

Don't Throw in the Towel!

I have a friend who is a respected Christian leader. But like all of us, he wrestles with his own sins, weaknesses and trials. People associated with his ministry have disrespected him, his family has suffered, and he has struggled with health problems. He has also carried loads of shame since his childhood because of sexual abuse.

My friend recently admitted that he has occasionally asked God to take his life because he was so discouraged. When I prayed with him, I saw a vision of a huge arena. I could see athletes running while the crowd cheered, but my friend was sitting on a bench next to the track. Then I saw Jesus walk over to him, grab his arm and beckon him to get in the race.

My friend turned a spiritual corner after I shared this vision with him. His hope was renewed, and he decided to run the race of faith again. But there are many Christians today who have pulled out of the race because life got too tough. Some were instantly broadsided; others gradually slowed down until they quit.

The apostle Paul wrote to a group of people who were thinking of quitting the race. They were Jewish Christians who faced intense persecution. Using imagery of an athletic arena, Paul said to them: "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).

Are you sitting on the bench? Or are you out of breath because you are lugging 50 pounds of shame and failure? Have you disqualified yourself from the race? Here are five of the most common reasons Christians throw in the towel:

1. Depression or discouragement. When we face stress, tragedy,

disappointment, failure or prolonged delay, we will lose hope if we don't stay close to God and cling to His promises. We must remember that the darkness never lasts. "Weeping may last for the night," Psalm 30:5 says, "but a shout of joy comes in the morning."

Charles Spurgeon wrote: "There are no immortal sorrows for immortal saints. They come; but, blessed be God, they also go." No matter what obstacle you face, it will not stand in front of you indefinitely. No matter how heavy and dark the cloud is over your head, the sunshine will soon break through. Though you may not see a light at the end of the tunnel, you must keep pressing forward. You will outlast your problem.

2. Shame or self-loathing. The miracle of grace says all your past sins have been blotted out. If you have trusted in the blood of Christ, heaven has purged all record of your failures. Yet many Christians cannot forgive themselves for their weaknesses, and they imagine that God is still angry with them because they still struggle with temptation. And the devil is eager to remind us of what we once were!

Go back to the cross and give God your doubts, fears and shame. Stop punishing yourself. Trade your sinfulness for His righteousness. Jesus knows you cannot live a sinless life apart from Him—so He chose to live His perfect life through you.

3. Sinful habits. If you struggle with a life-controlling problem, you cannot overcome it alone. You must open your life to mature Christians and confess your weakness. Paul told the Hebrews: "Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble" (Heb. 12:12). Athletes don't rehabilitate themselves—they ask for help. You cannot run the race when sin has crippled you. Be transparent and let the right people pray with you.

4. Distraction. The key to winning a race is focus. Paul

emphasized this when he told the Hebrews to fix their eyes on Jesus (Heb. 12:2). Our focus cannot be on a pastor, a celebrity preacher, a pet doctrine, a church, a denomination, a political party, spiritual gifts or emotions. If you put your trust in any of those things, you will not be able to finish the race. It was Jesus who started His work in you, and only He will complete it.

Regaining your focus is not difficult. Simply set aside some time to pray, and cast your cares on the Lord. Read the Psalms. Listen to praise music. Spend time in God's Word each day. Spurgeon said: "A Bible that's falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." If you soak your mind in Scripture, you will find unusual grace to press forward, even when all hell is raging against you.

5. Persecution. It's easy to serve God when everybody thinks you're wonderful. But how do you respond when family members and co-workers speak against you because of your faith or your moral convictions? Persecution can tempt us to deny Christ or to make moral compromises. But you must remember that when you suffer for His name's sake, you will be blessed. Peter said when we are persecuted, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you" (1 Pet. 4:14).

I will tell you what I told my friend last week. Jesus is calling you back in the race. Don't just sit there and let the devil win. Put one foot in front of the other, focus on Jesus and trust Him to give you the strength to run. {eoa}

If Jesus Can Restore Peter,

He Can Restore You

One of the saddest parts of the Easter story occurred the night Jesus was arrested. His disciple Peter was stressed to the breaking point and fearful of the crowd. When the high priest's servant girl accused him of being a disciple of Jesus, he denied it.

When the girl repeated her accusation to some bystanders, he denied knowing Jesus again. When others questioned him, the Bible says Peter "began to invoke a curse on himself, and to swear, 'I do not know this Man of whom you speak'" (Mark 14:71). The brave disciple who had promised Jesus he would follow Him anywhere turned into a pitiful wimp. He caved in under the pressure.

Then the rooster crowed, and Peter remembered Jesus' words: "Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times" (v. 72).

This could have been the end for Peter. He wept bitterly and disappeared. He never says anything else in Matthew and Mark's Gospels. Luke says Peter went to Jesus' tomb and found it empty. John's is the only Gospel that explains how Peter found full restoration after his failure.

Sulking, lonely and dejected, Peter went back to what he knew—his fishing job. He had fished all night and caught nothing. But then Jesus appeared on the shore and invited His friends to cast their nets on the right side of the boat—and they hauled in a full net of fish!

This was a divine sign that their Master still had plans to use Peter, in spite of his weakness.

Peter must have been curious when He saw the full breakfast Jesus had prepared for the disciples on the beach. How could this be? Jesus wasn't frowning or scowling. Nor was he waiting

to deliver a stern rebuke. He didn't scold Peter or even remind him of his cowardly denial.

This amazing Savior simply invited Peter to sit with him and eat. Jesus wanted to be with his friend.

Then Jesus talked his beloved Peter through the process of healing. He said to Peter three times: "Do you love me?" Surely Peter realized that Jesus was repeating himself three times in order to intentionally apply forgiveness to his three denials. Jesus' three commands to Peter ("Feed My lambs," "Tend My sheep" and "Feed My sheep") provided all the reassurance he needed.

Jesus had not disqualified him. Peter was not sent away as a failure. He was back in the game.

What is even more amazing is how the shaky, impetuous, insecure Peter was transformed after he was baptized in the Holy Spirit a few weeks later. This weak man who crumbled under pressure when His Master was arrested then preached not one, not two, but three important sermons in the opening chapters of the book of Acts.

First, Peter preached on the day of Pentecost and boldly declared to a crowd that Jesus is the Messiah—and 3,000 people were converted. Second, after God healed the lame man in Solomon's portico, Peter preached a sermon of repentance and 5,000 people were saved. Third, after Peter and John were arrested and brought before the high priest, Peter bravely defended his faith in Christ and told the elders: "There is salvation in no one else" (Acts 4:12).

Three denials. Three affirmations of Christ's love. Three courageous sermons defending Jesus in the face of opposition. I hope you can do the math.

Peter's story is my story—and yours. We all need to know that the risen Savior is willing to welcome us back even when we

have disappointed Him. He is faithful even when we are faithless.

There is a bit of Peter in all of us. We are weak in the face of temptation. We have dropped the ball too many times. We allowed fear to paralyze us. Maybe you have even keep a spiritual scorecard to remind yourself how many times you have struck out. You may have assumed God's grace had reached its limit.

Yet the Easter story shows us otherwise. The same Christ who conquered the grave also conquered our sin and shame. The same Peter who denied knowing Jesus ended up being one of his boldest witnesses.

As you celebrate Resurrection Day this weekend, please remember that after Peter wept over his embarrassing failure, the sun came up and Jesus appeared on the shore with a meal prepared. He invited Peter to breakfast, and then lovingly restored his faith. Jesus can do the same for you, no matter how you have failed Him. {eoa}

4 Ways People Misuse the Bible

The Bible is a supernatural book. It is divinely inspired and saturated in God's living presence. It brings joy when we are sad, comfort when we are weary, guidance when we are confused and encouragement when we are ready to quit. That's why we need to read and study it daily.

God's word is compared to fire, water, seed, honey, milk, meat, bread, rain, a lamp, a mirror and the very breath of

God. But it is also compared to a weapon. Ephesians 6:17 calls the Bible “the sword of the Spirit,” and Hebrews 4:12 says it is “sharper than any two-edged sword.”

And while swords are extremely useful in a conflict, they are also dangerous. This is why the apostle Paul instructed Timothy to handle the word of truth “accurately.” This word, in the original Greek, means “to make a straight cut.”

That means when we use God’s Word, we don’t wave the blade around sloppily or slash people. Instead, we use it according to the Owner’s manual. After all, the Bible is not our sword—it is the sword of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who inspired all Scripture, should guide how we use God’s Word.

Some disturbed people today buy guns and plan mass shootings; in the same way, lots of people buy Bibles and then misuse them. The result is spiritual carnage. Here are four primary ways the Bible is misused:

1. We misuse it to condemn people. Our heavenly Father is merciful, slow to anger and full of love. Yet people who don’t understand His heart make Him out to be a harsh, abusive God. Legalists spend most of their time in the Old Testament, and they prefer to judge rather than extend grace.

All Scripture is inspired by God, but we are a New Testament people now. The coming of Christ changed everything. The Old Testament must be read in the light of the New. You will be miserable, and you will make other people miserable, if you don’t understand that mercy has triumphed over judgment (see James 2:13).

For example, we often quote Malachi 2:16—“For the Lord, the God of Israel, says that He hates divorce”—without explaining that God has compassion for the victims of divorce. Be careful how you quote God’s Word to people. Always season your words with grace.

2. We misuse it to manipulate people. Preachers have a special responsibility to nourish, encourage, exhort and even rebuke the church using God's Word. But we should never use Scripture to extort money, twist people's arms or put them under a cloud of guilt.

For example, I've heard ministers use verses from the Bible to suggest that if people give in an offering, all their debts will be magically paid overnight. That is not scriptural; that is sorcery! I've also heard ministers use 1 Chronicles 16:22a—"Do not touch My anointed"—to warn people never to ask questions about a minister's financial behavior. But the Bible should never be used as a tool to keep people from asking honest questions.

3. We use it to mislead people. The Bible warns us about false teachers who infiltrate the church as imposters. Such teachers always quote chapter and verse to defend their odd doctrines. Mormons sometimes use Jesus' words in John 10:16a—"I have other sheep who are not of this fold"—to promote the idea that God established Mormonism as His final, end-time church. But Jesus was speaking of Gentiles in that passage.

Even the devil can quote Scripture (see Matt. 4:6). Beware of people who use Scripture to lure people away from simplicity of devotion to Christ. Some liberal denominations today use Isaiah 43:19a—"See, I will do a new thing"—to suggest that God has now sanctioned same-sex marriage. Yet if you study the New Testament you will find that homosexuality is never permissible for a Christian. The "new thing" prophesied by Isaiah was the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the age of grace! Don't be deceived by a person who uses the Bible to excuse their sin or to lead others into immorality.

4. We misuse it to excuse people from responsibility. While some people judge others with the Bible, many try to smooth the edge of the sword so it won't hurt anyone. Because they

don't want to appear judgmental, they go to the opposite extreme by overemphasizing grace. They play it safe by avoiding parts of Scripture that directly confront sinful behavior.

Yet human hearts are hard, and sin has made us that way. We need to be cut. Our hearts are sick, and we need to be sliced open by the Holy Ghost in order to be healed. He uses the two-edged sword of God's Word to perform that divine incision. True conversion cannot happen until the sharp edge of the truth performs the needed surgery. Soft sermons result in soft, weak, spineless Christians.

We must become like Paul, who told the Ephesians: "For I did not keep from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Don't add words to the Bible that aren't there, and don't ignore words that are there. Speak the whole truth with all grace. Let the Holy Spirit help you to wield His sword with balance and precision. {eoa}

Don't Let a Secret Ruin Your Life

I don't know exactly why, but many people confide in me. I can't count the times people have told me, "I don't know why I'm telling you this, but ...," and then they share a horrible moment from their past. They finish by saying: "You're the first person I've ever told."

At a recent men's retreat in South America, dozens of guys came to the altar one evening and asked for prayer because they had been victims of sexual abuse or they struggled with a porn addiction. Most of them told me they had never shared

their secret with anyone because it was too embarrassing.

After they admitted what happened—often through tears—they found indescribable relief. It was as if a 200-pound weight they'd carried for years just dropped off their shoulders.

We know what the Bible says about secrets. Whether we are hiding a sin we committed or suffering from the shame of something done to us, transparency is the path to freedom. James 5:16a says: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed."

The devil thrives in darkness. Satan loves it when we keep our sins, failures and embarrassing moments locked up in a vacuum-sealed emotional compartment. As long as no one else knows our pain, our enemy can exploit it.

When no one else knows about our issues, Satan whispers his lies without being challenged. His arsenal is full of accusations. He tells us: "No one else struggles with this," "You are the only one with this problem" or "Anyone with your problem is a terrible Christian—you might as well give up."

Have you heard those words? If you have never brought your pain into the light, unlock your heart and allow the light of God's love into your darkness. The old adage says, "Confession is good for the soul," but it's good for your physical health, too. Here are nine of the most common secrets people are afraid to reveal:

1. Abuse: Some victims of abuse were warned if they ever told anyone about what happened, they would be harmed. No wonder so many people hide this ugly secret. Plus, society sometimes stigmatizes those who are abused, or victims imagine they deserve mistreatment. The only way to silence such voices is to bring your pain into the light.

2. Abortion: Our culture minimizes the emotional effects of abortion, and some people even push others to abort. Yet

abortion is often accompanied by overwhelming guilt—for the woman who ends a pregnancy or for a man who is responsible for it. If you endured this experience it is best to process it, receive prayer and ask God for forgiveness and closure.

3. Bullying: Verbal abuse is extremely hurtful, especially when it involves a child. Some people have been marked for life by toxic words spoken by parents, classmates, teachers or relatives. If your soul was branded with a hot iron by hateful words, you need to discuss them and receive prayer. God can shatter the power of a curse.

4. Rejection or abandonment: I have prayed with people who were abandoned by parents or spouses. They are tempted to blame themselves—and then they hang a huge scarlet “R,” for “Rejected,” around their neck for the rest of their lives. And the devil is happy to chime in with his chorus: “You are worthless and unlovable.” You need someone else to help you overcome this lie.

5. Sexual sin: I will never forget the moment when a man wept in my arms and admitted he had been unfaithful to his wife more than eight years earlier. He had carried that weight for too long, and he assumed God would never forgive him. Today his marriage is healed, and he is active in ministry. Whatever sexual sin you have been involved in, the blood of Jesus is powerful enough to forgive. But don’t hide it!

6. Sexual confusion: Some Christians lack compassion for people who struggle with same-sex feelings or gender confusion. But the fact is that people wrestle with their sexual identity for a variety of reasons. If the church does not become a safe place to talk about these problems, people will simply seek help from the world. If you struggle with any area of your sexuality, the Holy Spirit can give you the power to live a life of purity. But you must open up and share what you are wrestling with.

7. Panic attacks, anxiety or unnatural fears: Some people are tormented by embarrassing fears or worries. It could be something as simple as a fear of talking on the phone, or as paralyzing as fear of car accidents, yet it's hard to admit such quirks to others. So we suffer in silence. Bring your fears and worries into the light and let a mature Christian pray for you!

8. Depression: Clinical depression affects a large percentage of Americans, yet we don't talk much about it in church. People who suffer from depression often choose to hide their sadness behind a mask—since “good Christians” are supposedly happy all the time! But hiding depression is not only bad for you—it is bad for the people around you. You need to talk about it.

9. Addictions: Many Christians never grow in their faith because they are hiding a secret addiction—to either prescription medicine, alcohol, gambling, nicotine or marijuana. They have had to learn to sneak around so no one will find out—and this severely hinders social interaction. You can break free from these chains if you confess your sin to another believer.

When you decide to open your heart, don't just talk to anyone. It is best to share with a mature Christian who has a track record of confidentiality and compassion. In some cases, it is also good to join a support group with others who have the same struggles. (After some initial prayer ministry, you also may decide you need to talk to a professional counselor.)

When you share your pain, you may fear that the person listening to you will judge you, scold you or shame you—but no loving Christian will do that. They will listen, speak words of forgiveness and help you receive God's amazing mercy. {eoal}

6 Signs of a Toxic ‘Apostle’

I’ve just spent two weeks in South America, where the Holy Spirit is moving in unprecedented ways. Churches are growing and average Christians are sharing their faith passionately. One recent Pew Research study showed that 1 in 5 Latin Americans now identifies as an evangelical Christian—and a majority of these are Pentecostals.

But this growth is not without problems. While there are certainly many healthy Christian movements in the region, other churches are suffering from a lack of trained leadership. And untrained, untested leaders often result in spiritual abuse, false doctrines and financial corruption.

I’ve become more concerned lately with leaders who declare themselves “apostles” when they have no business wearing that label. I believe true apostolic leadership is needed today, but a small army of imposters is threatening to damage the work of God. It is time to heed the apostle Paul, who warned of “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who were “disguising themselves as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13).

Discerning the difference between a true and false apostle is not complicated. Since Scripture clearly tells us that Paul is our apostolic model (see 1 Cor. 4:16), we can use his surrendered life as our standard. Here are six signs that a man or woman who claims apostolic leadership is actually a dangerous influence in the church.

1. A toxic “apostle” requires the title. One popular television preacher in the United States typically sends a letter to his hosts before any preaching engagement and specifies that his name must be preceded by the “apostle”

title. Compare that arrogant attitude with the humility of Paul, who referred to himself as the chief of sinners (see 1 Tim. 1:15). If a man requires people to elevate him to an elite status, you can be sure he has a serious character flaw.

2. A toxic “apostle” carries an aura of self-importance. In some churches I have visited in Africa, the “man of God” waits until after worship to enter the auditorium—and then he is followed by an entourage. Someone carries his Bible, another carries his handkerchief, someone else carries his water bottle and another brings his iPad. This spectacle is designed to impress people—but it is all just religious theater. It is an offense to God. You can be certain that a man with this much pride will soon fall.

3. A toxic “apostle” is inaccessible. One pastor I know in a Latin American country belongs to a network of churches ruled by powerful preacher. But when I asked my friend if he gets advice or mentoring from this leader, the answer was no. The “apostle” does not offer counsel, training or personal interaction of any kind to the leaders in his group. He simply steps into his pulpit to preach and then vanishes.

The apostle Paul’s style was totally the opposite. Rather than being aloof and impersonal, Paul spent time with those he was mentoring. He told the Thessalonians: “So having great love toward you, we were willing to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you were dear to us” (1 Thess. 2:8). If an “apostle” cannot get on the same level with people and interact with them, he is in the wrong profession.

4. A toxic “apostle” dominates and controls people. The apostle Paul told Timothy that church leaders are required to be gentle and “not argumentative” (1 Tim. 3:3). Yet I have known so-called apostles who used their violent temper to manipulate and intimidate their followers. A man who is full of anger is unbroken and un-surrendered; God would never

entrust an apostolic ministry to someone with that fatal flaw. The Lord will first drain out his anger and replace it with the sweetness of Jesus before letting him shepherd God's people.

5. A toxic "apostle" refuses to work with churches outside his network. False apostles are insecure because of their lack of training, so they feel threatened by other leaders' successes. They develop an atmosphere of elitism—and pretend that their doctrines and preaching styles are superior to everyone else's. False apostles also demand strict loyalty to their churches and may even curse members who leave. True apostles are not controllers or elitists; they work to expand the kingdom of God, not just their own church or denomination.

6. A toxic "apostle" demands financial payment. I asked one friend in Latin America if his "apostle" offered him marriage counseling, encouragement or ministry training. He replied: "No, the only discussions we have are about the tithe I owe him." How tragic that hard-working pastors are being ripped off by wolves in sheep's clothing.

As we contend for true apostolic leadership in today's church, let's avoid the pitfalls of immaturity. We need character, humility and integrity as well as powerful anointing. Don't follow the false apostles. {eo}

Let God's Grace Flood Your Soul Again

The word *grace* appears in the Old Testament only 37 times. But you will find it 122 times in the New Testament. Every epistle penned by the apostle Paul opens with the greeting, "Grace to

you,” and closes with similar words. It is as if the New Testament is literally bathed in grace. Notice the trend:

- “*Grace* to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:7b).
- “The *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen” (Rom. 16:24).
- “*Grace* to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:3).
- “*Grace* to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” (Gal. 1:3).
- “*Grace* to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:2).
- “*Grace* to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:2).
- “The *grace* of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (1 Thess. 5:28).
- “The *grace* of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Philem. 1:25).
- “*Grace* to you and peace be multiplied” (1 Pet. 1:2).
- “*Grace* to you and peace” (Rev. 1:4b).

And the closing words of the Bible are the same, in Revelation 22:21: “The *grace* of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Amen.”

Why this continual flood of grace? John’s Gospel reveals the secret when he writes: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Old Covenant couldn’t give us true victory over sin because it was based on man’s obedience to rules; the New Covenant guarantees forgiveness because it is based on the

obedience of Jesus alone, not on our performance.

This is the essence of Christianity. We have been saved by grace through faith. Yet I meet so many Christians who struggle to receive grace, even though the Bible is dripping with it on every page. We find it difficult to believe that God really and truly loves us because we are so aware of our sinful past, our recurring sinful habits and our blatant weaknesses.

If you are struggling to understand true grace, open your heart and read the words below, and imagine that Jesus, the Lover of Our Souls, is saying them to you directly:

...Because of My grace, I am not angry with you. Because you have put your faith in Me, there is no condemnation, shame or guilt. I took all of your guilt on the cross. I have chosen to forgive and forget your sins. I have pronounced over you, "Not guilty!" Stop bringing up your past. There is nothing on your record! I have covered you with My blood, and I have made you righteous.

...Because of My grace, I am not disappointed in you. Even though you stumble often, and even though your flesh is weak, I see your heart is to please Me. Don't let your failures discourage you. I'm not counting your mistakes. I am patient and full of kindness. My grace is working powerfully to make you faithful. You are My beloved child, and I would never abandon you.

...Because of My grace, you don't have to strive to be perfect. When you first invited Me into your life, I placed My Spirit inside you. He began working at that moment to refine you, and He will not stop until you are transformed into My image. Stop striving and straining and sweating. You cannot change yourself. Let My Spirit do His miraculous work! Yield to Me, and I will change you from one level of glory to the next.

...Because of My grace, you can have a close and intimate

relationship with Me. When I paid for your sins at Calvary, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. There is no separation now—I have invited you to live in My presence and to hear My voice. I am seeking those who will be My worshippers. I have been drawing you closer. Come away, My beloved, and spend time with Me. Seek Me with all your heart. I want to reveal Myself to you, face to face.

Because of grace, I have ransomed you from the enemy and claimed you as My own. Because of grace, I have delivered you from darkness and secured a place for you in heaven for eternity. Because of grace, I have adopted You into My family and given You My full inheritance. Because of grace, I no longer call you a slave—you are My friend. Don't let anything hinder you from receiving My grace! {eo}

God Wants You to Multiply

My wife and I have four grown daughters, and the youngest of them is 24. We are not planning to have any more babies. Our girls are the joy of our lives—and we love it when they visit our empty nest.

But even though we're finished with the task of bringing Grady children into the world, I'm not finished reproducing. I believe every Christian is called to bear spiritual children. Jesus called us to make disciples, and this is what He was referring to when He told His followers: "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit ..." (John 15:8a).

So for the past several years, I've invested most of my waking hours discipling younger Christians. I offer them counsel and share the life lessons I've learned in ministry. We meet for coffee or meals and take trips together; we also chat using

every medium available—phone, text, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook and Skype. I love watching young people grow spiritually.

Discipleship is not just a hobby—it's my passion. But something dramatic happened a few months ago that proved to me how serious God is about this process of spiritual multiplication.

I was preaching at Berean Church in Pittsburgh on a Sunday morning in October. After my message, I invited people to the altar who wanted to be filled with the Holy Spirit. I also had a word of knowledge that there was a young man in the audience who had a porn addiction.

Many people responded, but I noticed a tall guy right in the middle of the group at the altar. I laid hands on his head and prayed, and then moved on to pray for the others. When I looked back I saw that this young man was on the floor. He was trembling and speaking in tongues.

When I finished praying for everyone, Pastor Mark Moder closed the service. But the young guy was still on the floor, so I sat down next to him and prayed quietly. I could tell the Holy Spirit was doing some deep work in him. He must have stayed horizontal for 20 minutes.

When he finally sat up and gained composure, I asked him a few questions. He told me he was 20 years old. He told me he came to the altar because he'd been a slave to pornography. He said it was his first visit to this church.

"What's your name," I asked.

"Dante Lee Grady," he replied.

"Huh? You're kidding," I said.

"No, seriously! I was surprised to find out the preacher this morning has my name!" he said.

Since that day, Dante Lee Grady and I have become close. He came to my home in Georgia in January for a discipleship retreat, he traveled with me when I preached last month in Pennsylvania, and he's joining me on another ministry assignment in May.

This guy is on fire for God now. He's ravenously reading the study Bible I gave him, he's plugged into Berean Church and he feels a call to fulltime ministry. And he texts me often to ask questions about his faith.

I never had a biological son. But now I have a spiritual son who actually bears my name.

When I asked God about this unusual experience, I sensed that my encounter with Dante was a prophetic sign—not just for me but also for the body of Christ. God is reminding us that we must take the command to make disciples seriously. Our priorities must shift.

We've all read the research about the younger generation in the United States. Statistics show that many young adults have left the church or have no interest in Christianity. Yet I've also seen that when I offer to be a mentor or a spiritual father to young people between the ages of 18 to 34, they are eager to latch on.

When I offer love and encouragement to these young adults, they can't get enough. This generation isn't interested in dry religious programs, but they crave an authentic and relational connection with a mature Christian who is willing to spend time with them.

The spiritual sons and daughters I'm investing in today love worship, they want to experience the Holy Spirit's power, and they are eager to share their faith everywhere. Dante has almost 10,000 followers on Twitter (@whoknowsDante), and he loves to tell them about Jesus.

Watching Dante Lee Grady become a mature follower of Christ gives me great hope for the future. It reminds me that every Elijah should have a young Elisha following him and begging for a double portion of the Holy Spirit. And if you read that story in the Bible, you learn that Elisha surpassed his mentor. That is my heart's cry—that those I invest in will do greater things than I did!

Don't miss the greatest adventure of the Christian life. Don't let the life of Jesus end with you—pass it on to the next generation. Be a multiplier. God wants you to reproduce His life in others. {eoa}

10 Qualities of Healthy Mentors

Throughout my Christian journey, God sent special people to be my role models and mentors. One of those, a youth pastor named Barry, invited me to his home for a weekly Bible study when I was just 15. He taught me how to have a private prayer time with God—and now, many decades later, he's still a close mentor and an example of how to be a man of God.

Yet I meet many Christians today who never had a mentor—or they had a bad experience with someone who tried to disciple them the wrong way. If you want to begin a relationship like this, you can find God's pattern for discipleship in the Bible. Here are 10 qualities to look for in a healthy mentor:

1. Healthy mentors have mentors. The greatest leaders I know talk often about the people who helped them grow as Christians. No mature leader is “self-made.” Even the apostle Paul had Ananias and Barnabas to disciple him when he first

came to faith. If a mentor claims he or she “learned everything directly from God,” you can be sure they have a spirit of pride. Never trust a loner.

2. Healthy mentors are accessible. Some mentors keep an arms-length distance from people, and they make you wait until the planets align to schedule an appointment. That is not the Jesus way. The apostle Paul told the Romans: “For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift (Rom. 1:11a). Don’t be aloof or play hard-to-get. If you are called to help other disciples grow, give them your phone number, answer their texts and open your heart as well as your office door.

3. Healthy mentors don’t just talk—they listen. Jesus is the source of all wisdom, yet when He was with His disciples, He didn’t just lecture them. He often asked them questions (see Mark 8:27-30) and listened to their answers. God gave us one mouth and two ears—so we should listen twice as much as we talk. Good mentors know how to use their ears to comfort and care.

4. Healthy mentors are patient and understanding. If you are called to be a mentor, you must realize that people don’t always take your advice the first time you offer it. Young Christians will make huge mistakes, ignore your counsel and frustrate you so much that you’ll be tempted to get angry, pull out your hair (or theirs) and give up on them! Be there for them when they stumble. Cry with them when necessary.

5. Healthy mentors have the courage to confront. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians that he cared for them “like a nurse caring for her own children” (1 Thess. 2:7b). But he also sternly warned his followers to avoid sin. Don’t compromise biblical standards to show compassion. Love is kind, but it is never soft. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is rebuke a person who is acting foolishly.

6. Healthy mentors are committed to confidentiality. When your disciple bares his soul to you, cover his sins with the blood of Jesus and never tell others what he said. 1 Peter 4:8b says: "Love covers a multitude of sins." You are betraying your disciple if you tell others about his private confession. Unless he confesses to child sexual abuse or murder (which you are required by law to report to the police) his confession is between you and him. Give your disciple a "safe place" to heal.

7. Healthy mentors live what they preach. Anybody can post their sermons on YouTube and attract a huge audience. But sermons alone don't make a man or woman of God. Don't be duped into following people just because of pulpit charm or online popularity. What you need in a mentor is tested character, not the wow factor. And true character is not formed in the spotlight but in the darkness of life's trials.

8. Healthy mentors focus on a few. We are all tempted to measure success by numbers. But Jesus turned this mentality upside down. He focused His time on a small, unimpressive group of followers. He taught us that quality comes before quantity. Good mentors, even if they preach to huge crowds, invest most of their time in helping a small number of disciples reach maturity.

9. Healthy mentors are always growing spiritually. Jesus said a good steward in His kingdom "brings out of his treasure new and old things" (Matt. 13:52). Good mentors aren't effective if they only teach what they learned 40 years ago. They must stay current. Good mentors are always reading books, learning new things and applying old truths to new challenges so they can train a new generation.

10. Healthy mentors know their limits. Jesus was the Son of God, but He got tired because He was also fully human. When the crowds drained His energy, He would often slip away to the wilderness to pray (see Luke 5:16). Good mentors know when

their tanks are empty—and they withdraw from people to get refilled. Don't make the mistake of seeing yourself as a Messiah. You can only give people what God gives you.

If you need a mentor, look for a healthy one. And if you are a mature believer, make it your goal to impart what you've learned from Jesus to a whole new generation of Christians who need healthy role models. {eoa}

The Holy Spirit Wants to Fill You Again

On Feb. 17, 1967, exactly 50 years ago this month, a miracle happened near Pittsburgh that the world has largely ignored. It happened at a small Catholic retreat center called The Ark and the Dove, where a group of students from Duquesne University had gathered for a weekend of prayer. Suddenly, and without any warning, those students were baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Patti Gallagher Mansfield, one of the first students to experience this outpouring of the Spirit, says she knew something remarkable and otherworldly had happened.

"Within the next hour, God sovereignly drew many of the students into the chapel," she writes. "Some were laughing, others crying. Some prayed in tongues, others (like me) felt a burning sensation coursing through their hands."

Gallagher had prayed a simple prayer prior to experiencing her personal Pentecost. She prayed, "Father, I give my life to you. Whatever you ask of me, I accept. And if it means suffering, I accept that too. Just teach me to follow Jesus

and to love as He loves.”

The world was in turmoil in February 1967. Israel was on the verge of war with Palestinians. Racial tensions here in the United States were at a boiling point. Young protesters were demanding an end to the Vietnam War.

Few people noticed what happened to those students at Duquesne, but the fire that fell on them spread quickly to other campuses. Within a year, the Catholic Charismatic movement spread to millions—and it jumped the theological firewall to touch Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and believers from all denominations.

It became the largest Christian movement since the Protestant reformation. Today, 70 percent of all Christians in Latin America are part of the Pentecostal movement. Similar growth has occurred in Africa and parts of Asia.

The wave of supernatural renewal that swept across the United States in 1967 continues today. The Holy Spirit has not withdrawn from us. He longs to fill us, refresh us and empower us in this new season. But if you want to experience your own Pentecost, you must surrender like Gallagher did. You must want more of God.

I believe Jesus wants to visit us in 2017 in a surprising way. It may not look exactly like the visitation of 50 years ago, but the Spirit is ready to fill us to the point of overflowing. Whether you have experienced the infilling of the Holy Spirit already, or if you are new to this experience, open your heart and take these simple steps:

1. Prepare your heart. The Holy Spirit is holy. He is compared to a fire (Matt. 3:11), which means He purifies sin and burns up what is not Christlike in our lives. Make sure you have confessed all known sin and made your heart ready for His infilling. If you have grieved God because of habitual sin, repent and ask Him to set you free.

2. Ask Jesus to baptize you in the Holy Spirit. You do not need to jump through hoops to get God's attention. He is eager to answer your request. He said in John 7:38: "He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." Jesus is the One who baptizes us in the Holy Spirit, so ask Him—and expect him to answer. If you have been filled with the Spirit in the past but have backslidden, ask God to restore you. He is a God of second chances.

3. Receive the infilling. Begin to thank Him for your miracle. The Holy Spirit is filling your life. If you feel your mind is clouded with doubts or fears, just praise the Lord. Focus your mind on Him and not yourself.

4. Release your supernatural prayer language. The moment you are filled with the Spirit, you will receive the ability to speak in a heavenly language. You may feel the words bubbling inside you, or you may actually hear the syllables in your mind. Open your mouth and begin to speak.

5. Step out in boldness. You have just jumped into river of God's anointing—and it is the gateway to all other miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit such as prophecy and healing. God wants to use you as a channel of His power to reach others for Christ. You will begin to notice a new boldness now that you are filled with the Spirit. God does not want you to hide your faith; He wants you to speak to others about Jesus. Expect Him to use you in surprising ways.

Jesus never wanted us to rely on our own abilities. He fills us with His Spirit so we will rely on Him alone. To be baptized in the Holy Spirit means to be totally immersed and saturated. The emptier you are of yourself, the more you can be filled with Him.

We live in a world that needs Jesus. We face terrorism, political polarization, injustice and the threat of war. What

we need is another visitation from heaven. Let it start with you. Empty your life of sin, anxiety, selfishness and distraction and invite the Holy Spirit to set your heart on fire. {eoa}

How to Love People Across the Political Divide

Our country has always enjoyed lively political debate. But psychologists and sociologists have noticed that the 2016 election took the United States to a whole new level of polarization. The animosity is hot—and getting hotter. In fact, couples have gotten divorced and families have stopped speaking to each other because a massive chasm separates Red and Blue political platforms.

To put it bluntly, we hate each other.

Call it the Trump factor, if you will. But more than two months after the presidential election, nerves are still raw, and blood is still boiling. Longtime friends are avoiding contact or unfriending each other on Facebook. Rage is seething under the surface of our country like a volcano about to erupt.

This anger is also in the church. Believers are at odds with each other over who voted for whom and who supports what policies—and even who drinks Starbucks coffee, shops at Nordstrom's or likes Lady Gaga's Super Bowl halftime show. Everything has been politicized. This divisive spirit burns bridges, erects walls and pushes God's people into opposite camps over even the most trivial matters.

Many white evangelicals view Trump's presidential victory as a miracle of God, and for that reason, some of them rigidly defend every decision he makes. Other Christians—including many African-American, Hispanic and millennial believers—view Trump as a dangerous threat to the country. And somewhere in the middle are Christians who accept the outcome of the election and pray faithfully for Trump, even if they don't support every move he makes.

We are faced with a serious challenge. Either we choose to love each other across this vast divide, or our love becomes cold and our message becomes hollow and hypocritical. I'm praying we will rise above the conflict so we can show America who Jesus is. Only a church full of love can reflect Him. Here are some steps we can take now:

1. Read your Bible and pray more than you listen to news programs. There's nothing wrong with staying in the know when it comes to politics. But if you find yourself listening to countless hours of angry commentators every day on Fox News or CNN, it's possible you have become addicted to this verbal venom. Today's polarized media is fueling a civil war, and many Christians have become pawns in the devil's scheme to divide and conquer. Please hit the mute button when necessary. Tune out the screaming before it poisons you.

2. Submit your mouth (and your social media posts) to the Holy Spirit. I've been shocked by the belligerent tone some Christians take when defending their views. Is it really necessary to blow someone out of the water just because they disagree with you? The Bible makes it simple when it says: "Be kind one to another" (Eph. 4:32). Does this commandment apply to us, or not?

(I'll admit I haven't always tempered my words in this column, and for that I am sorry. I'm learning that grace should season my words like salt. Please forgive me if my tone sounded self-righteous, condescending or judgmental.)

3. Let Jesus adjust your attitude. In the Old Testament, Moses went on top of a mountain and received the Ten Commandments. In the New Testament, Jesus went on top of a mountain and gave His most quoted sermon—which focuses not on outward behavior but on attitudes of the heart. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to show love, mercy, gentleness and forgiveness. And in it Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God” (Matt. 5:9).

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel. But today we prefer quick-witted comebacks, one-line zingers and downright ugliness to get our points across. Our hearts are full of resentment and hostility. We need the Beatitudes now more than ever.

4. Look for common ground in conversations. If we are going to reach unbelievers for Jesus, it certainly won’t be by having a discussion about immigration policy or Obamacare. Some topics need to be avoided when trying to win someone’s trust. Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” Steer the conversation away from divisive topics and avoid getting on your personal soapbox.

5. Let love be your guiding rule. Right after the apostle Paul told the Corinthians to “be bold like men” and “be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13), he added in verse 14: “Let all that you do be done with love.” I fear many Christians today think it’s weak to show love. But Paul tells us that loving people is the strongest, bravest, most powerful thing we can ever do—especially in a culture in which it’s acceptable to be mean and offensive.

6. Embrace the priority of evangelism. I love to watch the 1970 film *The Cross and the Switchblade* because it stirs my passion to reach lost people. The clothes and the hairstyles in the movie are dated, but I’m inspired when I see how evangelist David Wilkerson risked his life to reach a group of drug-addicted gang members in a New York ghetto.

Wilkerson didn't go after those Puerto Rican youths with a political message. He didn't preach to them about policies on drugs or immigration. He preached Jesus, pure and simple. And that is what brought Nicky Cruz and his friends to salvation. When we are full of love, we focus on Jesus. Let's get back to the main thing and stop arguing about the issues that divide.

{eoa}