

GRACE COMMUNION INTERNATIONAL

CHRISTIAN Odyssey

Summer 2014

Growing Together in Life & Faith

Jesus' Acceptance

Vol: 11 No. 3

ChristianOdyssey.org



When I first moved to Cincinnati several years ago, we had a talented group of young adults who wanted to put together a band. We bought amplifiers, guitars, microphones, etc. and we started practicing. We had a great drummer who I asked to be the leader of the group. They needed a singer, so I volunteered to be one of the lead singers with the caveat they would find a replacement and tell me when I was no longer needed. I love to sing, but I don't have the talent needed to take the band where I believed it could go.

It was a lot of work, but also a lot of fun. We practiced a few hours a week and soon started a Saturday evening service for young adults. At the same time I was working with a couple of young men who were attending a local Bible college. I was helping them prepare messages before they spoke at our evening worship service. Things were going well and the response was positive. I was excited about the potential.

Then a good friend of several of the band members moved back into town and started hanging around. He was a gifted guitarist and vocalist and sang a couple of times with the band. One day the drummer came to me and said, "Pastor Rick, you're out and Josh is in." OK, he said it significantly more graciously than that, but the truth was, I was no longer needed. As much as I wanted the band to get better and have more opportunities—knowing for this to occur they needed a lead singer who was their age—it saddened me to know I was expendable. For them to increase, I needed to decrease.

It's funny, though. As much as I am known for encouraging others to increase, and for giving younger people opportunity to thrive, I still find myself wanting to be involved in everything, to make my mark, to make a difference. Fortunately, those wiser than me often intervene and remind me that for others to increase, I must decrease. Hmm, seems I've read that in the Scriptures, and if it was good enough for John the Baptist, maybe I need to take note.

I've been involved in the magazine business off and on for almost 30 years. I started as a contributor and moved up to editor and senior editor of a magazine dedicated to Christian youth. When that magazine folded, I went into full time ministry and thought my editing career was over. Then a year and a half ago I was asked to edit *Christian Odyssey*, which I've very much enjoyed doing. But from the start I told our Media Coordinator, Nathan Smith, that he would do better to build his own team and to move Odyssey and GCI media in a new direction, knowing that direction might not include me.

So here I am in the same position I was when my drummer came to me and said it was time to move on.

The band became much better when I wasn't included. They were able to find their own niche and developed their own style. They wouldn't have done that with my involvement. GCI media is going to become much better as well. Our media team is developing their own style to reach the new generation. I want them to increase, and they will. They are qualified and talented and in touch with the latest technology. I'm excited to see what the future holds for GCI media. Keep watching the GCI web site to see new and creative ways to live and share the gospel.

In the meantime, it's been an honor to write for *Christian Odyssey* and many other GCI publications over the years. The time for the magazine is past; many glorious things wait in the future.

Blessings to each of you...

Rick

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CHRISTIAN Odyssey

Summer 2014. Vol. 11 No. 3

Christian Odyssey (ISSN 1937-500X) is published by **Grace Communion International**, PO Box 5005, Glendora, CA, 91740. Copyright © 2014 Grace Communion International. All rights reserved. *Christian Odyssey* is available on the Internet at www.christianodyssey.org.

Editor: Rick Shallenberger. **Managing Editor:** Michael Morrison. **Proofreader and Copy Editor:** Janet Shay, Tammy Tkach. **Circulation:** Celestine Olive. **Media Coordinator:** Nathan Smith. **Publisher:** Grace Communion International. **President:** Joseph Tkach.

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Jesus' Acceptance²

In part one of this article, we saw that Jesus loves and accepts all people. We then observed that he invites those he has accepted to follow him and then discerns their personal responses. As the Bible shows, there are consequences for those responses, which we will now address.

By Gary Deddo

Jesus knew there would be many different responses to him and his teaching. His parable of the sower and the seeds (the seeds being his word) makes this obvious (Matthew 13). There are four distinct soils (responses), and only one represents the receptive response that Jesus is looking for.

On numerous occasions, Jesus talks about receiving or rejecting him, his words/teaching, his heavenly Father and his disciples. When a number of disciples turned away and left him, Jesus asked whether his twelve disciples would leave him as well. Peter famously replies, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Jesus' initial initiative towards people is expressed in his invitation to "come, follow me" (Mark 1:17). There is a difference between those who follow and those who do not. Jesus likens those who follow to those who act on an invitation to a wedding

and contrasts them with those who refuse the invitation (Matthew 22:4-9). In like manner, a difference is noted in the refusal of the elder son to join in the feast celebrating his younger brother's return, despite his father imploring him to come in (Luke 15:28).

There are strict warnings to those who not only do not follow Jesus but who actively reject his invitation to the extent of preventing others from following him, some even plotting to have Jesus executed (Luke 11:46; Matthew 3:7; 23:27-29). These warnings are severe—indicating what the person issuing them does not want to happen, not what he hopes will happen. It should be noted the warnings are not what Jesus would do to someone who doesn't follow him, but what will naturally happen as a result of rejecting all he offers. Warnings are given out of love to those whom we care about, not to those for whom we have no concern. The same love and acceptance is exhibited towards those who accept Jesus and those who reject him. However, such love would not be loving if it then failed to note the

difference of response and the corresponding consequences.

Jesus welcomes and invites all to respond in a receptive way both to him and to what he offers, which is the reign of the kingdom of God. Though the net is cast wide and the seed is sown everywhere, receiving, trusting and following him call for a particular response. Jesus likens it to the reception of a child. He calls such receptivity faith/belief or trust in him. It includes repenting of putting one's ultimate trust in anyone or anything else, and it is summed up in worshiping the Father through the Son and in the Spirit. The gift is offered freely and extended to all. No pre-conditions are set out to limit or restrict who might benefit from it. However, the reception of the freely given gift always involves a cost to the recipient. That cost is to give up one's entire life and hand it over to Jesus and the Father and the Spirit with him. The cost is not something paid to Jesus to enable or incline him to give himself to us. It is the cost of emptying our hands and hearts to receive him for who he is, our Lord and Savior. What is freely given is costly to us to receive because it involves dying to the old and corrupted self in order to receive new life from him.

The cost to us to receive God's free grace is referred to throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament, we are said to need both new hearts and new spirits that God himself will one day give! In the New Testament we are told that we need to be born again from above, that we need new natures, that we must stop living for ourselves and begin living under the Lordship of Christ, that we must die to our old natures, that we are to become new creations, that we are to be regenerated, that we are being renewed according to the image of Christ, the new Adam. The day of Pentecost indicates not only God's sending of his Spirit to indwell his people in a new way, but our need to receive and be indwelt and filled by his Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of life.

Jesus' parables indicate that the response he is looking for, the response that indicates the reception of what he offers us, involves a cost to us. Consider the parables of the pearl of great price or the purchase of a field in which there is a treasure. Those who respond appropriately must give up all they have to receive what they have found (Matthew 13:44, 46). Those who place other things as a priority, whether they be lands or home or family, are not receiving Jesus and his benefits (Luke 9:59, Luke 14:18-20).

Jesus' interactions with people indicate that following him and receiving all his benefits calls for the abandonment of anything we might value above Jesus and his kingdom. That includes abandoning the pursuit and possession of material wealth. The rich ruler did not follow Jesus because he could not part with his goods. Consequently he was unable to receive the good that Jesus offered him (Luke 18:18-23). Even the woman caught in adultery was called to set out in a different direction of life. Receiving forgiveness was to be followed by her sinning no more (John 8:11). Recall the man at the pool. He had to be willing to leave behind his place at the pool as well as his diseased self. "Get up! Pick up your mat and walk" (John 5:8).

Jesus accepts and welcomes one and all. He died for all. His welcome and acceptance are **an invitation that calls for receptivity.**

Jesus welcomes and accepts all, but a receptive response to Jesus does not leave anyone where Jesus finds them. Jesus would not be loving if he simply left them in the condition in which he first encountered them. He loves us too much simply to leave us alone as though he merely empathizes with us or feels sorry for us. No, his love is a healing, transforming, life-changing love.

In sum, the New Testament consistently declares that the response to the free offer that Jesus makes of himself, including all that he has for us, involves denying (dying to) ourselves. It involves giving up our pride, our confidence in ourselves, in our religiousness, in our gifts and abilities including our ability to manage and give ourselves life. In that regard, Jesus shockingly declares that compared to following him we must "hate our father and mother." But more than this, following him calls for hating our own life—the false idea that we can give life to ourselves (Luke 14:26-27). When we accept Jesus, we cease living for ourselves (Romans 14:7-8) because we belong to another (1 Corinthians 6:18). In that sense, we are "slaves of Christ" (Ephesians 6:6). Our lives are completely in his hands, under his provision and direction. We are who we are in relationship to him. Because we are united to Christ, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20 ESV).

Jesus does accept and welcome one and all. He died for all. He is reconciled to all. But he does this as our Lord and Savior. His welcome and acceptance are an offer, an invitation that calls for response, for receptivity. And that acceptance and receptivity necessarily involve receiving exactly what he has to offer according to who he is. Nothing more and nothing less. This means that responding to him will involve repentance, getting rid of anything that blocks receiving from him what he has to offer, that blocks communion with him and the enjoyment of life in his kingdom. Such a response is costly to us—but a cost well worth it. For in dying to our old selves, we receive a new self. We make room for Jesus, receiving with emptied hands his life-transforming, life-giving grace. Jesus accepts us wherever we are in order to take us to where he is going, which is to be with his Father in the Spirit now and for all eternity as his healed, whole, regenerated children. Who would want to be included in anything less than that? **co**



“We Don’t Trust You!”

By Rick Shallenberger

“Hi Pastor Rick, welcome to our church. We wanted to say we liked your sermon, and we don’t want you to take this wrong, but we want you to know from the start that we don’t trust you.”

Now I admit these were not the first words I expected to hear from the two women who approached me after my first sermon in their congregation. How was I supposed to take that statement? Before I could respond with more than a smile and an “OK,” they continued. “It’s not anything you’ve done or said or anything we’ve heard about you, it’s because of what other ministers have done and said. We just want to be honest and tell you it’s going to take a while before we trust you.”

I have to admit, while I was a bit taken aback, I appreciated their honesty. Upon reflection, I have to say they were among the most honest and heart-felt words I’d heard in some time. I told them I completely understood and believed they would grow to trust me. If they didn’t, I told them, then it was likely going to be more my problem than theirs. From their response, I knew I was going to get along with those two women and I did. Over the years, we became close and they did grow to trust me.

As a pastor, I want people to trust me. It makes my job a lot easier. But I don’t want people to trust me because they feel obligated or because they’ve been told they should. Neither do I want them to trust me because of my title or position. I want them to

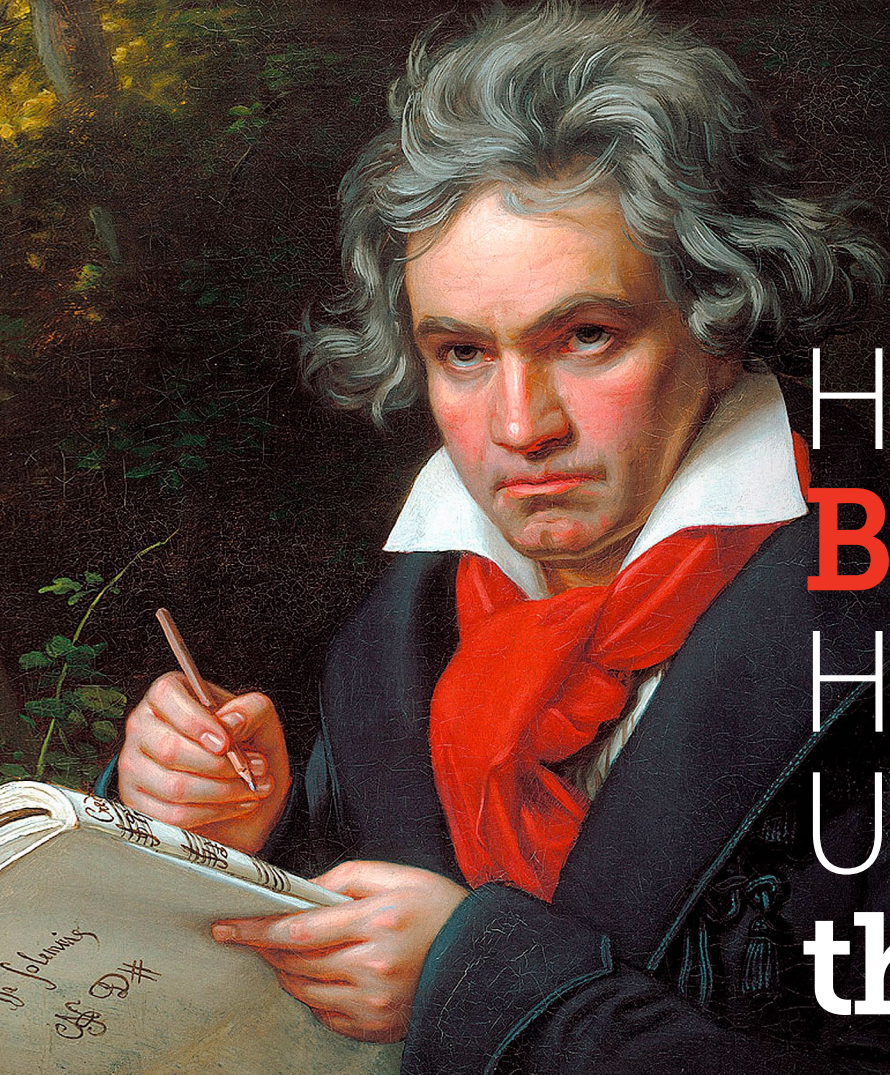
trust me because I’ve earned it.

I didn’t always feel this way. When I was young I always thought *pastor* was synonymous with *power*. You get ordained as a pastor and immediately people look up to you, respect you, listen to you and follow you. OK, stop laughing please—naiveté is one of the curses of youth. Perhaps that’s one of the reasons God chose to wait to ordain me until I was almost 40. His wisdom always prevails.

By the time I became a pastor, I had learned that *power* is not synonymous with *pastor*. Love certainly is. Tenderness is. The ability to listen is. And when I practiced these traits, respect followed. I learned respect as well as trust is earned, not given. I wish more Christians could learn this lesson. We aren’t trusted because we claim to be Christian; we are trusted when we act like Christ followers; when we follow the example of Jesus. The Creator of the universe came among the creation (we call this incarnation) and he never once demanded respect. Instead, he loved. People came to him because of his example—not because he displayed power, but because he displayed compassion. He came as a shepherd to gather his sheep, not as a king to rule over subjects. He taught by example. Is it any wonder Paul told us to follow him as he follows Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1)?

The disciples trusted Christ because he lived what he preached. The people followed him because they saw that he un-

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How Beethoven Helped Me Understand the Bible

By John Halford

Like most people, I enjoy Beethoven's symphonies. Or to be strictly honest, like most people I enjoy parts of Beethoven's symphonies. Like the opening movement of his Fifth, sections of the Sixth and of course the famous chorale movement of the Ninth. But again, being strictly honest, I find much of the rest rather boring.

I find myself wanting to fast-forward through the parts I don't really understand to get to the familiar themes I enjoy. Once, on a long plane flight, which had all nine symphonies on the music channel, I thought about making a play list of just the 'good' bits—a sort of Beethoven's Greatest Hits. Then I felt guilty, thinking that would be short-changing the great composer. I knew there was more to Beethoven than had met my ear.

All that changed when my Audio Book Club offered me a course on Beethoven's Symphonies at a price I could not refuse. The instructor was a brilliant teacher. Instead of just playing musical tidbits, he guided me through all nine symphonies, movement by movement.

He explained how these compositions were the media two hundred years ago, and the great composers were the Andrew

Lloyd Webbers and Steven Spielbergs of their day. At each stage he explained what Beethoven was doing and why his music was so revolutionary at the time. I learned how Beethoven could entertain, shock, inspire and even tease his audiences.

That course has revolutionized my appreciation of Beethoven's music and whetted my appetite to learn more. I realized I was just sipping Beethoven. I now understand the music beyond the 'that sounds nice' stage. I know what is happening even during the 'dull' parts, which has greatly increased my appreciation of the more well-known themes.

For many of us the Bible is like Beethoven's music. We have our favorite verses and perhaps a favorite book, but that is as far as it goes. Today you can download a Bible app onto your i-something and make your own play list of the Bible's Greatest Hits. Many of us no longer take a Bible to church—why should we when the scriptures are projected on the screen behind the preacher?

This is progress. No one wants to go back to the days of heavy, brass-bound Bibles or scrolls. But there is a potential problem if we only experience the Bible through the fragmented images of a PowerPoint presentation. We will get to know some parables and the basic stories from the life of Jesus. We will

become familiar with Paul's teachings on law and grace. We may hear about Noah's Ark, the Exodus and Daniel in the lion's den. But do we know how it all fits together?

OK—much of the Bible does seem rather boring and irrelevant, as I once judged Beethoven's symphonies to be. It is tempting to fast-forward and get to the parts that inspire, encourage and inform. After all, the Bible's core message is about love, grace and truth. Those are the parts we need, aren't they? Do we really need to know about all that other stuff?

Notice what Paul wrote to his young protégé, Timothy: "There's nothing like the written Word of God for showing you the way to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us" (2 Timothy 3:14-17, *The Message*). Paul said this about what we call the Old Testament—the New had not been written yet!

Take a good look at your Bible. No—not the app—the book. Do you really know what is in it? What about those books with odd names: Leviticus, Nehemiah, Obadiah? If "every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another," there is something in them worth knowing. The Old Testament shows us how the rags to riches to ruin story of Ancient Israel laid the foundation for the ministry of Jesus. When you understand that story, the Gospels come

Don't just experience the scriptures as an app or a Power Point presentation. Get a Bible—and actually read it.

to life in a way you never expected.

So let me ask you—are you just sipping the Bible as I did Beethoven's music? Why short-change yourself? Don't just experience the scriptures as an app or a PowerPoint presentation. Get a modern easy-to-read version of the scriptures—ideally one with explanatory notes—and actually read it. (Some suggestions include the Good News Bible, *The Message*, Contemporary English Version or New Century Version). As you do, you'll see those favorite stories and scriptures in context. You'll discover there is so much more to them than meets the eye. **co**

We Don't Trust You

From page 5

derstood and cared. The women followed him because he treated them with respect, not the typical disdain of the day. Children followed him because he related to them. I hope we are beginning to see a pattern here. Christians are to follow the example of Christ. It's unfortunate that Christians are known more for what they are against than for what they are for.

Being a pastor or Christ follower is not about getting trust, respect, power or anything else—it is about giving of the self to others. It's about leading others in love to the One who loves them just as they are. The psalmist said it's about following our shepherd who lovingly leads us to green pastures and to still waters where we can drink and eat in peace. We are invited to join Jesus as he leads others to that same pasture and calm stream. Being a follower of Christ is about building relationships, which will lead to earned trust and earned respect, which leads to opportunities to teach.

I believe all Christ followers can look at the scriptural qualifications for elders and see how to be good Christians. "If anyone wants to provide leadership in the church, good! But there are preconditions: A leader must be well-thought-of, committed to his wife, cool and collected, accessible, and hospitable. He must know what he's talking about," (1 Timothy 3:1-2, *The Message* throughout).

Then in Titus we read: "It's important that a church leader, responsible for the affairs in God's house, be looked up to—not pushy, not short-tempered, not a drunk, not a bully, not money-hungry. He must welcome people, be helpful, wise, fair, reverent, have a good grip on himself, and have a good grip on the Message, knowing how to use the truth to either spur people on in knowledge or stop them in their tracks if they oppose it" (Titus 1:7-9).

Notice the focus? A Christian should be one who is looked up to because he (or she) welcomes people. She is "well-thought-of" because of her behavior. In other words, a Christian knows how he or she lives, and loves speaks volumes more than being able to quote the Bible or what title he or she has.

One of the qualities we look for in a ministry leader is what we call a shepherd's heart—someone who looks after the needs of others and is more concerned for them than for the self. True Christ followers have this same heart. And when they do, they don't have to ask for or demand respect, because it naturally comes as a result of how they live. Christians become trusted and respected when we, over time, demonstrate we are much more concerned about people than our personal doctrines, titles or denominational ties.

I enjoyed watching the two women grow to trust me, but more, I enjoyed watching them trust what God was doing in their lives through the Spirit. I enjoyed watching them serve others, love others and put others first. In short, I enjoyed watching them follow Christ. **co**



Trust & Transformation

By Nan Kuhlman

An ancient story from the poet Rumi tells about a young man named Nasuh who had a job in a women's bathhouse. He was able to work at this job because his face looked feminine and could pass for a woman's, but he was all man, through and through. He thoroughly enjoyed helping the women bathe, but his deception and lust eventually affected his conscience, so he went to see a holy man.

"Please pray for me," he asked the holy man, after confessing his deceptive behavior.

The holy man's response took him aback: "May God cause you to change your life in the way you know you should." After that, the saint said nothing to Nasuh or to anyone else. He knew the secret, but he also knew that God was aware of Nasuh's secret and was working to transform him.

Perhaps this story gets you a little riled up, particularly if you are a woman, because this holy man told no one about Nasuh's deception. If you're like me, you would expect the holy man to make Nasuh come clean and punish him for his dishonesty. It makes sense, humanly speaking, that when someone confesses a struggle with sinful tendencies, those who know should act boldly and forcefully to eradicate the sin. In the case of Nasuh, no one was hurt, but the privacy of those women had been violated. While this issue is important, the holy man could see that God was already effecting change in Nasuh, and he was content to let God's transformation fully develop.

When we are confronted with sinful behaviors in ourselves or others, we sometimes believe that attacking the issue head-on is the best way to becoming more Christ-like. We think sinful behaviors should be topics of sermons, expounding on how God is displeased by this conduct. But this usurps the authority of God to change hearts; he alone can bring about true and lasting transformation. And if we examine our motives, we may find we are lapsing back into a behavioral pattern of trying to win God's approval when we already have it, thanks to our inclusion in

Jesus Christ.

The issue of transformation really comes down to trusting God and releasing our need to control. Though it is difficult, we can learn to prayerfully wait and allow God to change hearts. By reminding everyone of God's constant love and acceptance of all, we can provide the good ground for transformation to occur, the type of change that will be lasting and healing for all.

In Nasuh's story, his change of heart happens when one of the women loses a precious jewel from her earring in the bathhouse. It is nowhere to be found, and because it is worth a lot of money, everyone is strip-searched. Nasuh hides in a closet, afraid of his masculinity being discovered, though he is innocent of stealing the jewel. He fervently prays to God, asking for help, and when the women call him from the closet to be searched, his repentance becomes complete:

At that moment his spirit grows wings, and lifts.

His ego falls like a battered wall.

He unites with God, alive, but emptied of Nasuh.

(Coleman Barks, The Essential Rumi)

He stands there waiting, and in that instant, someone shouts, "Here it is! I've found it!" When they begin apologizing to him for suspecting him of theft, he refuses their apology, saying he is the one who must apologize. He declares his gratitude to God for changing his heart:

And now, I am sewn back into wholeness!

Whatever I've done, now was not done.

Whatever obedience I didn't do, now I did!

(Coleman Barks, The Essential Rumi)

When we trust God for transformation, we recognize our human limitations to effect change in ourselves and others. We realize more completely that in God's eyes, all sin has been forgiven and we have been fully restored. By understanding this, we let go of our need to control the process of change, resting in the loving arms of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and trusting that humanity's healing will be completed in God's perfect timing. Even as Nasuh was healed of his lust and deception, so we too can be "sewn back into wholeness" by our loving God. **co**

The Golden Rule, or Jesus' Rule?

By Carrie Smith

The “Golden Rule” reminds us to treat others the way we want to be treated. This is generally a good rule and something to teach our children, but when we look around at “real life,” it is not what we often see happening around us. Homeless, low income, immigrants and those we consider to be “other” than us are often treated with less respect, dignity, and understanding than those whom we know in our neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Boundaries have been built to determine who are the “us” and who are the “them.” How did this happen?

I believe as we developed our personal senses of worthiness and judgment, we began to categorize people into groups: “us” and “them.” We then treat the “us” group as we want to be treated while treating the “them” group more negatively, sometimes leading to violence and hatred. This is not a new development. History proves this “us” and “them” division has caused violence, hatred, revenge, power struggles and discrimination—even resulting in war. Sometimes it seems the division is more prevalent than the unity Christ has called us to have with one another. It’s easy to become disheartened.

Perhaps instead of trying to teach the “Golden Rule,” we should simply focus on the “Jesus Rule”: “Love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). When we start here, our behavior begins with service to Christ and grows outward as service to and for others around us. We begin to see that there should be no division of “us” and “them,” but rather unity within the one Body of Christ, God’s children.

When we see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, we are reminded that God wants us all to celebrate with him and be a part of his kingdom. Paul’s words again remind us how to move toward and embrace God’s kingdom: “For the kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another” (Romans 14:17-19 NASB, emphasis).

When we serve others with peace, joy and encouragement, people take notice; our children take notice. People see others doing good and want to do the same for others. We don’t have to start a revolution of kindness, Jesus already did that. We simply have to get on board and follow along with him in treating others with love. **co**

TAMMY’S TURN By Tammy Tkach

Jesus Went With Him



“The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers and cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.” This quotation by Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe captured my imagination during my inward-looking, emotion-laden teen years. I had friends and a loving family, but I often felt no one understood me, not deep down inside. I didn’t even understand myself at that point, but most teenagers don’t, and it doesn’t always change as we become adults.

The desire to know someone who is close to us in spirit is a universal one. We all want to be known, understood, accepted and loved just as we are, no strings attached. But this world can be a lonely place. Most of us feel alienated at one time or another, either from friends, family or the world in general. Even with lots of loving support, which is vital to our well-being, we have to do many things on our own: job interviews, driving tests, surgery. No one can help or even hold our hands.

I imagine Jairus was feeling quite alone as he faced the impending death of his daughter (Mark 5). The family had no doubt gathered around to share the burden, but ultimately the pain of losing a loved one takes place in each individual mind and heart. Jairus car-

ried that pain with him as he approached Jesus in the midst of the crowd. When he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet and pleaded with him to come and heal his daughter (verse 23). Then something amazing happened—Jesus went with him (verse 24).

Many must have wanted Jesus’ attention that day, including the sick woman who touched his robe. The crowd was full of people with diseases and problems, some perhaps as severe as Jairus’ daughter’s illness. But Jesus, without any discussion or excuses, simply went with him. That act alone must have given Jairus encouragement and strength to face what he would find at home, especially when messengers came to tell him his daughter had already died. Jesus didn’t desert him at the news, but continued to walk with him to the house.

Jesus has not changed. He still has his Father’s loving heart, which is always turned toward our hearts, thinking and feeling with us, knowing and understanding our suffering. He goes with us into those situations we must face alone and doesn’t turn back when the going gets tough.

During those times when you feel most alone, remember Jesus is with you. He walks with you down the lonely, difficult paths, even the steep, rocky ones with no flowers or trees to brighten the way. He is close to us in the Spirit, and he is the one who makes the earth an inhabited garden for us. **co**

The Power of Ministering in Pairs



I have always appreciated the opportunities to share in ministry with partners. One of my favorite memories is the time when I was on the road with a district pastor. We made a wide, sweeping tour, and our first appointment was lunch with one of our newer pastors. This new pastor also happened to be one of our female pastors, and she simply needed to have a chance to be heard. Two sets of ears made the lunch conversation twice as encouraging. We then moved northward to meet with a church leadership team that was searching for another ministry leader to join them. We had a lovely meal and a spirited conversation about their needs. The high point of the meeting was when one of the local leaders told us they sensed our heartfelt desire to help them and how they were amazed that we kept track of their individual names and the issues that weighed them down. They were deeply grateful, and

to give first-person testimonies about Jesus—his ministry, teachings, and miracles. The disciples were certainly more likely to be heard because they came in teams of two—both witnessing about Jesus from their own perspectives.

A second reason is because of the power of shared ministry, the added impact when two or more people work together toward a shared goal. This co-laboring is not only effective, but also reflective of the collegiality that would become the hallmark of the Spirit-filled, New Testament church (see box).

A third reason Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs was simply for encouragement and endurance in ministry. There is a high attrition rate among missionaries in the mission field, and the most common problems are discouragement and loneliness. Jesus was no stranger to loneliness—think of the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness and then think of his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Sending out the future church leaders in groups of two displayed the deep concern that Jesus had for his friends. He didn't see these 12 men as tools to carry out his mission, but rather as dear brothers who were joining him in the joy of broadcasting the good news and ushering in the kingdom of God.

As a rule of thumb, I encourage ministry leaders to not engage in ministry alone, but rather always take another person with them; the witness will be more powerful, the ministry will be more impactful and the reward of relationship will be richer! **co**

In pairs, the witness is more powerful, the ministry more impactful, and the reward of relationship richer!

together we experienced the reality of Jesus being present and powerful among us. We were pastors ministering to other pastoral leaders, and there was no doubt that working in tandem had a much greater impact than if we had been flying solo.

That experience made me stop and think of Jesus' example. We know he gave the original followers the promise that as they spread the gospel and made new followers he would be with them, even to the end of the age. He wanted them to know that ministry was a participation in what he is already doing. But have you ever noticed when he sent disciples out to minister he sent them in twos (Mark 6:7)?

Simple math tells us that twice as many villages and people could have been reached if Jesus had sent his protégés out individually. So why did Jesus send them out as ministry partners? I think there are several good reasons.

The first reason comes from the Old Testament tradition of "two witnesses." No person could be convicted of a crime in the Old Testament by the testimony of just one witness: the law stipulated that at least two witnesses were needed in order to convict someone of a crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). (See the New Testament application in 1 Corinthians 14:29.)

The disciples were called to be Jesus' students and companions, but also to be his witnesses. They were called and chosen

Working in Pairs: the Common Practice of the Early Church

Jesus often sent his disciples in pairs. Two disciples were sent to find the donkey for Palm Sunday (Luke 19:29). He sent Peter and John together to prepare for the Passover (Luke 22:8). Prior to becoming disciples Peter and John had worked as pairs with their brothers Andrew and James. Jesus put special effort into teaching them to function as a pair. They went up the mount of transfiguration together (Matthew 17:1). Jesus left them to pray together at Gethsemane (Matthew 26:37). Peter and John continued to work together as a pair after Jesus died (John 20:2-3; Acts 3:1, 4:1, 13). The book of Acts continues with the team of Barnabas and Paul, who soon split into Barnabas and John Mark, and Paul and Silas.

You Poor Old Thing, You

By Jonathan Buck

I feel sorry for terribly ugly dogs, one of which really caught my eye. It had a squashed-in nose and huge bulging eyes as if it had been chasing a rabbit and had run into a tree. It was also wider than it was tall, so it looked like a small oil tank with matchstick legs at each corner.

It was so unbalanced when it lifted a leg it fell over. “You poor old thing, you,” I thought, but the dog didn’t seem to mind in the least. It staggered up and tried again. I watched in fascination as it teetered between falling over again and finishing off. My heart went out to that little dog. Every day it had to go through this embarrassing routine, stuck in that ridiculous body.

Watching the poor dog made me think of how God must look at me. I’m stuck in a ridiculous body, too, shaped and formed by years of cultural conditioning into a mess of phobias, fears, worries and unfortunate personality traits. I teeter every day on that knife-edge between functioning normally and being overwhelmed by an embarrassing inner weakness. I’m like that dog. It didn’t choose to be an oil tank on spindly legs, it simply ended up that way because of the silly notions of dog breeders and the poor habits of its owner. And I am who I am because of the silly notions of all those who’ve influenced me, and my own poor habits.

But when Jesus was here and saw people like me “his heart was touched with pity” (Mark 6:34, Phillips). “You poor old things, you,” he thought to himself, put in our terms today.

That drew my attention to the owner of the dog. He clearly loved the immensely ugly creature snuffing along beside him, and he wasn’t embarrassed by it either. He didn’t hide behind a bush when his dog fell over relieving itself. Instead, he waited patiently while it got up, angled its three legs into position and again up went the fourth. I could almost feel the owner’s tension as he willed his little dog to succeed.



The dog felt no embarrassment either. With obvious satisfaction it fell back on to all four legs and off it waddled into another day feeling utterly free, and so can we, because we too have an owner who loves us and wills us poor old things to succeed. **co**



What Happens in Heaven...

By Sue Berger

My friends have a sign at their lake cabin: “What happens at the cabin, stays at the cabin.” A spin off, I’m sure, of the slogan, “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” The implication being this is a safe place to let your hair down and be yourself. A place of confidentiality and perhaps a place to do things you wouldn’t normally do in public. One’s imagination can run amuck with that thought!

So when I saw an article titled, “What Happens in Heaven,” my mind filled in, “stays in heaven” and I immediately experienced mental whiplash as I almost said “NO!” out loud. The author’s article was about heaven, which was all well and good. But I was totally derailed by the emotional leap I’d already taken.

I suppose much of what happens in heaven, does stay in heaven. I really don’t have a clue what it’s like there. On one hand, the apostle John records fantastic visions of God’s throne room and heavenly hosts. On the other, author Paul Young portrays Father, Son and Spirit sharing the day’s events around the kitchen table eating chicken, rice and greens. I’m wowed by the first but I’m warmed by the second.

I believe much of what has happened in heaven has had everything to do with us on earth. For starters, the Father’s overflowing love prompted our very creation. A heavenly war between good and evil perpetuated an ongoing battle of the same in humanity. The biblical narrative relates numerous earthly encounters with angelic beings on various assignments, one of which announced God himself coming to dwell with mankind as one of us.

Now that was just plain crazy talk! Why on earth (or should I say, why in heaven) would God want to come here? Comparatively, the physical limitations, squalor, frustration and pain are mind-boggling. It would be like me going out to live in my flower bed with my pansies, experiencing life sustained by soil and rainfall, while hoping not to get trampled by the neighborhood kids or “marked” by my own dog. I’m just not that motivated to relate with my flowers! But God was with us.

How did the God who created the intricacies of our human bodies, himself become an embryo in Mary’s womb? What was it like to learn to crawl and then to walk and to form words into sentences when you were the One who created all the beasts of the earth and gave birds their songs? How does the Creator of space and galaxies study math and physics as a child? What

Heaven didn't stay in heaven. Emmanuel. God with us. A heavenly King, came to sit and eat at earthly dinner tables.

were his thoughts experiencing physical exertion and pain as he learned to wield carpentry tools in his father's shop? Was he ever surprised by how visceral the feelings of happiness or grief or love can be?

Heaven didn't stay in heaven. Emmanuel. God with us. A heavenly King surrounded by worshipping choirs, came to sit and

eat at earthly dinner tables. Yes ladies, he belched and scratched. But he also laughed and hugged and cried. A being unlimited by time and space, voluntarily limited by how far his legs could carry him in a day's walk. The Power of all creation, constrained by bone, muscle and tendon. Heaven was human. Motivated by a depth of love unimaginable to us. Creator, wanting to be personally known by his creation. Who can grasp that? A desire to reveal the Father's love for us, so deep that Jesus would come here to walk with us, laugh with us, suffer for us and die for us. And he didn't stop there. Earth then went back to heaven and sent the Spirit to work here in us, forever linking us to God. And as if that were not enough, Jesus, now as God/man, forever changed heaven with his humanity.

No. What happens in heaven doesn't stay in heaven. Heaven has walked earth and still dwells within us. And earth now walks in heaven. We are intimately known, we are accepted and we are deeply loved. And that, my friends, is very good news! ☪

FINANCIAL COACH By Craig Kuhlman

Going Deeper With Financial Freedom



In my last column I introduced the term "financial freedom" as no longer needing to rely on others (parents, friends, employers and the government) to meet our financial needs. This happens when our cash flow from income-producing assets exceeds our routine living expenses. That requires managing our fixed expenses to keep them at a minimum (for example, making it a goal to live off one income if both spouses are employed) and investing in assets that produce increasing cash flow.

What do I mean by income-producing assets? Well, most think of a home as a good investment because over time we build equity by paying down the mortgage. However, a home is actually an expense-consuming asset. Think of the ongoing maintenance, taxes, insurance and other expenses that go with the upkeep of a home. I don't disagree that equity can be built, but perhaps not as efficiently as with an income-producing asset, like dividend-paying stocks or rental property. I'm not advocating either one, per se, but use them here for illustration. Each of us needs to determine what best fits our investment portfolio.

We need to understand that the future is not already written. Where we are two to three years from now has a lot to do with the choices we make today. We can shape that future or let it shape itself. That is a choice available to all of us. As in any area of life, if we choose to shape the future (rather than react to whatever comes along) we need to use a written plan. By planning for a different future financially, we take control of our financial situation by taking proactive steps that we wouldn't have otherwise taken. If we choose to achieve financial freedom, then we must have a plan to pay off debt, minimize our fixed expenses and begin to build and shift savings into income-producing assets

that generate an increasing cash flow.

For example, let's say our monthly expenses to maintain our standard of living total \$3,000. Included in that amount is \$600 of debt from a \$90,000 mortgage. At some point in the future the mortgage (and any other fixed debts) will be paid off, reducing our monthly expenses to \$2,400 in today's dollars, or \$28,800 annually. If investments generated a 4% cash flow (income vs. appreciation), a portfolio of \$720,000 would be needed to meet living expenses apart from wages or other income. That's a large number (a proverbial elephant), and most wouldn't get close to it (absent inheritance or winning the lottery) without a long-term plan to achieve and save toward that goal, which takes years, not months. Typically we think of retirement as a time when we no longer rely on wages, but savings from 401(k) plans and Social Security income. As long as we have time on our side (years to save) and a well-developed plan (bite-sized specific steps to eat the proverbial elephant), achieving financial freedom comes easier, even though it may not come earlier.

I realize that not all of us have many years to save and work toward financial freedom. However, each of us can become more disciplined with financial management, and a plan helps us accomplish that. Achieving financial freedom with that plan is a great goal (and process) and also serves as a best practice to work toward as stewards of God's wealth. I have also found that a significant benefit of using a plan to identify where we are, and giving specific steps to a better future provides tremendous peace of mind regardless of how far off goals may seem; so be encouraged. The goal may not be insurmountable, and the journey toward that goal is rewarding and peace-giving in itself. ☪

God's Relationship With His People in The Prophets



In ancient tribal societies, if a man wanted to adopt a child, the ceremony was simple: "I will be to him a father, and he will become my son." The marriage ceremony was similar: "She is my wife, and I am her husband." In front of witnesses, they stated the relationship they had with each other, and those words made it official.

Like a family

When God wanted to state his relationship with ancient Israel, he sometimes used similar words. "I am Israel's father, and Ephraim is my firstborn son" (Jeremiah 31:9). He is stating the terms of the relationship: like parent and child.

God also uses marriage as a description of the relationship: "Your Maker is your husband . . . as if you were a wife" (Isaiah 54:5-6). "I will betroth you to me forever" (Hosea 2:19).

More often, the relationship is phrased in this way: "You are my people, and I am your God." In ancient Israel, "people" was a relationship word. When Ruth told Naomi, "Your people will be my people" (Ruth 1:16), she was promising a new and permanent relationship. This was where she belonged.

Reassurance in time of doubt

When God says, "You are my people," he (like Ruth) is stressing relationship more than ownership. "I am bonded to you; you are like family to me." God says this more often in the prophets than in all the previous writings put together.

Why is it stated so often? Because the relationship was threatened by Israel's lack of loyalty. Israel had ignored their covenant with God and worshipped other gods. So God had allowed the northern tribes to be conquered by Assyria and the people taken away. Most of the Old Testament prophets lived shortly before or after the nation of Judah was conquered by Babylon and taken away as slaves.

The people wondered, Is it all over? Has God abandoned us?

The prophets respond with repeated assurances: No, God has not abandoned us. We are still his people, and he is still our God. The prophets predicted a national restoration: the people would return to the land and, most importantly, return to God. The future tense is often used: "They will be my people, and I will be their God." God has not abandoned them—he will restore the relationship. He will bring it about and make it better than before.

Isaiah tells the story

"I reared children and brought them up," God says through Isaiah. "But they have rebelled against me. . . . They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their

backs on him" (Isaiah 1:2, 4). As a result, the people were sent into captivity. "My people will go into exile for lack of understanding" (Isaiah 5:13).

It looked like the relationship had come to an end. "You have abandoned your people," Isaiah says in 2:6. But it was not permanent. "My people who live in Zion, do not be afraid. . . . Very soon my anger against you will end" (10:24-25). "I will not forget you" (44:21). "The Lord comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (49:13).

The prophets spoke of a huge regathering: "The Lord will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land" (14:1). "I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.' Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth" (43:6).

"My people will live in peaceful dwelling places, in secure homes, in undisturbed places of rest" (32:18). "The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces. . . . In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us'" (25:8-9). And God says to them, "You are my people" (51:16). "Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me" (63:8).

This is good news, not just for Israel, but for everyone: "Foreigners will join them and unite with the descendants of Jacob" (14:1). "Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely exclude me from his people'" (56:3). "The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples" (25:6). They will say, "This is our God. . . let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation" (25:9).

Jeremiah tells the story

Jeremiah combines the family metaphors: "How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land. . . . I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away. . . . But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me" (Jeremiah 3:19-20). "They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them" (31:32).

Jeremiah initially prophesies that the relationship is over: "These people do not belong to the Lord. The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me" (5:10-11). "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries" (3:8). But this is not a permanent rejection. "Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? . . . My heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him" (31:20). "How long will you wander, unfaithful Daughter Israel?" (31:22).

He promises to restore them: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them" (23:3). "I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity" (30:3). "I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth" (31:8). "I will forgive their wickedness and will

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remember their sins no more" (31:34). "Israel and Judah have not been forsaken by their God" (51:5).

Most importantly, God will change them so they will be faithful: "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding" (3:22). "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord" (24:7). "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (31:33). "I will give them singleness of heart and action.... I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me" (32:39-40).

God promises a renewal of their relationship, which is the equivalent to making a new covenant with them: "They will be my people, and I will be their God" (24:7; 30:22; 31:33; 32:38). "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people" (31:1). "I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah" (31:31). "I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them" (32:40).

Jeremiah saw that the Gentiles would be included, too: "As for all my wicked neighbors who seize the inheritance I gave my people Israel, I will uproot them from their lands.... And if they learn well the ways of my people and swear by my name.... then they will be established among my people" (12:14-16).

Ezekiel tells a similar story

Ezekiel also describes God's relationship with Israel as a marriage: "When I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your naked body. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine" (Ezekiel 16:8).

In another analogy, God describes himself as a shepherd: "As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered" (34:12-13). He modifies the relationship formula to suit the analogy: "You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God" (34:31).

He predicts that the people will return from exile and God will change their hearts: "I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God" (11:19-20).

The relationship is also described as a covenant: "I will remember the covenant I made with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish an everlasting covenant with you" (16:60). He will also live among them: "My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people" (37:27). "This is where I will live among the Israelites forever. The people of Israel will never again defile my holy name" (43:7).

The minor prophets

Hosea also described a break in the relationship: "You are not my people, and I am not your God" (Hosea 1:9). Instead of giving the words of a wedding, he states the words of a divorce: "She is not my wife, and I am not her husband" (2:2). But as with Isaiah and Jeremiah, this was an exaggeration. Hosea quickly adds that the relationship is not over: "'In that day,' declares the Lord, 'you will call me 'my husband'.... I will betroth you to me forever'" (2:16, 19).

"I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (2:23). "I will heal their waywardness and love them freely, for my anger has turned away from them" (14:4).

Joel has similar words: "The Lord was jealous for his land and took pity on his people" (Joel 2:18). "Never again will my people be shamed" (2:26).

Amos also says, "I will bring my people Israel back from exile" (Amos 9:14).

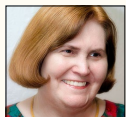
"You do not stay angry forever," says Micah. "You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago" (Micah 7:20).

Zechariah gives a good summary: "'Shout and be glad, Daughter Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,' declares the Lord" (Zechariah 2:10). "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God" (8:7-8).

Finally, Malachi says: "On the day when I act," God says, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him" (Malachi 3:17). **co**

Dr. Michael Morrison teaches classes in the New Testament at Grace Communion Seminary. More information about the seminary can be found at: www.gcs.edu.

From My Heart to Yours



By now you likely realize this is the last issue of *Christian Odyssey* magazine. Sometimes decisions happen so fast we barely have time to process them, much less have a bit of closure. So I've

learned to live without closure in a lot of areas of life. Knowing what, why, when, how and where are not as important to me as they once were. A good journalist will usually seek to answer those questions. However, when no satisfactory conclusion is found, the Christian writer learns to rely on "who." Our "who" is God. As long as God knows, as I'm sure he does, I can live with it.

I have loved writing for this publication and developing a relationship with the readers. The notes and comments I've received have been so encouraging. Writing can be a lonely life—just you, your computer and a thesaurus in case the Internet goes down. Sometimes writers never really know if what they have to say resonates with readers. Wanting my exit to be a memorable one, I'm perplexed about what to write.

Part of me wants to write about how hard it is to change or move on. God knows I hate to change. Change requires leaving my comfort zone. Being a tenacious, "set in my ways" type person, I find change extremely difficult. But change comes whether we like it or not—especially in today's rapidly moving society. To resist is folly. If we cannot embrace an inevitable change, we can at least adapt. Change doesn't mean we alter

our belief in Jesus Christ. It just means we make adjustments and find different ways of getting the gospel message to an ever-changing world.

Besides, from a spiritual perspective, change is a vital part of the Christian life. Peter says, "Grow in grace and knowledge" (2 Peter 3:18). Change is a part of our growth cycle. Without change there is no spiritual maturity. And if we believe Jesus is involved in our lives, then change, although difficult, can be met with hopeful expectation. It will be exciting to see where God eventually leads us.

While change is difficult, saying goodbye is even worse. What pithy words of wisdom can I leave with you? One of my favorite Bible passages comes to mind. When the apostle Paul comes to the end of his letter to the Philippians he says, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." I love those words!

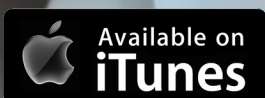
He goes on to say, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9). Not being in the same league as Paul, I'll just say from my heart to yours, "If you have received anything from me that has brought you closer to God, then God be praised!" co

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