:7-9A

Death. Ecclesiastes 7:2

Anger. Ecclesiastes 7:9

Cultural decline. Ecclesiastes 7:10

Unfairness. Ecclesiastes 7:16-19, 20-22

Sexual immorality. Ecclesiastes 7:26, 29

Abuse of authority. Ecclesiastes 8:12-13

The power of sin. Ecclesiastes 10:2

Foolish leaders. Ecclesiastes 10:4, 20

Risk. Ecclesiastes 11:4, 6, 2, 1

Aging. Ecclesiastes 11:8A, 9-10

Etc.

Fourth, we must find out where we are in God's cycle of life, what purpose God intends it to serve, allow it to serve God's intended purpose, be thankful and rejoice. Yes, we should change what we can and ought (1 Corinthians 7:21), but in the meantime we must be content. It is enough. Numbers 16:8-11A.

Fifth, we must enjoy life now and not "can't wait" it away. Illustrate throughout a lifetime. Ecclesiastes 8:14-15; 9:7-8, 10. "What is Solomon saying to us? ... Don't plan to live - start living now" (Wiersbe). "Every family knew how to enjoy special occasions ... That's when they wore their white garments (a symbol of joy) and anointed themselves with expensive perfumes instead of the usual olive oil. Solomon advised ... people to wear white garments always and to anoint themselves always with special perfume ... to make every occasion as special occasion, even if it's ordinary or routine ... It's not by searching for special things that we find joy, but by making the everyday things special" (Wiersbe slightly adapted). After all, who knows if we will ever have the tomorrow for which so many so desperately wait? Ecclesiastes 9:11-12.

To review, to be blessed ...

We must allow the kingdom or rule of heaven to rule over us. That can only happen if we fully appreciate how utterly incapable we are of being truly happy any other way.

We must be comforted from the curse of sin. That can only happen if we mourn our sins so deeply that we completely turn away from them.

We must use the earth as God intended. That can only happen if we completely relinquish our power over to the control of God.

We must have our deepest longings satisfied. That can only happen if we desire righteousness as desperately as people dying of hunger and thirst long for food and drink.

We must receive mercy from God. That can only happen if we are merciful for it is only in blessing that we are blessed.

We must see or understand God as He really is, not as we imagine Him to be. That can only happen if our hearts are pure because it is impossible for dirty minds to comprehend a righteous God.

We must be called sons of God by God the Father. That can only happen if we understand that intimate and loving relationships with divine and human beings are the sole source of true blessedness and we do all we can to make them happen.

We must allow the kingdom or rule of heaven to rule over us. That can only happen if we accept that some people will persecute us for doing so and that they actually bless us in so doing.

The bottom line. Ecclesiastes 12:13.

CONCLUSION:

Growing up one of my favorite books was Charlie And The Chocolate Factory.

[Explain the story]

Willy Wonka: ... Charlie, don't forget what happened to the man who suddenly got everything he always wanted.

Charlie Bucket: What happened?

Willy Wonka: He lived happily ever after.

The word of God is our golden ticket. If we'll allow God to teach us, He'll give us His kingdom and in it we'll find everything human beings have always wanted and unlike works of fiction, we really will live happily ever after.

God wants us to be complete in Christ. For His sake, I hope we all want utter joy and peace, have resolved to be content, know what to do to be satisfied, and are now on the road to fulfillment.

Compiled by Tim Norman, 09/23/17

