

The One Spiritual Habit You Need Most

When I was a teenager, my mentor, Barry, taught me to have a daily devotional time with God. This has become the single most important habit in my life, and I'm convinced no one can grow as a Christian without it.

I memorized Proverbs 8:34 when I was just 18: "Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at my doorposts." I started getting up early and praying in my college dorm room. I discovered that God promises a blessing to those who spend time with Him! More than 40 years later I'm still setting aside that special time with God.

But how do you structure a daily quiet time in today's overscheduled culture? Many Christians today say they are way too busy to set aside time to pray and read the Bible. Instead, they multi-task their devotional lives by listening to Christian podcasts while commuting to work or praying under their breath while showering or brushing teeth.

There's nothing wrong with doing those things, but if you never set aside time to focus wholeheartedly on prayer or the Bible, your relationship with God will feel cluttered and superficial. It's not too late to develop new habits. Here are a few ways you can make your time with God richer and more intimate.

1. **Set a regular time for your "date" with God.** There is no rule about when to pray. Some people prefer mornings; others find prayer easier in the evening hours. Devotional time works better for me early in the morning, before life's pressures crowd my time. Once you develop your unique habit, and you realize how much you benefit from it, you'll find you simply can't live

without time with God.

2. **Choose a special place that gives you privacy.** Jesus reminded us that seclusion is a secret to effective prayer. He said: "But you, when you pray, enter your closet, and when you have shut your door to pray, pray to your Father who is in secret" (Matt. 6:6a). This doesn't mean you can't pray while driving to work or walking in the woods. But you need a quiet place in order to focus. My favorite chair in my study at home is where I'm most centered.
3. **Turn off your phone.** Would you talk to friends, reply to texts or answer e-mails during a date with your spouse? Not unless you simply don't care about that relationship. The same principle applies when you spend time with the Lord. We need to reclaim the art of undistracted devotion.

I love my phone, but I've found it necessary to silence it during my times with God. And if you use your phone to read the Bible, consider switching to an old-fashioned hard copy of the Scriptures. The temptation to check messages or post Instagram photos can waste time and ruin your devotional life.

4. **Don't put yourself under pressure.** You don't have to read 50 chapters of the Bible or pray three hours. Pace yourself. Be realistic and take small steps. If you have not been seeking the Lord regularly, start by reading a chapter a day in the Bible and praying for 15 minutes. Eventually you will want more. It is better to be a tortoise than a hare. The key is to be consistent.
5. **Learn to "chew" the Bible.** One of the simplest ways to study the Bible is to read one book at a time (such as Romans or Isaiah) and slowly "chew" on each verse. The biblical word "meditate" means "to chew," as a cow chews its cud over and over. The more you read a passage, the more "juice" you squeeze out of it!

6. **Don't just read the Bible; listen for God's voice.** Some people have complained to me, "I just never hear God speaking." Yet when I ask if they read the Bible regularly, they say they're too busy. God wants to speak directly to us through the pages of His Word.

When you read Scripture with a prayerful heart, God can cause a verse to jump off the page as a direct personal message. British preacher Charles Spurgeon recognized this years ago when he wrote: "When I have been in trouble, I have read the Bible until a text has seemed to stand out of the Book, and salute me, saying, 'I was written specially for you.'"

7. **Use a prayer list.** Many Christians view prayer selfishly, as if it's just about getting their own needs met. But Jesus calls us to a deeper place of sacrifice by inviting us to pray for others. Years ago, I started the habit of praying for certain people God had put in my life. Today, I have a long list of family members, friends, mentors and disciples I pray for regularly. Pouring my heart out in prayer for them has become one of the most fulfilling spiritual disciplines I engage in.

The apostle Paul feared that the Corinthians might be "led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3, NASB). Our high-tech, media-saturated culture gives us a million ways to occupy our time, but simple devotion remains the antidote to all distraction. Tune out the noise, go into your prayer closet, close the door and spend time with God. Make devotion a daily habit.

'Paul': A Different Kind of Superhero Movie

Back in the old days, Hollywood gave us big-screen Bible epics every year around Easter. *Ben-Hur*, *The Robe* and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* offered chariot races, clashing swords, sweeping musical scores and colorful Roman costumes—along with some overacting and cheesy religious sentimentality.

But the new film *Paul, Apostle of Christ*, which opened last weekend, isn't trying to be epic or colorful. It's a dark, gritty portrait of the early church and its most influential leader. Best of all, it's true to Scripture without being religious or preachy.

Set in Rome in the year A.D. 67, *Paul* focuses on the apostle's last months before his execution. Emperor Nero is burning Christians alive or feeding them to lions, but Paul (James Faulkner) is languishing in a prison cell. He misses his spiritual son, Timothy. He is weary and in need of medical attention. And he is haunted by memories of the Christians he persecuted before his own conversion.

Luke, the physician and gospel writer (Jim Caviezel, who played Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*), visits Paul to get the final material he needs to write the Book of Acts. Meanwhile, the local Christian community, led by Aquila and Priscilla, are struggling to live out their faith when it seems they may all end up dead.

You'll be disappointed if you watch this film expecting dazzling CGI effects (there are none), swordplay (only in one scene) or an evil Nero (the tyrannical emperor is never shown.) There are no gladiators; the costumes are drab; and Nero's gruesome executions happen mostly off-screen. Sadly, that means modern moviegoers with short attentions spans will

probably yawn through a lot of the movie.

Yet *Paul* is a thoughtful film that shows us how fragile the early church was in its infancy, and how our spiritual ancestors suffered to pass on the gospel to us. It shows how the brave apostle must have felt when he “finished the race,” and how he reflected the character of Jesus even though he never walked with Him.

I wish the director had included Paul’s adventures in Ephesus, Corinth and Athens for the sake of people who don’t know his story. After all, this is the guy who survived a stoning, numerous beatings and a shipwreck. This is also the guy who struck a false prophet blind, cast a demon out of a slave girl and raised a dead boy to life. The historical Paul actually had superhero qualities, but this film focuses more on the last year of his life when he knew he would be executed.

The movie does show, in flashbacks, Paul’s encounter with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. But while the apostle’s superhero actions are ignored, *Paul* does offer a complex portrait of two men who wrote most of the New Testament. At one point Luke tells Paul: “I have never met Christ, but I have seen him in you.” When the apostle speaks about grace or faith or his own weakness, we realize he lived the epistles he wrote for us.

Paul was truly a walking miracle. He had violently opposed the gospel when he was a Pharisee, yet after he met the Savior in that blinding moment of conversion he became the brightest human beacon of truth to ever live. He did not spend three years with Jesus like the first disciples, yet he spent three years in the desert of Arabia being taught by the resurrected Lord.

Paul was produced by Affirm Films, the branch of Sony Pictures that gave us other faith-based films like *Soul Surfer*, *Risen* and *Heaven Is for Real*. It’s obvious director Andrew Hyatt

aimed to create a movie that would appeal to a wider secular audience while pleasing Christians who expect the message to stay true to the Bible.

In one of the final scenes of *Paul, Apostle of Christ*, Paul gives Luke a letter for his successor, Timothy, and some of the believers make copies of the Book of Acts to be distributed to Christians for their encouragement. It reminds us that even though the church seemed weak in those first dark years, their faith withstood the cruelest punishments, and the gospel overcame Roman tyranny.

The film is a jolting reminder that the early church didn't look victorious. It was a seed that had to die in the ground. Early Christians didn't gather in comfortable megachurches—instead, they were tied to poles, covered with fuel and lit on fire.

The early church offered a faithful witness of Christ's love to an evil world. And Paul, who had suffered as much as any of them, was faithful to the end—knowing that even a Roman sword could not separate him from the love of God.

Paul, Apostle of Christ is rated PG-13 because of some disturbing images of execution.

Gun Control Is Not Enough—We Need God's Protection

Parents barely had time to grieve for the 17 victims of the horrific Valentine's Day school shooting in Parkland, Florida, when there was another outbreak of campus violence this week. This time it was at Great Mills High School in southern

Maryland, where a 17-year-old student shot two students with a handgun before an armed deputy shot him.

What is going on here? Since the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting—an unimaginable tragedy that left 20 first-graders dead—there have been 239 school shootings nationwide, with 138 casualties. This number doesn't include mass shootings in other locations like the attack on a church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in November 2017; the Las Vegas massacre in October 2017; or the Orlando nightclub shooting of June 2016.

This week's incident in Maryland came on the same day that a package mailed from Austin, Texas, to an address in Austin exploded while on a conveyer belt at a FedEx facility near San Antonio. Investigators are convinced the person who mailed the carton is the same person who constructed four elaborate package bombs, three that were left on the doorsteps of homes in Austin and another that was left beside a road there.

Two men died in those attacks, two men were injured and a 75-year-old woman had to have her leg amputated because of her injuries. And these unsolved crimes remind us that guns are not the only weapons mass murderers use.

All these incidents have worried students, outraged parents, rattled nerves and sparked a national debate about gun control and school security. J. Scott Smith, a Maryland education official, declared at a press conference after the shooting at Great Mills: "If you don't think this can happen at your school, you are sadly mistaken."

What's the answer? Can we stop the violence?

I personally believe we've been way too lax about the types of weapons that are sold over the counter in this country—and we are too naïve about the legal age of gun ownership. A disturbed young man like Nicolas Cruz, the 19-year-old assailant in the Parkland massacre, should never have been allowed to get his hands on an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle.

We are setting ourselves up for more massacres if we don't adopt stricter background checks on those who purchase guns. We are inviting tragedy if we don't require guns to be locked up if they are stored in homes with children. And we are foolish if we allow anybody and everybody to sell firearms without requiring proper registration.

Yet as students stage walkouts to protest gun violence, and Congress holds hearings about enacting stricter laws, we also must recognize there is a spiritual dimension to this problem. Yes, America is becoming more violent, but guns alone are not the root cause.

Our country needs God.

The Bible tells us that when people honor God, He blesses them with peace and protection. Psalm 144 contains a powerful prayer for the welfare of a nation. It says: "Let our sons in their youth be as grown-up plants, and our daughters as corner pillars fashioned as for a palace; ... Let there be no outcry in our streets! How blessed are the people who are so situated; how blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!" (Psalm 144:12,14b-15, NASB).

Psalm 91 also underscores the truth that God extends His protection over those who love and serve Him. It says: "If you say, 'The Lord is my refuge,' and you make the Most High your dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent" (Ps. 91:9-10, NIV).

God is a shield to those who acknowledge Him. He defends them from harm. But when a nation or a people reject God, His protection begins to lift. Violence increases because Satan holds sway over unredeemed, unbelieving, unrepentant people.

French diplomat Alexis de Toqueville (1805-1859) traveled throughout the United States in its formative years, and he came to believe that our prevalent Christian faith made our democracy strong and our economy vibrant. He wrote in his

classic book, *Democracy in America*: “There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.”

I don't know if de Toqueville would have the same opinion today. We have fallen so far. We redefined morality and stripped away all mention of Christian faith from our schools, institutions and halls of government. We basically told God to leave us alone. And that has left us extremely vulnerable.

If we want safety in our streets and an end to this epidemic of violence, it will require more than gun control. We need a spiritual awakening and a return to true faith. As you pray for protection for our schools and our neighborhoods, pray that America will rediscover the God who is our only safe refuge.

Don't Throw a Tantrum When Hard Times Come

Last week, I boarded a flight for Miami to begin a journey to South America. But our departure time came and went, and flight attendants made numerous announcements apologizing for the delay. Finally, the pilot announced that we had a mechanical problem. He instructed everyone to get off the plane.

The mood was tense as all the passengers regrouped in the gate area. Airline representatives announced that everyone would have to be rebooked because our flight was canceled. The reason: A bird had collided with the plane and caused undetermined damage.

I was upset at first. I was supposed to arrive in Colombia that evening, and I was scheduled to speak at a conference the next day. I was grumbling in my heart. But other passengers were more vocal. I was standing in a long line to speak with an agent, but I could hear people yelling at airline personnel.

One woman near me was on the phone with the airline. She was demanding a rebooking. "I'm not asking you, I'm telling you," she told a customer service representative. "You will get me on another flight, and you will cover the cost of my hotel in Miami and reimburse me for the \$1,500 hotel room I was supposed to sleep in tonight in Aruba."

Another customer was yelling at the innocent gate agent, as if it were her fault that a rogue bird had been allowed to fly into Atlanta's airspace. I felt sorry for the lady at the counter, who was attempting to show courtesy while being berated.

A male passenger near the gate began using obscenities and making verbal threats toward the airline for spoiling his travel plans. A second gate agent informed him that she would call security if he didn't stop yelling.

Watching this scene jolted me into reality. I couldn't believe how grown adults were responding to something as trivial as a flight delay. And I was convicted because I had been on the verge of outrage myself.

So, while standing in that line, I prayed and adjusted my attitude. I said to myself: *I will not act like an entitled American. I will not blame anyone for this, since airlines don't control nature. I will smile and put my trust in the Lord—knowing that if He wants me in Colombia, He can get me there in time. Help me, Lord, to show the fruit of the Holy Spirit.*

Just before I got to the service counter, the passenger in

front of me began throwing a classic hissy fit. The gate agent remained calm—bless her heart—and she reminded the customer that she was doing everything she could to help.

When I finally approached the desk, I smiled and spoke in a soothing tone. “I’m so sorry you have to endure this,” I said. “I know this is not your fault. Thank you for being so polite.”

She smiled back with a look of shock and relief. “Thanks so much; how can I help you?”

I explained that I was supposed to preach in Barranquilla the next afternoon. I said I hoped there might be a way that she could reroute me so that I could make it on time.

After researching different options on her computer, the gate agent asked if she could speak to me privately. She walked away from her desk and I followed her.

She smiled again. “Look, I didn’t want other customers to hear me say this,” she said. “But you’ve been so nice, I want to give you this option.” She explained that she could get me to Bogotá on another airline, and then to Barranquilla in plenty of time for my conference. I said, “Praise the Lord,” and thanked her.

My flight was rerouted, I made my connection, and I arrived in Barranquilla on Saturday morning. Fifteen people gave their hearts to Jesus at the close of the first meeting that afternoon. A canceled flight did not prevent me from fulfilling my mission.

I couldn’t help but think about all the hardships the apostle Paul endured during his journeys. He never experienced the comforts of modern air travel. He walked, rode horses or wagons, or sailed the Mediterranean Sea to reach his destinations. The Book of Acts describes his arrests, imprisonments, snakebites, beatings and the shipwreck he

suffered on the way to Italy.

Paul never complained about his trials. In every case he traded his frustration, anxiety and anger for joy, praise and thanksgiving.

Right after he was stoned by an angry mob and left for dead in Lystra, he returned to the church there and told the disciples: "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22, NASB). Paul would later write to the Philippians: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4, MEV). He penned those words from a crude Roman jail.

I don't always respond with the right attitude when problems come, but this recent experience in the Atlanta airport taught me that my attitude determines my outcome. I hope you will also learn that it pays to respond with love, joy and kindness when our flesh begs us to grumble and complain.

We Have a New National Crisis—Loneliness

Three weeks ago, a troubled young man named Nikolas Cruz used an AR-15 rifle to kill 17 people at his south Florida high school. We were all shocked by the news, but we weren't surprised to hear how acquaintances described the 19-year-old killer. He was called a "loner."

That is the same term journalists pinned to Stephen Paddock, the quiet gambler who fired 1,100 bullets from his Las Vegas hotel room into a crowd of 22,000 music fans on Oct.1, 2017, killing 58 people and wounding more than 800. And Dylann Roof,

the 21-year-old white man who killed nine people in the 2015 Charleston church massacre, was described by his stepmother as “a loner and quiet.”

Loneliness, it seems, can be deadly.

Americans today are lonelier than ever, thanks to family breakdown, media overload, long commutes and job pressures. Our population has increased, highways are more clogged and we are “connected” more than ever through social media, but much of our communication is virtual. Face to face conversations are becoming as rare as hand-written letters.

We have more coffee shops and restaurants than ever, but more of us eat alone or sit with people who are glued to their smart phones. We have more customer service than ever, but it’s all automated. We have more retail outlets than ever, but we don’t talk to a salesperson—we shop online. Soon, a drone (not a real human who might actually smile) will deliver our packages to our front doors.

Psychologists today have been studying loneliness—and they’ve proven that it can also trigger Alzheimer’s disease, obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, neurodegenerative diseases and even cancer. Science actually reveals that humans need close relationships, meaningful touch and loving emotional support in order to thrive physically.

Dr. Vivek Murthy, who served as the U.S. surgeon general until 2016, said he believes loneliness is the most prevalent health issue in this country. Another prominent physician, Dr. Richard S. Schwartz, declared in his book *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the 21st Century*, that people who stay isolated have multiplied health problems and that loneliness is as great a health risk as smoking.

I’ve noticed that loneliness is a problem among many Christians, too. Many Christ-followers have turned their faith into a solo act. It’s a “me and Jesus” kind of thing. We

listen to our favorite preachers online, yet going to church is optional. Church dropouts ask, “Who needs people anyway?”

Are you starved for meaningful relationships? Have you become a Christian loner? Here are a few steps you may need to take:

1. **Get involved in church again.** If you’ve been AWOL from church for a while, wake up and realize that God created you to be connected to others. The church functions as a body, and people need you just as much as you need them. Hebrews 10:25 says: “Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching.” If you skip church, you are also skipping the chance to get encouraged!
2. **Join a small group.** It’s impossible to build deep friendships at church just by attending a Sunday service—especially if it’s a big congregation where people can hide. Most churches have home fellowships, Bible studies or support groups where you can connect on a personal level. Afraid of meeting new people? Swallow your fears and go anyway, even if you feel awkward. It’s possible that the people you meet will become your spiritual family.
3. **Let go of your past hurts.** I meet many Christians who have totally slammed the door of their hearts because they got burned in a past relationship. They don’t realize that resentment leads to more heartache—and even sickness. Cutting yourself off from people is unhealthy, regardless of how you justify it. Ephesians 4:31a says: “Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outbursts, and blasphemies, with all malice, be taken away from you.” If you are full of negativity about people, your toxic attitudes will poison you.
4. **Let God’s love grow in you.** God never called anyone to be a loner. He created us with the capacity to

love—because we were made in His image. When we invite Christ into our lives, His love grows inside us—not only in a vertical way, toward Him, but in a horizontal way toward others. One of the best ways to measure someone’s spiritual maturity is to look at how much they love other people.

God calls us to radical love. 1 Peter 1:22 (NASB) says: “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart.” The word “fervently” in the Greek can also mean “stretched.” The Holy Spirit wants to stretch your love so it becomes God-sized.

Make a quality decision that you will not live in isolation. Refuse the temptation to pull away from people. Open your heart and be willing to make a friend, even before anyone reaches out to you. Let’s drive out loneliness in the body of Christ.

How Billy Graham Avoided Scandal His Entire Life

Evangelist Billy Graham lived 99 years, wrote 30 books, met with 12 sitting American presidents and preached the gospel to millions. But when he is buried this Friday, March 2, in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, he will be remembered not only as a world-changing hero of faith but as a humble preacher whose personal integrity set the gold standard for every minister in this country.

Why was this man so respected? How was he able to keep his ministry free from scandal for more than 75 years?

In 1948, when Graham was just 30 years old, he and his small ministry team met for Bible study and prayer at a tiny motel in Modesto, California. The other men in that meeting including assistant evangelist Grady Wilson, singer George Beverly Shea and song leader Cliff Barrows. Graham challenged them to pray about what codes of behavior they needed to adopt in order to keep the ministry clean.

The results of that meeting were profoundly prophetic. The men outlined what would become “the Modesto Manifesto”—a list of core ministry values that became the guiding principles of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The BGEA was founded two years later, in 1950, just one year after media coverage of Graham’s eight-week gospel campaign in Los Angeles made him a household word.

Here are the four key components of the Modesto Manifesto, along with notes that Cliff Barrows jotted down in their meeting:

1. **Honesty:** “It was resolved that all communications to media and to the church would not be inflated or exaggerated. The size of crowds and the number of inquirers would not be embellished for the sake of making BGEA look better.”
2. **Integrity:** “It was resolved that financial matters would be submitted to a board of directors for review and facilitation of expenditures. Every local crusade would maintain a policy of ‘open books’ and publish a record of where and how monies were spent.”
3. **Purity:** “It was resolved that members of the team would pay close attention to avoiding temptation—never being alone with another woman, remaining accountable to one another, etc. A practice of keeping wives informed of their activities on the road and helping them feel a part of any and all crusades they undertook would be

encouraged.”

4. **Humility:** “It was resolved that members of the team were never to speak badly of another Christian minister, regardless of his denominational affiliation or differing theological views and practices. The mission of evangelism includes strengthening the body of Christ as well as building it!”

Graham has always been a spiritual hero to me for this reason. Early in his ministry—in fact, before he ever became famous—he realized that his ministry was a stewardship from God and that he could not run it any way he wanted. He had to manage it according to clear biblical principles.

Graham never forgot his humble roots, and he never let popularity change him into an egotistical monster. Even though he was invited to dine with presidents, queens and celebrities, his passion was taking the message of Christ to the common person. And when an usher tried to segregate black and white sections of an auditorium in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1953, Graham removed the barriers himself.

“I am not a great preacher, and I don’t claim to be a great preacher,” he once said. “I’ve heard great preaching many times and wished I was one of these great preachers. I’m an ordinary preacher, just communicating the gospel in the best way I know how.”

He also carried with him a healthy fear that he might try to touch God’s glory or take credit for evangelistic results.

Graham said: “So many people think that somehow I carry a revival around in a suitcase, and they just announce me and something happens—but that’s not true. This is the work of God, and the Bible warns that God will not share His glory with another. All the publicity that we receive sometimes frightens me because I feel that therein lies a great danger. If God should take His hand off me, I would have no more

spiritual power. The whole secret of the success of our meetings is spiritual—it's God answering prayer. I cannot take credit for any of it."

So much of what we call ministry today has been compromised by ego, marketing and man-made agendas. Some of our own "Spirit-filled" preachers are happy to sell a healing or a financial miracle for \$. Others claim spiritual superiority because they have the largest following on social media or because so many lined up to attend their packed conferences.

We have exchanged honesty, integrity, purity and humility for hype, fake anointing, manipulated photos, inflated attendance reports, sensuality and boastful swagger. God forgive us.

Billy Graham raised the bar for all ministers. I pray we will never forget his legacy.

Honoring Our Forgotten Black Heroes

Film history was made last weekend when *Black Panther* hit the big screen and broke box-office records. The movie was an instant hit—and not just because African-Americans were excited to finally get their own super hero. The story of T'Challa, the rightful heir to the throne of the mysterious African kingdom of Wakanda, inspires us all to be humble, courageous and wise.

Black Panther is not just for African-Americans. I don't have to be black to admire a black hero.

The same is true when I look at the history of faith in this

country. So many African-Americans sacrificed their lives to spread the gospel of Christ—but their stories are often forgotten because we focus on the names we hear every year during Black History Month. Yet there are so many black reformers, revivalists and preachers who deserve to be honored by all of us.

African-American history is also my history. Before Black History Month concludes, I hope you will celebrate these seven heroes, no matter your racial background:

Lott Carey (1780-1828): Born a slave in Virginia, Carey joined a mixed-race Baptist church in Richmond that had been swept up in the revivalist fervor of the Second Great Awakening. He learned to read the Bible and was able to save enough money to purchase his freedom. He eventually joined a movement of free blacks who desired to return to Africa to a life without racism. Carey became the first black foreign missionary sent from America. He planted a church in Liberia and eventually became its governor.

John Stewart (1786-1823): Born to free Negro parents in Virginia, Stewart experienced a powerful conversion after struggling with alcoholism. He launched the first Methodist mission to the Indians of the United States, focusing his efforts on the Wyandotte tribe of northern Ohio. His message to his audience was: “Flee the wrath to come.” His singing and preaching resulted in the conversions of several tribal chiefs before he died at age 37.

Jerena Lee (1783-1864): After her conversion, this outspoken daughter of slaves felt God calling her to preach. Some African Methodist Episcopal (AME) clergy told her that women couldn’t speak for God. Her reply: “If the man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not the woman, seeing he died for her also?” She was eventually authorized to preach by Richard Allen, founder of the AME church. She traveled thousands of miles on foot to spread the gospel and was the

first black woman in this country to publish an autobiography.

Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): Belle Baumfree was born a slave. After she married and had five children, she escaped from slavery and later fought a legal battle to win her oldest son's freedom. She became one of the first black women in U.S. history to win a court case against a white man. Eventually she had a dramatic conversion and changed her name to Sojourner Truth. She then felt God calling her to become a preacher, and she became an outspoken activist for women's rights, prison reform and the abolition of slavery. She felt it was wrong to fight for abolition and not women's suffrage at the same time. She said: "If colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, ... the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before."

William "Daddy" Seymour (1870-1922): This humble holiness preacher helped birth the modern Pentecostal movement at a time when blacks and whites rarely worshiped together. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Seymour's meetings, held in a rented building on Azusa Street in Los Angeles, beginning in 1906. Mixed-race crowds began attending the services, but locals viewed the whole scene with disdain. Yet in that humble place, where there was no pulpit and people sat on crude benches, a global revival began that has touched countless millions. Seymour, who was blind in one eye, marveled at the fact that all races worshiped together at Azusa. He said: "The color line was washed away in the blood."

C.H. Mason (1864-1961): Healed from tuberculosis as a teenager, Mason began his ministry in Baptist churches in Arkansas and Mississippi. But in 1907, he ventured to Los Angeles to investigate what was happening at the Azusa Street Mission. He had a powerful experience with God and saw a glorious light that enveloped him. He wrote: "My language changed and no word could I speak in my own tongue. Oh! I was filled with the glory of the Lord." He eventually established

the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tennessee, and it grew to a network of 4,000 churches before his death. Today COGIC's worldwide membership has grown to 8 million.

Thoro Harris (1874-1955): The son of a black doctor and a white woman, Harris is known today as one of the most prolific hymn writers of the early 20th century. In 1921 he wrote the song, "Jesus Loves the Little Children," which has been sung in countless Sunday schools of all denominations. It says: "Jesus loves the little children / All the children of the world / Red, and yellow, black and white / They are precious in His sight." He published countless songbooks that were used by early Pentecostals, and he was welcomed in both black and white churches in a time of racial disunity.

These men and women are not just heroes of the black church. They fought for freedom. They tore down walls of injustice. They were persecuted so we could experience the Holy Spirit's liberty. Their legacy is ours to honor and preserve.

We Don't Need Any More 'Shades of Grey'

Last weekend, the final movie in the revolting *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise hit screens. The third and last chapter of this sick soap opera is over. And we are left scratching our heads as we ponder why films that glorify sexual abuse and sadistic bondage are still popular.

We just watched the ugly Harvey Weinstein scandal unfold. We have listened to countless women tell how they were abused by film executives, movie stars and congressmen. Yet this new film, *Fifty Shades Freed*, made almost \$39 million at the box

office last weekend.

Why, why, why are women attracted to films in which the main female character enjoys being abused?

When the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* was published in 2011, critics described it as “dull and poorly written,” “depressing” and “a sad joke.” Yet, it sold 100 million copies.

Women were fascinated by the dark tale of a 21-year-old college student, Ana Steele, who falls in love with a handsome but mysterious billionaire named Christian Grey after she interviews him for a newspaper.

The book was accurately dubbed “mommy porn” because it is sexually graphic and full of crude language, and also because Christian expects his girlfriends to totally submit to his sexual tastes—which involve whips, chains, handcuffs and gray neckties.

It was not just mainstream porn. It was bondage porn.

The first *Fifty Shades* movie came out in 2015, and it broke records for advance ticket sales. Mostly female fans lined up at the Cineplex to watch Christian abuse Ana in his bedroom, which is called “the red room of pain.” A second film, *Fifty Shades Darker*, came out in 2017. The third installment, *Fifty Shades Freed*, opens with the wedding of Christian and Ana.

Critics expected the films to be rated N-17. (After all, the actor who plays Christian, Jamie Dornan, visited a sex dungeon to prepare for his role.) But the Motion Picture Association of America gave the films an R rating because 1) the sex scenes were edited carefully, 2) teenagers can see it legally and 3) the movies can make a ton of money.

We Americans get really angry when oil companies spill toxic fuel in our oceans; so why do we applaud when Hollywood dumps

a tanker of poisonous garbage like *Fifty Shades of Grey* on our country—with no offer to clean up the damage?

Here are three of the biggest reasons why we should urge everyone to cover their eyes and run from *Fifty Shades of Grey*:

1. **It encourages sexual deviance.** In the novel, Christian invites Ana to become his sexual partner, but he asks her to sign a document that spells out what he plans to do to her—and he demands that she tell no one about it. The contract says: “The Submissive shall accept whippings, floggings, spankings, canings, paddlings or any other discipline the Dominant should decide to administer, without hesitation, inquiry or complaint.” Ana finds out that Christian has had relationships like this with 15 other women—and yet she still pursues him, agrees to the painful sex and enjoys it.

There might have been some redemptive value in this movie if Ana called the police or ran out of Christian’s penthouse and refused his advances because she respected herself. But no—she submits to the abuse, and signals to women everywhere that there is pleasure in pain. The film also tells women that it’s OK to be mindless sexual slaves, especially if your boyfriend is rich, handsome and has his own helicopter.

2. **It glorifies violence against women.** A researcher from the University of Michigan did a study on the effects of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel on women readers. It showed that women who read the books were 25 percent more likely to have an abusive partner; 34 percent were more likely to have a partner who stalked them; and 65 percent were more likely to engage in binge drinking.

Just as there is a link between violent video games and violent behavior in teen boys, this study showed that women who read graphic porn novels tend to gravitate toward the

types of abusive relationships depicted in books like *Fifty Shades*. The study also showed that these women were more likely to have eating disorders.

3. **It totally perverts the meaning of love.** In one scene in the book, Christian buys Ana a diamond bracelet so she can cover the bruises on her wrists—which she got after being tied to her boyfriend’s bed. The message from Ana’s lover: I will hurt you, but I will buy you nice gifts so you will stay with me.

That’s twisted. And couples are going to see this movie on Valentine’s Day?

One of the most bizarre moments in the first book occurs after Ana leaves Christian and then goes back to him. She says: “The physical pain you inflicted was not as bad as the pain of losing you.” Any psychologist will tell you that is the mentality of an abuse victim, who is brainwashed to believe that the attention she gets from her abuser is better than no attention at all.

What is most hypocritical is that the same Hollywood executives and celebrities who covered up the Harvey Weinstein scandal are strangely silent about *Fifty Shades of Grey*. How can they condemn Harvey Weinstein for abusing women and then encourage women to sit through a third installment of this garbage?

Don’t buy it. There’s nothing “free” about *Fifty Shades Freed*. We don’t need to fuel the epidemic of abuse that is already destroying so many women’s lives.

Should Women Teach Seminary Classes? John Piper Says No

John Piper is a respected author and Bible teacher, and countless Christians—including many Pentecostals and charismatics—have been blessed by his influence. For more than 30 years, he pastored Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, and now, at age 72, he continues spreading the gospel through his books and his Desiring God website.

But a couple of weeks ago, the Calvinist preacher stirred up a hornet's nest when he said on his "Ask Pastor John" podcast that women should never be allowed to teach seminary classes. Piper said: "If it is unbiblical to have women as pastors, how can it be biblical to have women who function in formal teaching and mentoring capacities to train and fit pastors for the very calling from which the mentors themselves are excluded?"

Anyone who knows Piper's background would not have been shocked that he said this. He's a strict complementarian, meaning that he believes only men can teach and lead in the church and that women must follow them supportively. Most Calvinists, by definition, share this view. In the world of Reformed Christianity, women have agreed to take a back seat.

I certainly support Piper's right to hold what he views as a faithful interpretation of Scripture. But because he is injecting his opinions into the mainstream, I can't sit back and ignore the controversy when I've dedicated my life to empowering and supporting my Christian sisters who are in ministry. Piper's words not only insulted women; I believe his message grieved the Holy Spirit and could seriously hinder today's church from advancing the gospel.

As a Pentecostal who believes the Holy Spirit's gifts are

given to all people—regardless of race, class, age or gender (see Acts 2:17-18)—I believe the current discussion about Piper’s podcast provides the perfect platform for a refresher course on the scriptural basis for women as teachers, preachers and leaders.

1. **The Old Testament upholds the value of women as teachers.** Proverbs tells us that, in a family, wisdom comes from both father and mother. “My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the teaching of your mother” (Prov. 1:8). But a mother’s teaching and godly influence are not restricted to the home. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman preaching in the streets!

We have several examples of women who held leadership positions in Israel, including Miriam and Deborah. And we also see that when Israel was backslidden, and the book of the Law had been forgotten, King Josiah sent his representatives to find a “prophetess” named Huldah (see 2 Kings 22:14) who delivered the word of the Lord. At a time when even the priests had fallen away from God, this faithful woman continued to teach the truth, and she did not hold back from speaking it.

2. **Jesus gave women their voice back.** Jesus ministered at a time when women had no rights. Yet He elevated women to a position of dignity, and He especially reached those who suffered as social outcasts and abuse victims. Jesus also gathered a group of women and disciplined them at a time when Jewish rabbis believed it was wrong to teach women from the Torah. He even sent the Samaritan woman to preach to all the men of her village.

And in the end, Jesus chose one of His women followers, Mary Magdalene, to be the first to proclaim that He had been raised from the dead. I believe He did this to demonstrate that the shame-based restrictions placed on women since the Garden of

Eden have now ended. The gospel liberates women from second-class status. And it surely empowers women to speak for God.

3. **We have New Testament examples of women teachers.** I'm not sure how John Piper would explain the ministry of Priscilla, since we see her in the book of Acts instructing the young apostle named Apollos (see Acts 18:24-28). Priscilla is the grandmother of all women seminary teachers. She and her husband, Aquilla, traveled with the apostle Paul and helped lay the spiritual foundations of the early church. To ignore Priscilla's ministry is to dishonor a true mother of the faith.

Piper believes only men can teach men, especially men who are called to be pastors. But by maintaining this position he discounts the ministry of biblical woman such as Euodia, Syntyche, Chloe, Nympha, Junia and Phoebe, all who worked alongside Paul. Calvinist teachers claim to be strict enforcers of the Scriptures, but they actually display a cavalier attitude toward the Bible when they minimize the influence of the female heroes of the early church.

4. **We cannot use Paul's words as a universal ban on women teachers.** Piper and other complementarians base all their opposition to women teachers on 1 Timothy 2:12, where Paul says he does not allow women to "usurp" a man's authority. Yet Paul also allowed Priscilla to teach, sent Phoebe as a deacon to Rome (see Romans 16:1-2), and defended the right of Euodia and Syntyche to do ministry work (see Phil. 4:2-4). So obviously what Paul told Timothy was not a universal, all-inclusive directive; he was addressing a specific heresy in the Ephesian church that required swift discipline.

To all my sisters I say: Don't be discouraged. If you sense the call of God, and you know the fire of the Holy Spirit is burning in your heart, don't let the narrow views of some

Christians stop you from pursuing your dream. Men may seek to limit and restrict you, but God has the last word. He declared on the day of Pentecost: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17b).

Honor Your Father and Mother—a Forgotten Commandment

Twenty months ago this week, my 88-year-old father was weeding in his backyard when he slipped off an embankment and fell four feet onto his concrete driveway. My mother found him a few minutes later. He was lying in a pool of blood. He had no idea he had sustained a brain injury that would sap his mobility, speech and most of his memories.

The next day, I drove the familiar eight hours from Florida to Georgia to sit by my dad’s hospital bed. It was painful to watch him struggle. I knew he’d never be the same. I called my wife, and we quickly decided to sell our house and move to my parent’s town to take care of Daddy.

We then began what I call the long goodbye. My father went from the hospital to a rehab facility to a nursing home, then back to the hospital. Then we brought him to his home for a while, employing two caregivers, because Daddy had to be watched 24 hours a day. Finally, after another hospital stay, he went back to the nursing home for seven months.

My wife or I visited him every day, usually at lunchtime. My mother—who has been married to my dad for 67 years—was always by his side. She brought him clean clothes every day, cut his

hair, patted his head, listened to his ramblings and mourned his declining health. Daddy didn't know where he was (he often told me he was in a hotel), and he didn't always know me (once he told me I was a baseball player), but he had the brightest smile on the third floor of his nursing home.

Last week, after a bout with the flu, he stopped eating. His pastor came to visit on Tuesday and sang two hymns to him while my dad gasped for breath. My mom, my sister and a few other relatives sat in his room on Wednesday and talked while he lay almost motionless.

I went back to Daddy's bedside on Wednesday night and played more hymns for him on my phone. Before I left, a night nurse told me that a few months ago, she found my dad sitting up in his bed praying loudly. Then I prayed for him and told him it was OK for him to go to heaven.

Daddy died before sunrise on Thursday morning. He was 90. The long goodbye was finally over.

Nobody prepared me for what I experienced these past 20 months. I never read a book about how to care for aging parents, how to talk to a person with dementia or how to process the pain of seeing your own father forget who you are. And now, for the first time, I am learning how to handle grief.

There was one principle that guided me through this ordeal. I first heard Exodus 20:12 when I was a kid in Sunday school: "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you."

I later learned that this commandment, first given by God to Moses, was reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 15:5-7 and by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 6:2. Honoring our parents is not some antiquated rule that was later set aside because we live in the smart-phone era. It is timeless. And our culture seems to have forgotten it.

There is nothing sadder to me now than to see neglected old people. Some of the patients in my dad's nursing home sit in the corner of the dining room every day and never get visitors. Maybe they don't have children? Have their children died already? Or were their children too busy with their own lives to care about parents who had lost their memory?

In our materialistic culture, we worship youth, athleticism, sexuality and popularity. People are valued when they are young, healthy and employable. When they get old and sick, they are often discarded or ignored.

I don't think God is too happy about that.

Exodus 32:16 says God Himself engraved the Ten Commandments on two stone tablets. That holy list is the only part of the Bible not written by inspired human agents. God wrote those words with His own hand! How foolish we are to flippantly ignore them.

Honoring parents is so much more than caring for them in their old age—although this is something you may need to carefully adjust your priorities to obey. God calls us to think generationally. The fifth commandment cuts to the core of our selfishness and calls us to care beyond the here and now. It calls us to cherish those who have gone before us and to value their legacy.

The fifth commandment tells us that there are more important things than personal ambitions, financial goals and momentary pleasures. It tells us that if we will honor those who have invested in us, no matter the sacrifice required, we will end up with more to invest in others.

Let God examine you. Allow the Holy Spirit to write the fifth commandment on your heart so you can be blessed.