

What Kind of Company Do You Keep?

Spanish novelist Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra wrote in his masterpiece, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, "Tell me thy company, and I will tell thee what thou art." There is some truth to that statement.

We are known by the company we keep. We often believe that this concept applies only in our interaction with unbelievers; however, this can be applied to our relationship within the body of Christ, also.

Some years ago I was in a situation where I found myself unwittingly in the grip of someone who I could see was not good for me. The person was a professing Christian, but I found myself in his grip, and I was leaning on him. I realized that this was wrong. Thankfully, God delivered me from the situation.

Am I advising you to avoid altogether unbelievers or certain members within the body of Christ? Most certainly not. However, ask the Lord to shine His light on the various relationships in your life.

Could it be that at this moment you are in this snare? You are trapped with bad company, and they are doing you no good (see 1 Cor. 15:33).

Maybe, however, you have rationalized the situation and made up excuses, concluding that you can be an exception. The worst thing that you can do is to begin to think that you are the exception to the rule.

The devil will come alongside and say that you are different, that you can associate with wrong company. Then, before you know it, you are in a trap. It is a wonderful thing to realize

that God delivers us from bad company.

Maybe you are in a situation where you are being wrongly influenced, and as a consequence you have lost the sense of inner peace. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17, NKJV). But bad company causes you to lose the peace that God wants you to have. I ask you, are you in the grip of bad company?

How Parents Influence Your View of God

The problem of belief in God has never been solely to convince the conscious mind. If it were, He would need only to raise up brilliant debaters and apologists rather than pastors and churches that nurture. Paul wrote, "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:10, KJV).

It is easy to confuse deep, heartfelt conviction with mere intellectual assent and to think salvation is thereby accomplished. I do not mean to say that anyone's conversion experience is thereby invalid, but that it did not finish the process. We have been too easily convinced of completion.

When belief in the heart, to whatever degree, opens the floodgates of understanding to the mind and conviction to the spirit, and we respond in the sinner's prayer to invite Jesus in, we are redeemed and justified. Our sins are washed away in the blood of the Lamb and our destinies are changed from hell to heaven. We are once and for all time fully saved.

But the experience of conversion is not all there is to being saved. Salvation has a larger meaning than justification, redemption, being born anew, going to heaven or all these put together.

Unbelieving Saints

Redemption, justification, being born anew are entrances to the process of growing into **salvation** (1 Pet. 2). Going to **heaven** is the end product. All of what happens in between, the process of **sanctification** and **transformation**, is the major part of salvation, which means “to become whole, to be healed.”

When we ask, “Have you been saved, brother?” we mean redeemed, justified, born anew and going to heaven. Well and good. But perhaps the question is confusing. If we mean, “Has the Lord gotten hold of you, paid the price, and set your face toward heaven?” every born-anew Christian ought to answer with an unqualified, “Yes, I’m saved, and I’m going to heaven.”

But concerning the process in this life of being saved, none ought ever to reply that it is all done. Each one should answer, “I’m saved, and I’m being saved every day,” because “by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:14, NASB).

Although every **believer** is in process, he knows by **faith** that positionally he has already been made perfect and is already being raised up to sit with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). Whatever further conversions of the heart we explore ought never to be taken to imply that our first conversion was invalid or insufficient.

On the other hand, no matter how dramatic or conclusive that conversion was, we run the risk of crippling our abundant life the moment we build a tabernacle as though it once and for all finished the process it, in fact, only began. The **heart** needs to be transformed anew every day, or we fail to grow in Jesus.

Indeed, that is our primary definition of growth in Christ—further and further death and rebirth through continuing inner conversion.

Continual **conversion** of a believer's heart moves the heart from **unbelief** to **belief** and repentance. This happens as the light of God's Word reaches into the dark, hidden recesses of the heart, and begins to prepare it to produce good fruit (Matt. 13:3-8).

Historically, in America, sanctification has come to mean striving to live up to the law on the base of a supposedly transformed character. That struggle all too often has led to judgmentalism because tragically, the transformation had never been complete.

True, we are washed clean at the moment of conversion, and our consciences sprinkled (Heb. 9:14). But not all the character has been transformed at that moment.

Jesus is not yet that firmly seated as Lord in the inner depths of many Christians. It must hurt the Lord deeply that in churches considered most sound, sin so often still runs rampant, even among the leaders. Or where obvious sin has not reared its head, so little fruit of the Spirit is seen.

In such churches, conversion may be complete in the conscious mind, but the heart remains almost untouched.

The Lord must be allowed to fully occupy each believer's heart. This will be accomplished through the weapon of the Word of God being spoken to one another through preaching of the Word, the ministry of small groups, and through diligent, intercessory prayer for and with each other. As the Word touches the places of unbelief in our hearts, we will arise in conversion to take up the battle cry against the flesh and make it our joy to plunge to inner death and rebirth.

Purity of Heart

Matthew 5:8 says, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (KJV). Mark again those words, "pure in heart." Jesus was saying that those whose hearts are purified come to understand and embrace God for who He actually is.

The inference is that because our hearts are not pure, we impute to God motives and ways that are not His. We do not see God, but only our projection of Him.

The Scripture teaches, "We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also" (1 John 4:19-21, NASB).

Here we see that the impurity is hate. Our hatred of fellow human beings colors what we see of God—or prevents it altogether.

This is one of the primary facts that necessitates continual conversion of the heart. Our **hidden** and **forgotten judgments**, especially against our fathers and mothers, prevent us from seeing God as He is.

"He who curses his father or his mother, his lamp will go out in time of darkness," wrote Solomon (Prov. 20:20). Our judgments made against our parents in childhood, usually long forgotten, have darkened our spiritual eyes. We do not see ourselves, others, life or God accurately.

Many times people have come to us saying: "Don't talk to me about a loving God. Why doesn't He stop all the wars, or at least prevent some of the bestial things men do to men, sometimes in the very name of religion? Or doesn't He care?" We have all heard statements like that.

Being prayer ministers, Paula and I never try to defend God.

We avoid theological debates. We know the answer is not a mental one but a matter of an impure heart. We merely ask, "What was your father like?"

Invariably we uncover a history similar to what the person has imputed to God—cruelty, insensitivity, desertion, criticism and so forth. No matter what the mind may learn in Sunday school of a gentle and loving God who "so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16), the heart has been scarred and shaped by reactions to our earthly fathers.

As a result, we often project cruelty, insensitivity, desertion, criticism and other negative factors onto our understanding of who God is. Our minds may declare His goodness, but our behaviors reveal what the heart really thinks: "As [a man] thinks in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7, NKJV). Until we are able to forgive our natural fathers for the hurts they may have caused in our hearts, and repent for the judgments we have formed against them, we will not be able to truly see God as gentle, kind and lovingly present in our lives.

Repentance Fosters Healing

I (John) had a gentle, kind father who was a traveling salesman and gone much of the time. During the summer of 1979, I found myself puzzling over why thoughts of unbelief so often trooped through my mind.

In airports or while driving on busy freeways, I would find myself thinking, *How can God really be concerned about every detail of all these people's lives? Or, How can He actually know every hair that falls from every one of these teeming millions of heads?* (See Matthew 10:30.)

My mind insisted, "This is purely a logical matter. After all, that's a reasonable question to ask." But my spirit was not at rest.

Finally I thought to ask the Lord. He instantly replied, "Your father had little time to notice what you were doing." That revealed my inner world of judgments. I had judged, "Dad wouldn't see, compliment, affirm or care."

Nevermind that he did, in fact, do those things when he was home. My bitter root grew because he wasn't always there. So, of course, God wouldn't be there for me. And I worked so hard for Him!

Those thoughts plagued my mind most especially whenever Paula and I were busy serving the Lord. The little boy had been hurt because he worked so hard and received so little notice for it, and the grown-up subconsciously expected God to treat him like that, too.

Following the revelation, repentance was easy and joyous. I have never since been bothered by such nagging doubts. Now I do not merely have belief, but surety of knowing and feeling that my Father sees and approves of my service to Him. Now I have abiding fellowship with Him, in heart as well as spirit (1 John 1:3).

How many of us have come to our parents for something, and they said, "We'll see," and then forgot about it? Or our parents made a promise to buy us something, but either it never arrived or came so late that the joy of it was gone. Covertly, that colored our faith in God.

What kind of anger did we push down and forget, because we thought, It's not good to be angry with Dad and Mom. What kind of resentful judgments did our hearts cherish and our minds forget?

Seeing God Afresh

Perhaps the most important way we all fail to see God is in the most basic—love. Few of us had parents who could, and did,

take the initiative to regularly comfort and give affection when we needed it.

Most of the people I have ministered to insist that their parents did not initiate action appropriate to their needs in childhood. Many complain that their parents never showed affection at all. That clouded our hearts' picture of God, no matter what our minds learned to think of Him.

The entire Bible is the history of God taking the initiative to come to deliver all mankind and us personally. We see that basic fact, if we have eyes at all to read. But in the daily practice of devotional life, we strive to reach a God who we actually think in our hearts may not be listening after all, and we feel alone.

Our hearts see God clothed in our parents' mannerisms. In such areas we are unconverted in heart. All mankind's history teaches us at our hearts' level that God is created in our image instead of the other way around.

Our own personal history is the fabric by which we see God. And all our judgments become colored glasses that darken the face of God (Is. 55:8-9).

From the moment of our first conversion, the Holy Spirit is given license to work upon our hearts, to reveal and convict. The Christian life of sanctification and transformation is therefore summarized: "Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3, NASB).

After many years of ministering to others, Paula and I are still discovering more and more areas in which our own forgotten but still active childhood judgments of our parents have blinded our eyes to God. And we had good, loving, well-intentioned parents.

What of the many who have been so fiercely wounded? St. Paul said, "I press on to know Him" (Phil. 3:12).

Our first conversion has resurrected our inner Lazarus. Now let us be members of that fellowship of Bethany called by Christ to take the grave clothes off one another's hands, feet and faces (John 11:44) so we may behold life, walk with Him and hold His hand.

Read a companion devotional.

John L. and Paula Sandford *are the authors of numerous books, including Transforming the Inner Man, from which this article was adapted.*

3 Steps to God Fulfilling His Promises

God created each one of us for His glory. Therefore, you can move from a place of desolation into prophetic fulfillment of His destiny for you.

Have you ever waited so long for a **promise** to manifest that you lost hope? The **Bible** clearly tells us that we don't live down here on Earth with our sights set only on what is temporal, but we are to have a view of eternity and operate from that perspective. Even in our greatest hour here on Earth, our best is still ahead.

God will give us grace to endure what is going on in our temporal world until we come into the fullness of our eternal destiny. But God has a wonderful **plan** for our temporal existence that will flow into our eternal communion with Him.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a **future** and a **hope**” (Jer. 29:11, NKJV).

God has given us **promises** for **salvation**, **inheritance** and **spiritual life** on which we can base our **future**. We discover His plan for our destinies through our covenant relationships with Him.

He may reveal His desires to us through an urging or intense desire that He stirs within us. We may also have supernatural encounters with God through His Word, or through **dreams**, **visions**, **miracles** or **prophetic words** that we receive.

Each time we respond to the Lord in obedience, we see progress in the realization of our earthly purpose. God works all things together for good to position us properly so that His plans can be fulfilled. This process and progression is called prophetic fulfillment.

God’s Now Times In the natural cycle of life there are **seasons**, and every one of them has a time frame. Some seasons are filled with desolation, but there is a time when God’s promises are manifested—when desolation ends and prophetic fulfillment begins.

That was the case in our family when 10 years of **barrenness** came to an end with the birth of the first of our six children. When a time of **desolation** or **wilderness** ends and a **new season of promise** begins, those are God’s now times.

In Daniel 9, we see a biblical example of the end of desolation and the beginning of a season of prophetic fulfillment. When Daniel began reading the prophecies of Jeremiah, Israel had been in captivity in Babylon for 70 years and was still in bondage (v. 2).

Suddenly, Daniel understood that now was the time for the prophecy to be fulfilled. The 70 years of desolation Jeremiah

had prophesied were completed, and the time had come to break out of captivity (Jer. 25:11).

Daniel came to an understanding that the season was changing, and Israel needed to break out of captivity. He turned to God through prayer and supplications and began to deny himself through fasting (Dan. 9:3).

By doing these things, he reconciled himself with God, as a representative of Israel, and broke out of the season of desolation. This allowed the Israelites to begin to move into their future.

Through His promises to us, God is breaking off desolation personally, corporately and territorially—and hell hates it. Any time you are getting ready to break forth into a new season of prophetic fulfillment, Satan will oppose you and try to keep you in the desolation of the past.

As you move forward, be aware of the following three-step process:

1. God gives an intercessory call.

Intercession always proceeds what God is doing to break desolation from our lives. We need to respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to align ourselves with His mind and connect with His heart. As we come into agreement with God through His intercessory call to us, He will propel us out of desolation and into prophetic fulfillment.

Intercession is defined as “reaching or meeting someone to pressure them strongly to change a situation.” Hebrews 7:25 states of Jesus, “Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”

The Spirit of God will co-labor with us and reveal our way out of desolation. But we must pray until we gain the strategy for

moving forward and taking a stand against the enemy, who will seek to keep us bound. God will not only break us out of our wilderness, He will cleanse, renew and restore us to a place of communion with Him.

2. God revives unfulfilled prophetic destiny.

Jeremiah had prophesied that Israel would go into captivity and serve the king of Babylon for 70 years. As Daniel received the prayer burden from God, he was able to understand this word that Jeremiah the prophet had spoken and know that it was now time for the power of desolation to be broken and restoration to begin.

Some of our grandparents and great-grandparents had incredible destinies that were never realized. We need to know how their prophetic inheritance became captive to the enemy. We also need to see how the generational blessings of God have not been fulfilled in our families.

My father was a man with a great deal of potential, but the path he chose brought corruption and defilement. He died a premature death, and his destiny was never fulfilled.

When the Lord revealed to me His overwhelming love for my earthly father and the incredible plan He had for my father's life, I said, "Lord, let me not only come into the fullness of my own life, but let me accomplish the things that were meant for my father in his generation that were sent astray by his alignment with the enemy."

Prophetic destiny is often tied to the generations of our families. To have prophetic fulfillment in our own lives, we need to allow the Lord to revive the unfulfilled prophetic destiny in our family line and give us a success mentality of completion and fulfillment.

3. God calls you to prophesy your destiny.

God has chosen to use us to bring His will to Earth. He calls us to come into dialogue with Him, listen to His voice and gain prophetic revelation so that the hope of our calling can be fulfilled. He asks us to take that revelation and prophesy it into the earthly realm.

Declare Your Future

Throughout the Bible, we see examples of God's people making prophetic declarations into their situations in order to see His will come about. Such was the case in Ezekiel 36 and 37.

The Lord told Ezekiel that even though Israel (signified by the bones in Ezekiel 37) had been scattered, He was going to bring them back together. Then God gave Ezekiel an understanding of Israel's prophetic destiny that he was to declare into the earth.

Ezekiel 37 contains four levels of prophetic declaration that can help us to understand the process of prophetic fulfillment. In each level, there comes a place where prophetic fulfillment can stall. Understanding how the process can stall will help us proceed into the next dimension of prophetic fulfillment.

1. Coming together. When Ezekiel took the words God gave him and declared them into the desolate situation that had overtaken Judah, things began to happen. The same is true with us.

When we see God's prophetic destiny in our lives and begin to declare it, something will happen. However, we have to release faith before we can see the results with our eyes. Faith comes first.

When Ezekiel first prophesied, there was a rattling noise and the bones came together, and then the sinews and flesh covered the bones. In the first level of prophecy, when we prophecy what God has promised us, we hear a new sound and see a new

structure coming together. We even gain a portion of the plan to move forward. However, just having a plan is not enough (Ezek. 37:7-8).

2. The breath of life. Ezekiel had seen the bones come together and the flesh appear, but there was no breath in them. Something was not yet working to produce prophetic fulfillment. So the Lord said, "Go back and prophesy to that part that has not received life" (Ezek. 37:8-9).

Notice that He told Ezekiel to prophesy to the part that was not working and command it to come in line with God's plans and purposes. When we encounter a snag in declaring God's word, it does not necessarily mean that we have not heard God or that we have failed. It often means that we need to enter into another level of prophecy in order to see life begin to emerge.

3. Spiritual warfare over hope deferred. Ezekiel saw an army result from his prophetic declarations. But as those in the army began to speak, they said that they were filled with despair (Ezek. 37:10-11).

When we become filled with despair, our faith for the future can easily be depleted. Lost hope often works with rejection and causes us to feel isolated, as was the case with this great army. Hope deferred can also release a spirit of infirmity (Prov. 13:12)

We must fight against whatever the enemy is doing to try to steal the life that God has breathed into us. Deal with the issues that have discouraged and defeated you. Facing the problems of the past releases you to move forward into hope.

4. Hope for the future. In Ezekiel 37:14, notice the verse: "'I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it,' says the Lord." This was the prophetic destiny released in Ezekiel 36. The

word of the Lord had come full circle!

But what if Ezekiel had stopped pressing forward after the bones had come together and there was no breath? That's what we tend to do in the body of Christ.

When things don't turn out as we thought, we give up. But as Ezekiel prophesied, resurrection power was released so that the graves could be opened, and the people brought into their own land.

If we keep moving forward through the levels of prophecy, God will perform His will in us. Discouragement has no place in us as God's people.

We all have wilderness seasons that are ordained of God. The Israelites were held captive in the wilderness because of their unbelief and hardness of heart, but Jesus resisted the devil in His wilderness season and came out of it filled with power for His future (Num. 14:33-34; Mark 1:13).

If you are willing to press toward your prophetic fulfillment in God's time, your season of desolation will not be prolonged. However, if you allow the enemy to overcome you with discouragement, hopelessness and a lack of faith, you too may find yourself in a prolonged season of desolation that leaves you wandering for many years.

Begin prophesying your destiny and declaring the fulfillment of God's purpose in your life. Receive His wisdom and declare that every strategy of the enemy that has interrupted God's plan for you will be exposed.

Let your faith be stirred and your strength renewed. And may God's glory be seen in your life. Your best is yet ahead!

Read a companion devotional.

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Keeping Your Mind Sexually Pure

Enjoy God's Blessing of Food and Lose Weight

No matter how spiritually mature you are, an unhealthy lifestyle and diet will limit your potential.

As a **Christian**, you are free to **eat** anything you want. Your **diet** will not keep you from **heaven**, but if you continually eat **unhealthy** foods, you will probably get there much sooner.

All foods are not created equal. In fact, some food should not be labeled "food" but rather "consumable product" or "edible, but void of nourishment."

Living foods were created for our consumption. They exist in a raw or close-to-raw state. They are beautifully packaged in skins and peels, and no chemicals have been added.

Living foods are plucked, harvested and squeezed, not processed, packaged and put on a shelf. Living foods are recognizable as food.

Dead foods are the opposite. They are living foods that have fallen into human hands and been altered to make them last as long as possible at room temperature and to be as addictive as possible to the consumer.

Life breeds life. Death breeds death. Your body is made up of whatever you put in your mouth. You really are what you eat. And even fashionable clothing can't hide an unhealthy body. It's time to make over your pantry and fridge with more living foods, so you can look and feel your best.

Food Is a Blessing

Exodus 23:25 says, "You shall serve the Lord your God, and He will bless your bread and water. And I will take sickness away from the midst of you." The word here for *bread* is also translated "nourishment." God wants us to enjoy food. So it's important to know which foods He made to bless your body.

Organic fruits and vegetables. At least half of what you eat should be living foods, preferably organic fruits and vegetables, whole grains and living oils such as extra-virgin olive oil. It is an established fact that the more fruits and vegetables you eat, the lower your chance of heart disease, cancer and many other health problems.

Even adding one serving a day can lower your heart disease risk. The current recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is five to 13 servings a day.

Many times a diet rich in fruits and vegetables is able to reduce your blood pressure as much as medications do. People who eat more than four servings a day also have significantly lower levels of bad cholesterol. Studies clearly show that for preventing cancer, fruits and vegetables are the best medicine you can take.

Eat your fruits and vegetables raw or steamed because food in its fresh state has all its enzymes. They should be eaten

unpeeled whenever possible because many vitamins and minerals are concentrated just beneath their skins. If you have not purchased organic items, it is imperative that you wash these fruits and vegetables carefully.

If no fresh produce is available, choose frozen fruits and vegetables, though their nutritional value is mildly compromised. Canned produce is usually heated very quickly, destroying many vitamins and enzymes.

Organic foods are produced without the use of artificial pesticides and chemical fertilizers. These foods deliver superior nutrition without the harmful chemicals or substances that can wreak havoc on our health.

Carrots, tomatoes, parsley, garlic, strawberries, tangerines, grapes, blueberries and hundreds of other colorful, living fruits and vegetables contain antioxidants and phytonutrients, protecting you from a myriad of diseases, including cancer. Eat plenty of nonstarchy vegetables such as spinach, lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, asparagus, green beans, brussels sprouts, collards, radishes, turnips and cauliflower. Eat colorful salads with balsamic or red wine vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil or other healthy oils.

Starchy vegetables such as beans, peas, lentils, corn, potatoes and sweet potatoes are fine, though if you are overweight you will need to eat them in moderation. Beans, peas and lentils are high insoluble fiber, which helps lower cholesterol and control blood sugar.

One of the important ingredients in fruits and vegetables is indigestible fiber, which soaks up toxins and water in the digestive system and sweeps them out. High-fiber diets move food, toxins and parasites through your gastrointestinal (GI) tract quickly and harmlessly. Generally speaking, the higher the fiber content the better.

Whole grains. Another living foods staple is fiber-rich,

living grain products such as sprouted-grain breads, brown rice, whole-grain pasta and whole-grain cereal. These are nutrient-dense and pass on lots of vitamins and minerals to your body. Whole grains also contain lots of fiber, which is a fabulous toxin-trapper.

When you buy grain products, look for the words *sprouted*, *whole wheat* or *whole oat* on the ingredient list. I encourage you to eat sprouted breads and flat breads. Ezekiel bread and manna bread are both terrific flourless breads made from live, sprouted grains and should be refrigerated. Limit your consumption of whole-grain products that contain corn.

Good fats. The good types of fat are necessary every day for the health of your heart, brain, skin, hair and every part of you. Good fat nourishes and strengthens cell membranes. They include: (1) monounsaturated fats and (2) omega-3 fats.

Monounsaturated fat is found in extra-virgin or virgin olive oil that is cold-pressed (not heated). You can also get monounsaturated fats in natural organic peanut butter, avocados, olives, macadamia nuts, and especially almonds, walnuts and hazelnuts. Raw nuts and seeds should be a mainstay of your diet. Almonds are high in monounsaturated fats and contain about 20 percent protein.

Omega-3 fatty acids are found mainly in cold-water fish, some marine mammals and algae (seaweed). I recommend that you eat wild salmon as a good source of omega-3 fats.

Fresh organic fruits and vegetables, whole grains and monounsaturated fats you can eat almost unreservedly. However, meats and dairy products should be eaten with a little more caution.

Eat Meat With Caution

Humans are omnivores, and meat can be an acceptable and

healthy part of your diet. But many people don't understand the dangers of eating too much meat or the wrong meats.

Red meat has a higher concentration of toxins than nearly all other foods. Any pesticide, sulfa drug, hormone, antibiotic, chemical or other toxic residue an animal eats generally gets stored right into its fat. If you eat that fat, the same toxins go into your body and lodge in your fat.

White meat is better, but most chickens are given antibiotics, especially tetracycline, to counter salmonella and other bacteria. In the past, it was common practice to give growth hormones and estrogens to animals to add bulk to increase their value. Fortunately, now these practices have changed.

Eating too much meat and protein makes it harder for your body to detoxify on a cellular level. It may also put a strain on the kidneys. Individuals with kidney failure must restrict their intake of protein, especially meats.

Men usually need only 20 to 30 grams of protein (3-4 ounces of meat) with each meal. Women usually need only 14 to 21 grams of protein per meal (2-3 ounces of meat).

I recommend organic, free-range or grass-fed meat. If you cannot afford these, get the leanest cuts and trim off any visible fat.

Recognize and avoid irradiated meats or other foods. Evidence suggests that irradiation is unsafe. It has been confirmed that it harms the nutritional value of foods. Labels on packages of irradiated food are legally required to carry the phrase "treated by irradiation" or "treated with irradiation."

Turkey breast usually contains the least amount of pesticides and toxins. Other relatively safe meats include the leanest cuts of lamb, venison (U.S.), rabbit and buffalo.

When preparing poultry, peel the skin off and cut away any

visible fat before cooking. Bake, broil, grill or lightly stir-fry your meat.

Don't deep-fry your chickens or turkeys. Scrape off charred portions because char contains benzopyrenes, which are carcinogens, associated with colorectal cancer. Cook meats thoroughly because most poultry contain dangerous bacteria such as salmonella, and red meat may contain a dangerous form of E. coli. Once you start buying the right kinds of meats and preparing them in a healthy way, you can fully enjoy them as part of your regular diet.

What About Fish?

New studies keep emerging about the high mercury content of fish. But the following fish are usually safe: wild Alaskan or Pacific salmon, mahi-mahi (Florida), sardines, Tongol tuna (found in health food stores) and grouper (Argentina, Chile, Mexico).

Fish can be your best source of healthy omega-3 oils, which studies have shown is one of the best oils on the planet. The highest concentrations of omega-3 oils are found in Pacific herring, king salmon, wild Pacific salmon, anchovies and lake trout. Wild Pacific salmon contains higher omega-3 fat than farm-raised Atlantic salmon.

Avoid shark and swordfish. They have some of the highest levels of mercury and pesticides of any fish in the sea. In many areas trout also have been subjected to contamination through industrialization. Select fish taken from fresh, pure water areas.

Shrimp contains higher levels of cholesterol than other seafood, but it is usually free from contamination from pesticides. Like most shellfish, it usually contains the heavy metal cadmium, which is associated with hypertension. If you choose to eat shellfish, do so infrequently. Cook thoroughly, since raw or undercooked shellfish may be associated with food

poisoning or hepatitis A.

Dairy Products and Allergies

For some, dairy products, and cow's milk in particular, are linked to all kinds of allergies and sensitivities, including skin rashes, eczema, fatigue, spastic colon, excessive mucus production, nasal allergies and chronic ear and sinus infections. Some people have diarrhea due to lactose intolerance. If you have any of these, stop all dairy products for a week or so, and watch the improvement.

Also, dairy products tend to have lots of saturated fats in which toxins are concentrated. High amounts of pesticide residues are usually found in butter and cheese.

Goat milk products generally cause fewer allergies and sensitivities than cow milk. Organic, low-fat, or fat-free goat milk or goat cheese can be found in some health food stores and online.

Eat low-fat or nonfat organic cheese, sour cream or yogurt. Use organic butter or ghee, which is clarified butter. Never substitute margarine for butter. It contains trans fatty acids, which are associated with heart disease.

It's best to avoid ice cream and frozen yogurt. Both are high in sugar. Ice cream is usually also high in saturated fat.

The best dairy products for you is low-fat organic plain yogurt or kefir, or low-fat organic plain goat milk yogurt or kefir, which contains good bacteria to maintain a healthy GI tract. These good bacteria help reduce the production of cancer-causing chemicals.

If you can, buy living foods the day you intend to prepare them. Through proper handling, you can keep living foods healthy all the way to your dinner table.

Cook and Serve

Once they are exposed to air, fruits and vegetables begin to lose nutritional value. If you must chop or cut up your vegetables, do so just before eating.

Busy homemakers like to prepare meals in advance, but reheating food and leftovers depletes them of vitamins, minerals and nutrients. When you boil vegetables, the nutrients leach into the water, so bring the water to a boil first, then add your vegetables for a brief time. Drain them immediately and serve them. Lightly steaming your vegetables causes very little loss of nutrients.

A study in Science News in 1998 found that just six minutes of microwave cooking destroyed half the vitamin B-12 in dairy foods and meat. This is a much higher rate of destruction than other cooking techniques.

Stir-frying, steaming and grilling are wonderful ways to prepare your food. Don't overcook it, and watch what you cook in.

Teflon is possibly related to cancer because of the presence of a toxic chemical used to produce it. Aluminum has toxic effects, and iron is a free radical. I recommend the use of stainless steel, glass or porcelain cookware.

Once you've set the table with healthy foods, start your meal with a heartfelt blessing and keep the conversation pleasant. Eat moderate portions and feast instead on conversation and laughter. Chew each bite 30 times and put your fork down between bites. This dramatically slows down the meal so that the hormone leptin will signal the brain to stop eating.

Set new goals for yourself this year. Plan and cook healthy meals, and most of all, enjoy the company of your family and friends. Deuteronomy 30:19 says, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life, that

both you and your descendants may live.”

Don Colbert, M.D. *is the author of The Seven Pillars of Health, from which this article was adapted. For additional resources and articles by Colbert go to .*

Why Difficult Co-Workers May Be God's Tool for Your Success

*Don't let unrealistic expectations turn your **work** into misery. God's purpose for you is a good one.*

Many believers I know desire to **work** for a **ministry** or **Christian company** someday. Their goal is to work in an environment with praise music playing, co-workers praying and Scripture verses beautifully calligraphied on wall plaques. They imagine such a workplace as holy, peaceful and devoid of that common problem: **difficult co-workers**.

I wish this were the case, but until our Lord comes back we will always have some level of difficulty relating to co-workers, whether Christian or not. I have traveled the length and breadth of this nation and most of the world, worked with Christians and non-Christians alike and believe me, there is little difference in how personnel operate under pressure.

Disagreements, arguments, conflicts, tempers, grudges and gossip often affect **churches, ministries and Christian organizations** as much as any other office. Pettiness, greed, ambition and favoritism all creep in as the enemy fires his darts and hopes to create a flame.

We would like to think that as believers, our faith allows us to work without strain or tension, but that is simply not the case. We are not perfect, so if we are going to survive our hostile work environments then we must increase our capacity to work with difficult personalities, regardless what kind of workplace in which we're placed.

Act Like a Pro I'm afraid that as Christians we are often contributing more to the **problems** in **office relationships** than to their solutions. Others observe our behavior and our testimony suffers because of poor work ethics, long breaks, lengthy personal phone calls, reading the Bible on company time and so on. But the very worst thing is that we often alienate ourselves as an elite group of people and leave others feeling somehow less than us.

Though our personal preference plays into who we choose as friends, the workplace is not an appropriate setting for enforcing our own set of rules on who counts and who doesn't, on who matters and who doesn't, on who we might hang out with or totally avoid. This is so dangerous!

Work is not the setting for establishing relationships. Save that for the ladies' home fellowship or the church picnic. A workplace, especially today, includes diverse ethnic groups, cultures, religions and even sexual orientations.

You have to be able to work with people you might not relate to personally. An employee must develop a professional attitude, one in which personal opinions of any individual do not come into play.

If you allow God to enlarge your understanding of people and work relationships, you may be ready to have Him enlarge your territory. God won't give you something you are not ready to handle, but He does want to expose you to greater things and greater ways of managing life.

We need to apply the wisdom of the Bible to contemporary

situations. David had that sought-after ability to work effectively with difficult people. It doesn't get much more challenging than working with someone who has an "evil spirit troubling him" (see 1 Sam. 16:14-23).

Saul was that challenge for David, yet David blessed Saul. David didn't limit himself and he surely didn't limit God! Getting his eyes off of people, being neither impressed nor depressed by them, afforded David unlimited opportunities because he freed them up to be used by God.

Learn to work with difficult people; the very challenge you have today may be the one who tomorrow determines your promotion. Conversely, sweet Sally may be the very one who informs the boss that you walked in six seconds late one morning. Learn to remain not aloof but professional, and depend on God to reward you.

Eyes On The Prize How do you cultivate a professional attitude? Begin by keeping your eyes on your objective. Are you selling windows? Then don't walk into a customer's house and offer unsolicited advice about their décor.

Limit yourself to what you are called to do. People can be easily offended, and by speaking about areas outside your expertise—what your customer has solicited your help in—you can jeopardize your opportunity to make a sale.

Another way to maintain your professionalism is to treat everyone fairly and equally. You will naturally find some customers, co-workers and administrators easier to work with than others. But if you show favoritism by being kind and respectful to only those you like, then you are in for trouble—if not now then down the road.

Try not to take things personally, even when unhappy co-workers intend for them to hurt you. Remember that you are so much more than just an office manager, a temp worker, a high

school science teacher, an accounts manager, or an advertising executive.

Work to live; don't live to work! You must learn to let go of grudges and to set aside past histories with some of your co-workers.

When you find your emotions flaring and you're tempted to react, stop yourself and remember what's really going on: You're in the midst of a battle and the first shots have just been fired. This is the time to say a silent prayer, remember your true calling, and respond with patience and a professionalism that will astound those around you.

If you are not easily ruffled by difficult personalities, then you will increase your ability to remain cool in the heat of the battle. Your decisions will be more objective and levelheaded and you will be able to keep the work goals in mind as opposed to operating out of your personal moods and preferences.

Oil And Water It's helpful to understand some of the dynamics that contribute to interpersonal friction on the job. Like trying to mix oil and water by shaking the bottle again and again, many Christians believe that if they just act nice around difficult personalities that eventually those people will change and become nice too.

But "nice" doesn't always cut it, especially when you use it to avoid confrontation and direct communication. True kindness isn't afraid to look someone in the eye and tell him or her the truth, even if we know that this isn't what he or she wants to hear. You will garner much more respect for yourself and your beliefs if you act on kindness and honesty rather than "niceness."

Unfortunately, school doesn't teach conflict resolution; churches don't either. Often we do not learn it at home, so we step into workplaces either unwilling to confront, or—at the

other extreme—unwilling to resolve conflicts. If conflict is not dealt with, it can manifest as obnoxious attitudes and discontentment.

Are you able to resolve conflicts, simply and efficiently, seeking out the common good? When confronted, can you listen to what the other person is saying or do you talk over them, debating or defending yourself?

Can you forgive the other person so that you do not pollute the environment with hostility? If not, your gifting, education, or skill may take you to a higher level and give you opportunities, but your poor character will ultimately destroy everything you work hard to accomplish.

When reconciliation seems difficult, jealousy may be the underlying combustible that fuels some of those fiery relationships. The colleague who starts rumors about you may be envious of your gifts, your education, or your looks. The manager who seeks to undermine you at the board meeting may be jealous of your relationship with the boss.

If you sense jealousy is an issue with someone, make an effort at praising their strengths or commending them for work well done. I'm not advocating flattery or false praise; if your words come across as insincere, that will only escalate the problem. This is a great opportunity to subtly minister to someone by building up his or her self-confidence.

As surprising as it may be, other believers in a hostile work environment can often pose unexpected challenges. Instead of being each other's prayer partner or ally, you instead become competitive and combative, bringing out the worst in each other. If this occurs, you must stop and realize what the enemy is about.

If the devil can create dissention and division among believers in a given workplace, then he's killed two birds with one stone. He has not only diluted the potential power

that you could all experience as a united energy cell of God's children, he's also used you to undermine your witness to nonbelievers.

Learning And Growing When we learn to get along with all the various types of people in our workplace, particularly those we find challenging, there is a double benefit. Not only will our work go smoother, but we will also become better, stronger men and women.

Most of us gravitate to people who think like we do, however, I have learned that the best teams are not comprised of people who perform the same functions; great teams require diverse gifting. It is an amazing asset when you can work with various types of people and build teamwork and fraternity eight hours a day.

God uses trials with difficult people to build our character and to increase our own store of maturity and wisdom. By attempting to avoid or ignore those who are so different from ourselves, we are often avoiding the very training that God has provided for us to advance to the next level. Be grateful when difficult personalities create challenges in your workplace and know that God is indeed equipping you for your future.

One problem that believers often grapple with when becoming more accepting and tolerant of diverse people involves the notion of judgment. Since God's Word is very clear about us not becoming like those of the world in their sinful practices, we often are tempted to think we are better than they are. Or, we fear that if we accept these people, we are endorsing or accepting their sin.

You don't have to relinquish your beliefs about sin in order to work alongside sinners. You can work with someone who's having an affair without having one yourself. Avoid self-righteousness and act with humility and grace when you

encounter people whose differences make you uncomfortable.

Grow by Grace You may never receive a diploma in diplomacy, but you can learn what God wants to teach you by sticking it out and not giving up when difficult personalities add hostility to your work environment. We mustn't dismiss or ignore those who seem different from us. We should endeavor to love others within our workplace, trusting that God will shine through us and allow us to interact with those who we find most challenging.

As you look at the assortment of personalities and temperaments in your workplace, I encourage you to thank God for each of them and ask for His guidance. The following prayer might help get you started:

"Almighty God, I am so blessed to be in my present position and I thank You for continuing to use me. I'm grateful for everyone in my office, even those I don't particularly like or understand. Thank You for Fred in accounting. I don't like his temper but I pray that I could learn to not fear him and grow in my ability to communicate with him.

"Thanks for Betty in the next cubicle. She talks and socializes all the time, but I know she's just looking for connection. Give me kindness and Your words when I need to ask her to focus on work.

"I know I'm the person for this job! So I pray that I might learn how to be a better witness not just in the words I say but also the way I do business and the attitude with which I serve others around me. Thank You, Jesus! Amen."

Read a companion devotional.

T.D. Jakes *is a pastor and the best-selling author of numerous books.*

When Obeying God Is Risky

The late John Wimber is credited with having said, "Faith is spelled 'r-i-s-k.'" The first time I read that, I thought, what a relief! Over the years I've struggled to get to the place where my ability to walk by faith would be, well, perfect. To hear someone of Wimber's stature and influence confess that faith involves stepping out despite apprehensions, really helped me.

Have you ever received an word from the Lord, but you dragged your feet before acting on it because you're afraid of what the outcome would be? Some of us may have to admit that we're not always waiting on God.

We can spiritualize our hesitation, but often at the root is a paralyzing fear that God is not going to come through as we hoped. And whatever would we do then? Will we be able to accept any other outcome? And, will we be found passionately in love with Him, if things don't go as we thought they would?

How an Encounter With Jesus Changes Everything

When we confront the awful truth about our sin, we will see with new eyes the Savior who reaches down to lift us up.

In my travels, there have been many times when I was unaware that a notable person was nearby. Were it not for my observant

traveling companion, well-known people such as Paul McCartney, Dick Morris, Richard Thomas, Prince, David Gergen, Cokie Roberts, Charlie Gibson and many others would have all passed by unnoticed.

However, I'd usually receive a little nudge and whisper, "Anne, don't look now, but so-and-so is here. Right over there." And when I'd look "right over there," I'd see a very ordinary person. No glitz or glamour, no neon lights or fancy get-up—just another weary traveler struggling with the luggage and trying to get comfortable in a seat that's too small.

Somehow, seeing a famous celebrity in an ordinary setting is just, well, not that exciting. I wonder...would it be possible to see Jesus and not know it? As wildly implausible as it might seem—it is possible. Like Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb on Easter morning, you and I may see Him yet not recognize Him.

Sometimes we need help. We need someone to nudge us and whisper, "Look, He's here. Right over there." And then, when we see Him for who He is, the experience may not be what we expected.

A Change of Focus

One reason I've been unaware, at times, that I was seeing Jesus was because the moment wasn't what I thought it would be. I thought that seeing Him would send me into a kind of spiritual orbit. I thought it would result in a glorious, exhilarating, out-of-body ecstatic experience. Yet, within seconds, the thrill of a fresh encounter with Jesus morphed from the heights of joy to the depths of depression.

The depression, then, seemed to call into question the validity of the encounter. How could meeting Jesus make me feel so miserable and helpless? The prophet Isaiah's testimony, recorded in Isaiah 6, taught me that having an encounter with Jesus isn't necessarily an occasion of ecstasy.

In the year before Isaiah saw the Lord, he'd passionately preached a message to the people in his changing world, exhorting them to repent, saying: "Woe to you...Woe to you...Woe to you!" (See Is. 5:1-30.)

Isaiah was preaching his heart out and pointing his finger at the sin he saw in his collapsing culture. He was preaching God's truth! Often when I watch the evening news or read the morning paper, I also have an overwhelming desire to point my finger and thunder, "Woe to you, woe to you, woe to you!" My focus is entirely on their sin!

Before he saw the Lord, Isaiah was totally focused on their sin too. But upon seeing the Lord, his eyes were opened—not only to a fresh vision of the Lord—but also to a fresh vision of himself.

Then Isaiah wailed, "Woe to me!" (See Is. 6:1-5.) He wasn't ecstatic. He wasn't transported to heights of glory. He wasn't uplifted to an exalted spiritual plateau. He was plunged into a state of spiritual helplessness and depression.

When Isaiah saw the Lord, he felt dirty, sinful, wretched, guilty, worthless and ashamed. Flooded by the light of holiness and purity that emanates from the Lord, he had nowhere to hide and no one to blame. It was then that Isaiah knew he wasn't a victim; he was a sinner.

The Ugly Truth

Think back over your life. When have you felt the acute weight and unshakable burden of your sin? When have you felt so spiritually poor and blind and naked and utterly helpless that you even despaired of life?

Could it be, Dear One, that that was your encounter with the spotless, sinless Son of God? Could it be that—because your sin becomes glaringly apparent in the searing light of His holiness—the nearer to Him you actually are, the closer to

hell you actually feel?

To his credit, Isaiah didn't shut his eyes or deafen his ears or whine about what somebody else did or didn't do. He didn't run away from the blinding light. Isaiah, in soul-stripping, brutal honesty, sobbed: "I am ruined!" This was no shallow, superficial, hypocritical show of spirituality. This was the cry of a man whose heart had been broken in two.

This kind of utter spiritual ruination is almost foreign to our modern-day mind. So much of our focus seems to be on building up our self-esteem and thinking positively. We're repulsed by even the thought of being so totally helpless in our sinful condition.

We don't want to acknowledge that we're spiritually hopeless, without a remote possibility of ever pleasing God. Our condition makes us forever unacceptable in His presence and unwelcome in His heavenly home.

How is it that, like Isaiah, we can be so offended and preoccupied with the sin of others while we're completely oblivious to the sin in our own lives? I wonder if this is one reason the world seems to view the church as a haven for hypocrites. While the unsaved may be somewhat aware of their own sins—those for which we condemn them—they also see our sins, which we ignore.

With a face that must have burned crimson from shame, Isaiah burst into a startled confession, "'I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'" (Is. 6:5, NIV).

In other words, "I'm no better than the people at whom I've been pointing my finger!" That wasn't just a humbling admission; it was a humiliating confession.

As I studied the first five chapters of Isaiah's book, his

sins were not readily obvious to me. If he set his standards by looking around at others, then, in comparison, he might have felt quite confident. But when his life was measured by standards of perfect holiness, the revelation of sin was devastating!

Again and again, as I stand to publicly proclaim God's Word, in my spirit I'm on my face before God with a dreadful fear. I'm acutely aware that I'm a sinner—no better than those who look back at me with attentive, upturned faces. But when I began my ministry, I lacked a Spirit-sensitized awareness of my own sinfulness.

I remember being so spiritually superficial that when a speaker challenged those in the audience, including myself, to spend a few moments in confession of sin, I couldn't think of even one sin in my life to confess! But then I came across James 2:10, which issues this indictment: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." All of it? All of it!

I thought of all the moments of all the days of all the weeks of all the months of all the years in my life when I'd broken the greatest commandment—the one that directs me to love the Lord my God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. Since I was easily guilty of this sin, I was guilty of all sin. In my life, just one moment of not loving God with all my heart is enough to clinch the verdict that I'm a sinner.

As I meditate on what sin is—asking God to give me eyes to see myself in the light of who He is—the sin in my life becomes a nightmare of guilt that tears my heart, leaving me totally helpless and hopeless. And I'm in ministry! The thought is appalling!

How can I instruct others when I'm responsible for—and ruined by—sin? The turmoil in my heart and mind, brought on by repeated failure, wrenches from my lips an echo of Isaiah's

outburst, "Woe to me!" The pain is unbearable. The grief is all-consuming.

When my heart is rent and I acknowledge what I've done, I can so easily dissolve into utter self-pity and absolute despair. But praise God! Praise God! The very same thing that God used to save Isaiah, He's used to save me—and He can use it to save you from emotional, spiritual and eternal misery.

From Pain to Purity

Just when Isaiah was spiraling into the dark night of despair...just when he surely thought he'd plummeted as far into the pit of abandonment as anyone could go...things got even worse: "Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth" (Is. 6:6-7).

As the live coal was pressed to Isaiah's lips, the searing pain must have been agonizing. But painful blisters would lead to the joy of sins forgiven. For even as his lips were seared, the angel's words must have felt like a soothing balm to Isaiah's tortured soul: "'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for'" (Is. 6:7).

From that moment on, Isaiah's life was never the same. I expect that with his lips, now purified by holy fire, he never again talked, thought, or lived the same way. Praise God! There's hope for ruined sinners like Isaiah! For me! And for you! The hope is found, not in a burning coal of fire, but in what it represents—the blood of Jesus, shed on the altar of the cross and applied to every area of our lives—mind, spirit, soul and body.

My own searing conviction and confession of sin have left me feeling desperate for cleansing. I've longed to hear the same words of reassurance Isaiah heard. And I have: "Anne, the blood of Jesus, My Son, purifies you from every sin—past, present and even future sin. Because you have confessed your

sin, I will be faithful and just to forgive you and purify you from all unrighteousness. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. As far as the east is from the west, so far have I removed your transgressions from you.” Thank God for the blood of Jesus that hasn’t lost its power to cleanse us of our sin. All of it!

As Isaiah bowed in the flickering light of the burning coals, having repented of his sin and returned to the cross, his heart must have started to beat in sync with that same divine rhythm. His entire being also must have been wholly captivated by the compelling desire to serve the One whose grace and mercy had been extended to him at the altar. And in that moment, Isaiah knew his life would never be the same. A genuine experience of personal revival that results from a fresh encounter with Jesus is not a fleeting thing. It’s not just educational—or inspirational—or motivational—or emotional. It’s life-changing.

It truly is like waking up in our personal relationship with God so that now our lives entirely revolve around our passionate love for Jesus. You’ll know your heart’s been set aflame by the fire of revival when nothing else matters to you as much as your love for Him.

Read a companion devotional

Anne Graham Lotz *is the second daughter of Billy and Ruth Graham, founder of Angel Ministries, and the author of several books.*

Sowing Seeds of Kindness Yields a Harvest of Marital Harmony

If you want a harvest of joy in your home, start weeding out the meanness.

The first command God gave mankind was to be fruitful and multiply (see Gen. 1:28). But fruitfulness involves more than merely growing physical fruit.

As a Christian, the Spirit of God has already been planted within you, now it's your job to cultivate the seed of His nature. And it is not going to be an easy thing to do all the time.

The farmer's seeds must push through a layer of dirt in order to reach the sunlight. That dirt outweighs that little seed, and it will have to struggle hard to break through. In the same manner, God's Spirit has to push through the dirt we call our flesh.

Our flesh may be innately selfish, rude and indulgent. The Spirit of God inside of us is none of those things. Thus, there is resistance; there is conflict. And in marriage, these can pose numerous problems in the way we communicate with our spouse.

Take the case of James, who comes home after a rough workday. The computer program he'd worked on around the clock for weeks wasn't running. After a tense meeting with his concerned boss, James headed home exhausted.

When he opened the door to greet his pregnant wife, he was confronted with the words, "I hope you won't work all hours of the day when the baby is born!" Without saying a word, James

watched his wife set out the meal she had prepared hours earlier. He knew he was desperately in need of something, but couldn't put his finger on it.

Then there is Charlotte, a homeschooling mother of four, who also had a tough day. Shortly after her husband left for work, one child developed a fever combined with nausea.

After a stressful day of serving as both impromptu nurse and schoolteacher, Charlotte was preparing dinner when her husband entered and said with a smile, "This house looks like a disaster area. What did you do today?" Not returning the smile, Charlotte became defensive as she set the table. She also needed something, but felt too overwhelmed to express it.

What James and Charlotte needed was an act of kindness. James needed a hug and a "Boy, I'm glad to see you, you hard-working man." Charlotte needed her husband to notice her overwhelmed state and come to her aid.

Every spouse needs kindness daily. Many of us feel that life is like an overworked, fast-moving engine. In mechanical terms, an engine receives a constant supply of motor oil to prevent friction and overheating. Likewise, random and intentional acts of kindness lubricate marriage relationships, easing life's friction.

An offer to help, a smile and a kind word will reduce the heat of everyday responsibilities. Knowing that someone cares enough to notice and say thank you makes the day-to-day routine a little easier to handle.

Kindness is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, and when it's displayed, it can make anyone feel special. Think about the last act of kindness your spouse did for you, and how it made you feel. The fruit of kindness is sweet to the soul.

You've Got It In You

Through the Spirit of God, the power of kindness dwells within

you, ready to be released. Any act of kindness you show to your spouse plants a seed that will eventually grow into a fruit-bearing tree of kindness. Will you reap a plentiful harvest because of your continual planting and nurturing, or will your harvest be small?

In Colorado where I live, huge trees grow right through rocks and boulders. It's amazing that the power of a tiny seed is greater than the power of the large surrounding rocks. Similarly, your decision to exhibit the fruit of kindness is not hindered by the attitude of your spouse. Even the strongest will cannot weaken the power of the seed.

In marriage, you have been given the strength to be kind in order to fortify the spirit, soul and person of your husband. He, in turn, will grow because of your encouragement. King David, one of the greatest Bible characters and a friend of God, referred not to God's power or wisdom, but rather to His gentleness as the thing that made Him great (see 2 Sam. 22:36; Ps. 18:35).

In essence, kindness is shown when one person chooses to use his or her strength in a gentle manner toward another. Take note of the following ways in which kindness can be expressed in your interaction with your mate:

Spoken Kindness

The first seeds of kindness we can sow in the heart of our spouse are in the thoughtful words we speak. Often, out of laziness or familiarity, we begin to be gruff, sarcastic or demeaning in our responses to normal questions. Our answers seem sharp instead of seasoned with grace. We should respond as though every question our spouse asks is an intelligent one. We should take time to listen fully and give a sincere answer.

Spoken kindness is expressed also in the tone of speech we employ. It's possible to never say a wrong thing yet

communicate an unkind attitude when we speak. Next to God, you are the loudest and most consistent voice your spouse hears. It's your choice to use a kind voice that supports and encourages your spouse, or a gruff voice that discourages, degrades and minimizes.

Speaking thoughtful, gentle words to your spouse in front of your friends and your children is yet another expression of spoken kindness. Always thank your spouse when he or she is serving you in some manner. But instead of just saying, "Thanks, Honey," be specific. Saying "Thank you, Honey, for getting the butter; that was kind of you," communicates that you actually notice your spouse's acts of kindness.

The words you speak and the kind way in which they are spoken will soon become the heart of your everyday lifestyle. As your heart becomes kind, so your words will also, and your spouse's heart will be motivated by your example to do the same.

A Kind Touch

Sometimes a touch can communicate kindness more loudly than words. Holding your spouse's hand, gently caressing his back or even giving him a private foot massage can express volumes of kindness.

There is a kind of touching that is expressly meant to communicate kindness without any hint of sexuality or need for reciprocation. This soothing, unselfish, gentle type of touch is a great way to plant kindness in your spouse's heart. Although verbal expressions may be deflected or discounted, a touch is rarely rejected.

The Expression of "Teamfulness"

I use the word "teamfulness" as a means of defining the way a husband and wife operate in unity. They anticipate each other's actions and, knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each other, capitalize on these strengths for the good of the team.

Here is how teamfulness works: When you see the laundry, you do the laundry because you're part of the team. If you see a situation that must be dealt with regarding one of your children, you handle it without passing it on to your spouse. You know your husband's schedule, and you cover for him without an attitude.

In the same way, your spouse—the other team member—is so in touch with your world that often he sees a need before you do. In this way your spouse throws you the ball, so to speak, and you both score.

Kindness is something you can offer your spouse freely every day. It should be both intentional and spontaneous.

Intentional kindness means purposefully releasing the kindness you possess on a regular basis. Along these lines, one piece of advice I offer husbands is to give their wives a night away from home once a week. This should be a time for her to spend as she chooses. I explain to them that their wives need time to relax or play, when she does not have to be a mom, a wife, a cook, the clean-up crew and the leader of bedtime rituals.

Similarly, a wife can plan intentional acts of kindness for her husband based on his interests. Some wives who are gifted cooks may want to select one day a week to prepare a gourmet meal for the family.

We also need to recognize the importance of spontaneous kindness. Don't become so mechanical in your plans that you fail to capitalize on those great daily opportunities that arise to be kind to your mate.

My wife, Lisa, is regularly kind to me. When I come home on a warm day, I first like to spend about 15 minutes on the hammock in our backyard. It's magical the way both my soul and body become relaxed and refreshed. Lisa usually protects this time, so I am not interrupted. This is a much appreciated, spontaneous act of kindness she gives to me.

Commit to Kindness

Just as a seed in the natural realm contains the nature of the fruit it will become, so, too, within that seed of the Spirit planted in you is the very DNA of God: His heart, His mind, His will and His nature. The seed in you desires to be respectful and kind.

The first step in making kindness a greater reality in your home is to break previous agreements you may have made with unkindness. Confess your sins against God and your spouse. Seek forgiveness for any actions, attitudes or beliefs that have fueled unkind habits in your marriage. And in the name of Jesus, break any spirit, soul or body agreements with meanness. Eliminate all traces of it from your behavior and speech.

Make an official declaration of your decision to uproot old habits and create new beliefs and attitudes. Prayer will help you establish a great foundation for your new resolve to be kind, and the Holy Spirit will strengthen you to carry out your commitment. Be intentional toward your mate, but also respond to those surprising opportunities to practice kindness that come along every single day.

You and I have a lot of farming to do. Oh, yes, it's work. And yes, it's daily. Some parts of the field will be easy to plow, and some will be harder.

But imagine the increased fruitfulness in your marriage, and in the lives of your children and grandchildren. Feel the hand of Jesus on your shoulder, and see the smile on His face when He will say to you, "Well done!"

So get ready to plow. There is plentiful harvest of eternal joy ahead of you.

Read a companion devotional.

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How God Uses Joy to Direct You

Some people need 10 Bible verses and 14 prophecies before they can hear God speak. Stop making guidance so complicated!

Recently the host of a radio talk show posed a question we had not discussed in our preshow briefing. “Dr. Stanko,” he asked, “how would you define success?”

I could almost hear the radio audience inhale and hold their breath, waiting for the response. I didn’t have much time to think, so I responded, “I think success is doing what gives you joy.” After I said that, the telephone lines lit up like fireworks-and my 20-minute interview lasted for more than an hour.

Do you know that God uses joy to direct His people? As I’ve traveled and talked to thousands about clarifying their purposes, I’ve found that many people are afraid of their joy, claiming: “You can’t always do what you love. That’s not realistic.” Others tell me that joy is a feeling and can’t be trusted. I maintain, however, that joy is an important barometer in determining the will of God in your life.

You don’t need a word from the Lord, confirmation or permission to follow your joy. You just need to trust God that He is with you and that He is the author of your joy.

Some people may have joy when they paint, others when they sing, and still others when they counsel, travel or speak. Who gave us this joy for certain activities? Isn't it the Lord who made us, who knit us together in our mothers' wombs (Ps. 139:13)? And if God gave us the joy, why would He want us to neglect or ignore it?

The well-known verse Nehemiah 8:10 states, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." If you don't have joy, then you don't have supernatural strength. And if you don't have God's strength, then whose strength are you functioning with?

I see so many people who are concerned about doing God's will, yet they ignore their joy and consequently are like an airplane parked next to a runway. They are close enough to take off but remain grounded because they don't recognize that the heavenly control tower has released them for takeoff.

I've been in ministry for 30 years. In that time, I've come across many common fallacies and misunderstandings concerning guidance.

1. We assume that most or all thinking is wrong or dangerous.

Many people are waiting for God to speak or direct because they don't trust their own thinking. Yet Paul wrote, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Rom. 12:2). This verse indicates that once your mind is renewed, you can use it!

On at least two occasions, Luke used his renewed mind to determine the will of God. The first is described in his gospel: "Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us ... it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the

certainty of those things in which you were instructed (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke was a scientist who obviously enjoyed research and writing. I'm convinced he experienced joy in his work.

Notice what he didn't write in the passage above: "The Lord led me; the Lord spoke to me; I felt impressed by the Spirit to write." The Lord does lead, speak and impress, certainly-but in this case, Luke simply had a good idea.

Do you have any good ideas? I believe God can use them to direct you into what He wants you to do.

The second occasion is described in the book of Acts: "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:9-10, emphasis added).

After they examined all the evidence, Paul and his team came to the conclusion that God wanted them to go to Macedonia. What conclusions have you come to after you've examined all God's evidence? I would advise you to pursue that course until God shows you another one.

2. We confuse thinking with speculating. I talk to hundreds of people every year and I hear many say, "I thought maybe God wanted me to do this" or "I prayed and then felt perhaps the Lord wanted me to do that." Usually it is connected with something they don't want to do (or don't have joy doing), but they try to use a lot of circumstantial evidence that leaves them unsure and groping for direction.

God doesn't deal in "maybe" or "perhaps." He is a big God, and He has no trouble communicating His will. Did Paul and Luke speculate in the passages quoted above? They came to a conclusion, but they had been praying and seeking God's will.

They put their trust in God and what He spoke. Notice that they “got ready at once” and left. There was no doubt in their minds.

Several years ago, I received an invitation to go to Afghanistan during a period of tremendous violence and upheaval in that country. I deliberated and debated, but every time I said no, someone came and told me I should reconsider. When that happened three times, I concluded that God wanted me to go.

At no point did I say “maybe” or “perhaps.” If I had used those words, I would have stayed home. Where guidance and purpose are concerned, eliminate those two words from your vocabulary. And if you are using them, be careful before you proceed with your determined course of action.

3. We put our faith in the wrong place when it comes to guidance. People ask me regularly, “How do I know if I heard the Lord?” So many people are afraid of doing the wrong thing that they do nothing. They are so concerned that they may miss the Lord that they actually do miss Him!

A few years ago, I realized I had this same tendency. I was so zealous to hear God that I was putting all my guidance through a filter.

It was at this point that I stopped putting my faith in the wrong place. Previously I had put my faith in my ability to hear God’s voice and understand His will. Now I put my faith in God’s ability to speak to me and make it clear.

Think about it: God speaks every language. He can guide you using the Bible, other people or circumstances. If your heart is positioned to hear God, then God’s heart is to speak, and to speak clearly.

When I was deliberating over my invitation to Afghanistan, I

was straining under the weight of figuring out what to do. That's when I said: "God, I've told You I will go wherever You want me to go. I don't believe that if I ask You for bread, You will give me a stone.

"I don't believe that the enemy speaks to me when I pray to You. Therefore, I have faith that You are speaking to me, and I'm going."

I love traveling; it gives me joy. So I put all this together and determined to go. I can honestly say that the trip changed my life and the course of my ministry. I put my trust in God's ability to speak to me and He did. He is a good God who isn't out to trick or confuse us.

4. We are often waiting for God to reveal His will, when He's already revealed it. When I speak at missions events and conferences, I often deliver a message titled, "What Part of Go Don't You Understand?" The message is based on the Great Commission, which states: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20).

I've seen many Spirit-filled believers who believe that the gifts are for today act as if the Great Commission ended with the death of the apostles. I've also had people tell me, "I'm praying about what to do"—but they really aren't. They are using prayer as a smokescreen and delay tactic.

There has never been a better or more exciting day to serve the Lord. Travel to anywhere in the world is easier and cheaper than ever before. People are more open than they've ever been to the message we preach. Yes, there is danger—but when you commit your life to the Lord, you give it to Him; you

don't lend it.

If you can't travel, why not have a personal Web site and put your testimony on it? Do a simple Bible study there. You never know; someone in Africa or China might see it, read it and meet the Lord.

Do you really think you need a "word" to have permission to do that? I don't think so. I believe you need to think, have faith, act and trust the Lord for the results. If God wants to shut it down, He can and will. The key is for you not to shut it down before it ever starts.

5. We don't know our values or follow them. Paul was a man of values. He went to the Jew first, he always traveled with a team, he never took financial support from the people among whom he ministered, and he tried to be all things to all men to win some to Jesus.

Paul knew what was important to his life and leadership and he lived out those values on a daily basis. Values are something you don't have to pray about; they are non-negotiable principles that God has worked in your life.

One of my personal values is foreign missions. My church recently announced a partnership with other churches to start a dental clinic in Syria. Believers will start and staff the clinic.

I got out my checkbook and wrote a check, and I will do so every month from this point forward. I can't say that the Lord told me to write those checks, but I know He worked in me the value of missions.

Another one of my values is racial reconciliation. So when I get an invitation to go to Africa, I accept! Why? Because I want my actions to be consistent with the values God gave me. I go because I want to be a source of healing among people who

don't look like me. Since Africa has many such people, I go.

Directed by Joy

I want to leave you with three things you can do to enhance your ability to hear and do the will of God. If you do these things, you will learn how to use joy as an indicator of God's will for you in your daily walk.

1. Pray. I pray this prayer regularly: "God, I'll do whatever You want me to do, wherever You want me to do it." And then I have faith that God is going to direct my interests, using my joy as an important factor.

2. Have faith. If God wants you to do His will-and He does-then He must reveal what His will is. If you are asking God to reveal His will, then He will answer your prayer. You must have faith that you are receiving the answer.

Jesus said that our heavenly Father is no different from earthly fathers who know how to respond to the requests of their children (Luke 11:11-13). After I've prayed, I don't expect God to trick me. Nor do I put my trust in my ability to figure things out. I am learning how to trust my God more and more to reveal His will to me.

3. Write down your values and act. James wrote, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17). If you are praying and believing, then you must also be doing. Do something, allowing God to use even your missteps to direct you in the path He has for you.

Here's how to start. Spend 10 minutes writing down what's important to you. If nothing else, write down what you do that gives you joy. Then determine to do something about each one of the things you wrote down.

If the unborn are important to you, pick up the phone and call a pregnancy center to volunteer your services. Write a check,

no matter how small, toward a pro-life publication or cause. If cooking gives you joy, then how can you cook more often? Can you bake and donate your baked goods to the poor? Have faith and act.

In John 7:16-18, Jesus says in essence, "If you commit to do God's will before you know what it is, then God will reveal His will to you and you'll know it." Some refuse to believe it is that simple, but I believe it is. Doing God's will-not finding it-is the hard part.

If you do nothing other than follow your joy, you will be well on your way to fulfilling God's will for your life. If you have made a sincere commitment to doing His will, He will show you what it is-perhaps by no other way than your having joy in what you do.

Don't over-spiritualize the guidance process and don't ignore the answers when they come. Pray, have faith, determine what is important to you and then take action. Do what you can do and God will do the rest.

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