FAR AND NEAR

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Category: John Fifteen

Article # one: **Merf and Mannie**

Far or near. Far from Christ or near to Christ. Or somewhere in between.

Positionally, we are equal. The Lord has given everyone everything. We are "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." But not so relationally. Whereas our position is determined by Christ, our relationship is determined by Christ *and us.* It's the *and us* part of *Christ and us* that's the problem.

Relationally speaking, we each have as much of Christ as we desire. If we wanted less we would have less; if we wanted more we would have more.

No two have the same 'amount' of Jesus.

There are a hundred men at a christian business luncheon. Financially, no two are worth the same. A few are wealthy and a few are broke and most are somewhere in-between. The majority is near average, but no two are exactly the same.

Likewise is the value of their relationship with Christ. A few are rich, a few poor and most somewhere in-between. The majority is near average, but no two are exactly the same.

J E S U S : *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit.* (John 15:5)

There are degrees of abiding. Abiding implies relationship.

J E S U S : *According to your faith let it be to you.* (Mat. 9:29)

There are degrees of faith. Faith goes no deeper than relationship.

In this series we compare the christian who walks close to Christ with the one who distances him/herself. How different is his life on earth. How different will be her eternity.

Merf and Mannie will help illustrate *far* and *near.* Merf and Mannie are my imaginary friends, a married couple, both inching toward forty, together they run a home business. A flip of the coin tells me Merf will be *near* and Mannie will be…. well you know, Mannie. Heh-heh.

C h a l l e n g e : *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"*

P r a y e r : *Father, bless this series of articles. Not only because it's relevant. Not just because it contains*

a degree of Your perspective. But because I ask it in the name of Jesus. (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # two: **Choices**

F A R

Mannie never made a singular decision to distance herself from Jesus, it was many little decisions at life's many little crossroads that inched her to this unhappy state. Jesus is not a bright shining light, not like He once was, but rather a dim glow off in the distance. She looks in His direction once in a while, always comforted to know He is still there watching over her.

Mannie never did turn her back on Jesus; it was tiny backward steps with Him in view, the sad effect of each one imperceptible. But as the years passed numerous minute steps added up to a considerable distance, and the glow emitting from Christ is now dim.

Distancing herself from Christ consequentially distanced Mannie from the Holy Spirit. Which distanced her from the fruit of the Holy Spirit. From love and peace and joy and.....

Denial has become a way of life for Mannie. Her community assures her she is doing okay, and she can see for herself she is keeping up with the crowd. She accepted the notion the exhilaration of rebirth was never meant to be lasting. She must now think 'dutiful' and 'balanced'.

Chatter and activity protect Mannie's denial from reality. As she slips away from Jesus her talking increases, she listens only to the non-threatening, and spins. Sunday is social day, monday, wednesday and friday afternoons she volunteers at the church library, tuesday is Bible study, thursday she leads the girls in prayer and praise. The in-between times are packed with business concerns and kids concerns.

A. W. T o z e r : *It is characteristic of the natural man to keep himself so busy with unimportant trifles that he is able to avoid the settling of the most important matters relating to life and existence.* (Who Put Jesus on the Cross)

N E A R

It was five years ago Merf gave his head a shake, said to himself, "What am I *doing!?"* and turned back to Christ. He had recalled what it was like the early years. The excitement. The feeling real good. Talking to Jesus and the Father throughout the night. Five years ago he somehow learned this was to be a lifestyle, and it was the enemy of his soul who had years ago dropped an otherwise suggestion into his heart.

If it wasn't for the five a.m. alone time he may still be backsliding. Shortly after discovering Christ, Merf made a commitment to be alone with the Lord for one hour. (So did Mannie, but it was so tempting to snuggle her pillow a little longer, especially on chilly winter mornings.) That hour is what the Holy Spirit needed to re-evangelize Merf, to bring him to repentance and back on track.

What Merf wanted and what Merf got after three years of being 'back on track' was the intimacy and enthusiasm he had as a newborn. No, it didn't come all at once; it doesn't work that way. He inched away and he had to inch back.

When he got back to where he was at rebirth he happily discovered there was more of Christ to gain, always more. Every year he can look in life's rear view mirror and know there has been increase. And he is confident next year he will be richer still. But it hasn't all been roses. Oh, no.

P a u l : *All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.* (2Tim. 3:12)

Merf doesn't fit in anymore. What used to be entertainment isn't entertainment. What used to be fun isn't. What satisfied doesn't. He tried to talk to friends - they couldn't hear. Talked to 'his' pastor - that was a mistake. *Look, Merf, about once every two months I get someone in that chair you're sitting in trying to straighten me out or enlighten me about some revelation they had. I say to you what I've said to them, "This isn't a perfect church and I can't please everyone. We all have to focus on common ground and tolerate each other's right to an opinion." I would suggest you stop making waves and become the team player you used to be.*

Mannie will understand, thinks Merf.

Mannie didn't understand. She took 'their' pastor's side. More, she complained. *Marriage isn't fun anymore. Our friends avoid us. We live separate lives.*

Rejection of friends hurt, but Christ was worth it. Pastor was a real hurdle, but Merf would allow the Holy Spirit to comfort him. But Mannie. His wife, life partner, the one he slurped oatmeal with, shooed away mosquitoes on the patio, argued over who should take out the garbage. This was no little crossroad. *Hmmm. Christ or Mannie? Mannie or Christ?* He loved his wife. And he loved his Christ. Merf thought of Adam. *God or Eve? Eve or God?* Merf wasn't going to make Adam's mistake!

Merf chose Christ over Mannie. And paid the price.

C h a l l e n g e : *Will you choose Christ over whatever and whoever and pay the price?*

P r a y e r : *Jesus, may writer and reader not be ashamed of Your gospel. Deal with idols in our lives. In Your name.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!") Article # three: **Inner Healing**

F A R

Mannie can't get over her past. Daddy wasn't there much, Mom couldn't be pleased, brother was a jerk, grade three teacher picked on her, a terror-bully in seventh, dumped by her boyfriend in college. Etcetera. Add a pocketful of regrets (should-haves, could-haves, would-haves) and we have a very sad and insecure Mannie.

You need inner healing, she was told. *Need to take 12 steps* (or was it 10 or 7?), she was told. *Look inside.... understanding the cause of your pain is the key.... when you understand the problem you will*

understand your reactions.... can't have a future till you fix your past.... before going forward you got to go backward.

After the laying on of hands, after many sessions with a degreed counselor, after stepping through all the steps, after many hours of self-analyzing, Mannie's past still haunts her. A determined soul, Mannie. Keeps praying and soliciting prayers from friends and prayer ministries, rationalizes her fears and resentments, reads how-to books. Healing is always around the next bend.

The eyes once resting upon her First Love are now fixed on Mannie. No one told Mannie too much introspection was not a good thing. (Didn't do much for Lucifer.) Not much in there to brag about. Seems the most erratic are the most introspectional.

When first born-again Mannie, like most, was a *me* person. Had she gone on in Christ she would have evolved into a *Him* person. But she had drifted far from Christ-the-Healer and sunk to a *me, me, me* person, almost entirely wrapped up in herself.

Me is now Mannie's favorite subject. Religion and *me* are often good buds, and Mannie went deeper into both. She competes with others in an attempt to prove to them and herself she is good enough. Better than most, in fact. She became a clean freak around the house because good christians are clean and tidy. Never misses a sunday service; good christians never miss a sunday service. Smiles lots and is warm to others because a good christian smiles lots and is warm to others.

Life is a stage and Mannie-turned-christian-turned-actress plays the part well. Doesn't much matter what she is but what she appears to be. A smile is a magnet, so lots of teeth. Image is everything. The human itch to impress gets itchier.

A. W. T o z e r : *The desire to make a good impression has become one of the most powerful of all the factors determining human conduct.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

Others get the nice Mannie, Merf gets the other Mannie. The complaining Mannie. The controlling Mannie. The sad Mannie. Poor Merf.

For all her self-examination, Mannie cannot see herself. What do the lost and the lukewarm have in common? Both stumble through life poking a white cane in front of them. Neither can see their need for Christ.

Will Mannie ever learn? - nothing works without Christ (a healthy relationship with Christ). And in Christ there is no failure.

N E A R

Merf was mad at himself for drifting from Christ. He went with the flow and flowed the wrong way. In every direction he could see many who had lost their passion for Jesus Christ. He studied 'his' pastor and, to his dismay, had to conclude that pastor and Jesus were relationally distant. Mannie never talked Christ, nor his friends.

He remembered the old days when close to Jesus. *Man, those were good times!* Didn't have much knowledge about spiritual matters but he sure felt good. Merf determined to go back, to regain what he lost. But how?

P e t e r : *Be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."* (1Peter 5:5)

Humility will get you every good thing. Merf could have played the victim: *Sure I backslid, but can anyone blame me? Who did I have for an example? Not my wife, that's for sure. Not even my pastor.*

J E S U S : *My grace is sufficient for you.* (2Cor. 12:9)

Jesus spoke these words to Paul. Yes, the grace of Christ was sufficient for both Paul and Merf. Merf took ownership of his disloyalty to Christ. He had resisted the Holy Spirit's gentle guidance and drifted from the very One who loves him most, who bore his sins on His body, who provided access into the kingdom of God. He sincerely repented.

And so Merf faced his crossroads determined to always choose Christ. These crossroads can be wrenching, a demand from Christ to depart from familiar and beloved attachments.

J E S U S : *He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.* (Mat. 10:38)

Choices, choices, choices. Life is choices. Results are the results of choices made. Christ or money. Christ or business. Christ or Mannie. Christ or christians. Christ or religion. Christ or family. Christ's approval or man's approval. Christ's protection or self-preservation. Christ-rule or Merf-rule. Christ or tv. Christ or ministry. Christ or many etceteras. Whenever Merf chose Christ idols toppled.

Thankfully crossroads come one at a time, not in bunches. One of the fruit of the Spirit is gentleness, and none has more fruit of "the Spirit of Christ" than Christ. Sometimes Merf lingered at crossroads longer than he should have. Sometimes he even went the wrong way for a while. Jesus was gentle, waiting, never trespassing Merf's free will, never retracting His love.

It took years for Merf to make it back to where he was when first spiritually born into the family of God. Back then he had no words to describe the richness and excitement of intimacy with Christ and now is equally inept. Where does Merf go from here?

Merf made the happy discovery he could have even *more* of Christ. And when he got more there was more yet, always more. But more always comes with a price.....

A. W. T o z e r : *Let the..... convert know that if he would grow instead of shrink he must spend his nights and his days in communion with the Triune God.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

We are either growing or shrinking; nobody stays as is. We will grow if we eat and drink. We will eat if hungry, drink if thirsty. We will hunger and thirst if we ask the Lord to make us hungry and thirsty. Merf asked.

Merf isn't particularly eloquent: "More, Lord!" "More of Christ, Father!" "More of Christ, Holy Spirit!"

"More of You, oh my Jesus!" Over and over and over again.

Thirst came in waves. Merf would get concerned when his desperation slackened for a time, and then another wave would roll in and Merf found himself in a still deeper richness of life. *Hey, this is good!*

Inner healing? No prob. Healing comes when Christ comes. Takes time, but it comes.

One day Merf fully realized and fully acknowledged he had a sick soul. No biggie. *Of course I've got a sick soul, I've been living without Christ most of my life; what else could I expect?* Solution: (an ongoing faith in) Jesus Christ.

A. W. T o z e r : *We are becoming what we love.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

Behold and become (heard that someplace). What grabs our attention grabs us (ditto). See and be. Embracing Christ-the-Healer is good medicine. Those in tune get tuned. To be like Him we must be with Him. What fills our mind slides down to our heart; a good heart brings peace of mind.

Sanctification is a process. Merf still has a sick soul but much less so. Still talks too much, watches too much tv (watches too much unbelief), gets cranky spells, falls asleep when praying. But he is going in the right direction, toward, and not away from, Christ.

Going in the right direction, that's what it's all about. Not arriving, just going forward, traveling toward and not away from Jesus.

C h a l l e n g e : *Learn Christ.*

P r a y e r : *Another article for You to anoint, Holy Spirit. May Your anointing be relative to its truth and relevance.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # four: **High Calling**

F A R

Mannie has no clue regarding the high calling in her life. Rarely does she give the matter thought, being more concerned with her weight (overweight) than her appointed destiny. Fitting in, doing what is expected, impressing - this is full-time ministry.

Our dear sister is not without occasional praise reports. The other day a box of church library books disappeared, and after earnest prayer was guided to check the recycle bin. There on top of boxes of shredded financial statements was her missing prize. "The big truck pulled up to the bin just as I was retrieving the books," she told the ladies' prayer group. "One minute later it would have been too late. Praise the Lord!"

Such answered prayers confirmed she was doing what God called her to do, to faithfully serve in the library. But how far from reality. Had she been in the high place God called her to be, had she been

in His supreme will and not merely permissive, had she been a dweller of "the secret place," had she been the branch abiding in "the true vine," her praise report might be something like.....

"Several young ladies the Lord had brought into my life for training and discipling are now working full-time in ministry, three in other countries. They are totally sold out to Jesus Christ, and their light shines brightly. Also, the Lord is calling Merf and I to minister to whoever in the city of whatever this summer....."

D a v i d W i l k e r s o n : *What is destiny? In simple terms, destiny is God's purpose for your life. It is your appointed or ordained future. Destiny is what God has predetermined you to be and to become, in His divine will.* (Times Square Church Pulpit Series 7-8-1996)

Mannie never chose the lower calling, she simply chose not to choose Christ. She wanted Christ, but not enough. She wanted a distant Christ so she could do her own thing, be the lord of her life, and live for the people she loved more than Jesus.

J E S U S : *Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.* (Mat. 6:19)

Mannie works hard doing what her Savior told her not to do, accumulating such earthly treasures as approval of peers, new kitchen appliances, an assortment of worldly memories, self-esteem, friendships, financial security.

Remorse is not far away. The judgment seat awaits.

N E A R

J E S U S : *Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven.* (Mat. 6:20)

That's what Merf's doing.

No longer will he compare himself favorably with others because most others are squandering much of their lives. He wants more eternal treasures than Joe Average has. And he knows not to depend on evangelicalism to open doors of opportunity. Jesus will be his door-opener and door-closer.

Merf does not yet know what the high calling on his life is, though he gets occasional glimpses. He knows he will one day preach God's truths to the world and to the church, but where and to whom and by what means has not been revealed. But it will be.

P a u l : *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* (2Tim. 4:7)

Merf's highest calling is to gain Christ, to develop a life of worship similar to Paul's, worship that is not in speech only but worship with noble actions. A surrendered life causes all the details of life to fall into place, and when time is up he will be satisfied he had "finished the race."

L u k e : *As John was finishing his course.* (Acts 13:25)

Had John the Baptist been less than passionate for the God he served he would not have finished his course. And Merf's no different. The lukewarm don't get the job done, are not sufficiently concerned. *Hey, what's on the box tonight?*

D a v i d W i l k e r s o n : *Beloved, if you're going to walk in your destiny, the only thing that will set you apart is your desire to surpass all others in the knowledge of Jesus. No one will spend more time alone with Him than you.* (Times Square Church Pulpit Series 7-8-1996)

And what is the treasure in heaven most will not attain? This is my opinion….

The treasure in heaven is the same as *the* treasure on earth…. Jesus. Relationally, we will all have some of Jesus up there because we all have some of Jesus down here, even the most lukewarm. Those who have much of Jesus here will have much there. Distancing oneself here distances oneself there…. for eternity. Such will not be able to drop in on Jesus to say hello. Even Peter and Paul and Stephen and John will be hard to get to. He will have no "crown of righteousness" on his head. No "crown of glory that does not fade away." Those are reserved for the passionate. Like Merf.

C h a l l e n g e : *All of heaven's resources are available if you but exercise the free will God has given you to* choose *to fulfill, through (faith in) Jesus Christ, the high calling on your life. Will you?*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, may the reader know here, as he will certainly know there, how priceless You are. May he/she attain a crown that can one day be thrown at Your feet. Anoint this article, to the glory of Your Name, that Your purposes be accomplished.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!") Article # five: **A Sign**

F A R

Mannie is not only influenced, she influences.

Mannie is unaware just how hugely she is being influenced by peers and those giving spiritual oversight. And she is unaware just how much she influences others, especially others of the same gender, especially those younger in the Lord.

Every christian is a sign, a sign pointing others *to* Christ or pointing others *away from* Christ. Evangelicals in Mannie's life, mostly, point away from (an intimate relationship with) Jesus. Their arrow is aimed at a way of life, though containing a degree of Christ, foreign to New Testament writings, impotent and wasteful.

As others are an impediment to her, so is Mannie to others. Mannie is a sign pointing to a wayward path. She is a gospel preached daily by her words and lifestyle, a "different gospel," not the simple gospel of Christ, but Christ plus, plus, plus.

A. W. T o z e r : *If we offer our converts something beside Christ or something in addition to Christ we should not be disappointed if they do not run well or long.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

While being guarded by others to stay within *the zone* of established protocol, she is herself a guard policing others from straying beyond the boundaries.

The zone. The zone - a walled christian society with keepers at the gate, easy to enter and difficult to leave, a society ruled by salaried protectors faithful to those higher up the ecclesiastical ladder. Faithful underlings such as Mannie, intent on pleasing the keepers, become keepers themselves, watchful and protective, able to apply subtle pressure on *dissidents.*

Dissidents. The dissident may be a serious defector of New Testament instructions, or simply one threatening the *unity* of the group by casting off the plus, plus, plus, one rebellious to headship, a loose cannon.

Unity. Unity is a god to be bowed to, more reverenced by far than the Lord Himself, equally worthy of homage as god custom and god tradition. What we do we do together or not at all. God likes unity and God is good; we like unity and therefore we must be good. Bad guys are divisive malcontents, rebellious, refusing to accept their allotted station, refusing to give the keepers due *homage.*

Homage. Homage is what Mannie gives to others, the influential get the most, and she expects a little in return. Homage feels almost as good as a paycheck. Homage is the price of *acceptance,* something she couldn't live without. Never could. As a child, acceptance by parents and siblings was vital. As a teen, acceptance by teens was on par with pizza and oxygen. And now, forty within sight, acceptance is still to be protected at all cost.

Acceptance. Acceptance (and rejection) can be a tool used illicitly to keep others under *control,* a certain cruelty required to finesse with finesse. Mannie is as skillful as most, knowing when to offer acceptance and on what conditions, when to hold back a little, when to hold back a lot.

Control. Mannie is controlled, not by Jesus (Jesus is not a controller), not by the Holy Spirit (likewise), but by her christian community. And she in turn has become a controller, ably applying peer pressure to keep whosoever in step.

The zone is a comfort to most, a prison to several. Mannie has neither the courage nor the heart to dissent; her arrow will point in the same direction as others. Within the zone is ample acceptance so she will gladly bow to god unity, and give homage to those who demand it. Small payment for controlling and directing her life.

N E A R

Merf, too, is a sign and a gospel. His life points others to Christ, his actions preach a living and caring Jesus.

Merf frightens the keepers, his independence a threat to god unity. He is tolerated, just. Whenever and wherever he shows up he is met with less-than-veiled suspicion, his words closely examined for subterfuge; the congregation, after all, must be protected.

A sign not only points toward but points away from. The arrow pointing to the left points away from the right, and that creates a conflict. Pointing toward a dependence on and loyalty to Christ alone is pointing away from dependence on and loyalty to the group. The group doesn't like that. All look to leadership for guidance except Merf and a few others. The group looks to each other for support, Merf doesn't. They don't have what Merf has, don't feel what he feels, are not passionate about his passion…. Jesus.

They notice Merf changing, turning serious, even grave. Doesn't laugh like he used to. Walks around with a concerned look, like something's the matter. Leadership is wary of his independence.

Leadership: *Wouldn't be so bad if Merf simply kept quiet. But no, Merf seems to have this need to express. You would think since we are doing our best to tolerate him he would show some gratitude. A little sensitivity. When he talks to others about the lordship of Christ over the lordship of man, don't think we don't know who he's talking about. And okay, so he no longer believes in tithing, believes in being led by the Holy Spirit in his givings… but does he have to yak about it? We need healthy collections! And can't he, at least in front of others, call us* Pastor *like everyone else? He's causing division! If it weren't for Mannie we would give him the left foot of fellowship!*

A. W. T o z e r : *The fear that keeps us quiet when faith and love and loyalty cry out for us to speak is surely evil.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

So Merf is a pain in the neck, a thorn in the side, a threat to god unity, not exactly a team player, would never win the layman-of-the-year award. But Merf is happy. No encompassing walls, no man-lords, no need for permission. Merf is the little boy who climbed the fence and is discovering a massive neighborhood that never seems to have an ending no matter what direction he goes.

God is like that, endless. Merf thinks about God increasingly and is discovering God is *very* interesting and *very* big and *very* good. The Father always provides nourishment for His hungry kids. What Merf doesn't get at church he gets from books. Seems like some writers know a lot about Jesus. Seems like there are christians more radical than he. Seems like no matter how much he learns there is more to learn and someone to teach.

Ever see a kid with a flashlight in his mouth, skin pinky bright as the light leaks through his pores? Merf's like that…. sort of. With each passing year the light inside gets brighter and he leaks Christ through his pores. People find themselves studying him when he's looking the other way.

Though life is good, it isn't easy. A life with and in and through Christ comes with problems…. alienation, misunderstanding, rejection. Those lukewarm toward Christ will be lukewarm toward guys like Merf.

J E S U S : *A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.* (Mat. 10:24)

C h a l l e n g e : *You are a sign pointing toward and away from. You are an epistle recommending a passion for Jesus or something less. Your light, the light of Christ within, can shine brighter. You can use*

the gift of free will to choose more of Him. Who do you choose as teacher? As master? (God bless you!)

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, may Your light shine bright because of our choices. Lord, You commissioned me to preach (as You commissioned all), so I preach. I only ask that You anoint my words.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # six: **Pride vs Humility**

F A R

The proud are too proud to admit their pride. Mannie considers herself to be properly humble. (Because good christians are properly humble.) Besides, Mannie is practical. *What have I got to be proud of? I'm not rich, not beautiful, and my singing causes stampedes. Since I haven't got much, I can't be proud.*

No, Mannie, it doesn't work that way. The poor can be just as proud as the wealthy because there is always someone with less. Think there isn't pride in the slums? (Could be that's what got them there.) Think the less-than-beautiful can't find something on their body to be proud of? *(Hey, look at my pretty knuckles!)* And how many people you know can start a stampede by singing a lullaby?

For all her introspection Mannie can't see her pride. You see, Mannie is a victim. Victims, you may have noticed, have a victim's mentality. *It's not my fault!* is their anthem and creed and defense. He, she, they and it are to blame.

But Mannie's proud all right. Proud to have lots of friends. Proud to never have missed a sunday service in over a year and only late twice and "both times because of Merf even though I laid out his clothes and kept telling him we got to get going, but he just kept dawdling." Proud of the compliments she gets for her library work. Proud of her house, car, spirituality, sense of humor, honesty, the dimple on her cheek, and many etceteras including ten very pretty knuckles.

Pride is a destroyer, a corrupter, a dream-wrecker. Pride ushers many to hell and causes believers to distance themselves from Christ. One of the most wretched men I know once said, "Pride is all I got!" Yeah, he has pride and pride has him.

P e t e r : *God resists the proud.* (1Peter 5:5)

Doesn't sound good for the proud, does it?

A. W. T o z e r : *The promises of God are made to the humble: the proud man by his pride forfeits every blessing promised to the lowly in heart.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

Fortunately, though Mannie has pride she also has humility. Yes, she has both, same as you and me. (Well, maybe not you.) Pride distances her from Jesus, humility keeps her from drifting further.

What is humility?

A. W. T o z e r : *The humble man…. acknowledges that apart from God he is nothing, has nothing, knows nothing and can do nothing. But this knowledge does not discourage him, for he knows also that in Christ he is somebody.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

Mannie is fully aware her salvation is a gift from God and not something earned, she is totally dependent on Christ to get her to heaven. That's humility. She got herself saved through humility and humility keeps her that way.

What is pride?

Pride is the opposite of humility, a lack of awareness and acknowledgment of our dependence on Christ. Pride is refusing to acknowledge that in us, outside of Christ, there is no good thing.

Mannie can't, or won't, see that. She thinks she has the ability to manage her life, and retains a certain independence from the One she calls, "Lord, Lord." Not good.

N E A R

Merf, too, has pride, yet he is not a proud man. Hunh?

Merf is a humble man with a lingering problem with pride, not a proud man with only a little humility. Humility outweighs pride. Perhaps when he dies he will still have some of the bad stuff. But he is going in the right direction.

The right direction?

Yes. You see, that's the most we can expect, to be going in the right direction. We don't leap from here to there; it's a snail's pace.

A. W. T o z e r : *Sin has done a pretty complete job of ruining us and the process of restoration is long and slow.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

It takes time for Jesus to fix us, lots of time, for most a lifetime is too short. It's not that Jesus is a slow worker. There are two people involved in the sanctification process, the Sanctifier and the sanctifiee (just invented that word). It's the sanctifiee who slows the process.

If we are improving, growing in childlike trust in Christ, drawing closer to His side, that's all we can expect. As Merf grows in humility pride loosens its grip.

How does Merf grow in humility? By growing in the awareness of his need for Christ, by not trying to improve himself, by getting off the throne of his life and staying off, by accepting as fact he is the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus, by refusing to complete in the flesh what was begun in the Spirit, by dying to self, from shifting from a Merf-person to a Christ-person, by beholding Him in praise and adoration. (Going in the right direction is good, very good. But there is another matter for serious consideration, the speed of travel. But we won't get into that just now.)

C h a l l e n g e : *You have no hope of completing your course (fulfilling your destiny) if pride reigns in your heart. You cannot please your Father, bear good fruit, be a benefit to others. Confront your pride, not alone but with Jesus. "The Spirit of truth" will reveal your heart if you but petition Him.*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, though I freely confess pride of heart, though I acknowledge my difficulty in accepting the role of servant, I do pray You speak to the Holy Spirit about this article, asking Him to heavily anoint it. Let good come to Your saints.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # seven: **Stingy vs Generous**

F A R

Mannie is cheap. Getting is fun but giving hurts. She has heard a hundred times, "Give and it will be given to you," but still….

One day Mannie will be up there looking back on her time here. She will realize fully it would not have cost her anything to give. It would not have cost her to give a little and it would not have cost her to give a lot. Not one cent. Had she given little, the Lord would have replenished her little; had she given much, the Lord would have replenished her much. He is like that.

Mannie has the potential to finance great works for the Lord. She could be a soul-winner by simply supporting evangelists in certain third world nations, but giving is done by faith, and faith is lacking in the less-than-fervent.

But Mannie believes in tithing. She would be a second-rate adherent rather than a genuine church member if she didn't tithe. Perhaps when she gets to heaven Pastor Whoever will look her up to thank her for faithfully supporting him all those years on earth. Maybe she will be able to peek over the edge and look with solace at the nice church building she helped finance.

A. W. T o z e r : *Careless, unintelligent and prejudiced giving is wasting millions of consecrated dollars among evangelical Christians.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

L a r r y J o n e s : *A man's money and a man's heart go in the same direction. If his money is not being directed toward the Great Commission, neither will his heart be there. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."* (Financing the Great Commission)

As a young christian Mannie, like most young christians, had a zeal for soul-winning. But church took that out of her heart. First they taught her it was wrong to not attend church regularly so she attended church regularly. Then they taught her the Lord commands her to support the local church by tithing, so she tithed. Capturing her treasure had the effect of capturing her heart. And since her church was not particularly keen on reaching the lost with the gospel, neither was she. Brick and mortar and salaries slurped up her contributions…. and her heart.

She heard both sides of the tithing controversy, and it wasn't logic that made her decide to tithe. Her heart, not her mind, was the decision-maker. She would not be fully accepted if she didn't tithe,

Mannie needed as much of that good stuff (acceptance) she could get, so Mannie became a convinced and dutiful tither.

L a r r y J o n e s : *The weightiest evidence against the tithe system (for the New Covenant person) is the fact that there is nothing in Scripture to suggest such a practice. The Bible, that which is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness," does not instruct the Christian to tithe. Jesus never taught it. Nor did Paul. Nor did any of the other New Testament writers. There is not one precedent to be found. Not one.* (Financing the Great Commission)

Setting her loyalty upon man's words over Christ's words, while swelling her status with the group, was detrimental to her relationship with her Redeemer. Which forfeited the necessary grace we all need to overcome the natural tendency to hoard. Thus we have a very stingy Mannie.

N E A R

Merf was cheaper than Mannie. Never carried cash so he wouldn't be tempted to spend it or help someone in a moment of weakness. Merf and Mannie in a cheapie restaurant: *Darn, I forgot my wallet in the car..... Again, Merf?..... Think you can cover this one, Mannie? I didn't forget the two-for-one coupon. Heh-heh.*

But in time Merf has changed from a miser to a giver, a result of assimilation - walking with Jesus causes one to assimilate His nature, and there is none so generous as our Jesus.

A. W. T o z e r : *We are all in the process of becoming. We have already moved from what we were to what we are, and we are now moving toward what we shall be.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

A. W. T o z e r : *Not only are we in the process of becoming;* we are becoming what we love. (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

As time passes Merf's reverence for Christ's words deepens. It used to be, "Jesus said, 'Give and it will be given to you.'" And then it became, "*Jesus* said, 'Give and it will be.....'" And now it's *"JESUS* said, 'Give and it will be.....'"

As reverence for Christ increases so does reverence for His words. Merf trusts the words because he trusts the speaker of the words. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." Though the old Merf never disagreed, neither did he give heed. Today it's, *Truth, Lord! Give me more truth! Even if it hurts, I want it.*

Merf learned, and is learning, you can't outgive God. So he got brave one day and said, "Lord, every month I'm going to give *this much," this much* being enough to make the old Merf quite woozy. He opened a bank account and wrote checks whenever and to whoever the Spirit prompted. Well you know, Merf was none the poorer for it. After a year his confidence grew and he *doubled* the *this much.* A few years later he increased the *this much* by fifty percent. It was hard. There's no way he could give *that* this much. How would they survive? But somehow, don't know how, Merf and

Mannie never went hungry. Matter of fact, Merf has more cash for himself than ever (and he can take Mannie to classy restaurants.) Giving has become fun. *Hmmm. I wonder if I dare increase my giving again.*

And Merf made it real hard on the Lord by refusing to work so much. His study of the New Testament led to the conclusion it was not necessarily the Lord's will for christians to work a forty-hour week. He was certain none of the apostles did. (Yes, for some it would be wrong not to; it's not a simple matter.) So Merf stopped working fridays (Mannie: *You're not going to work fridays?!),* spending that day communing with the Lord, relaxing, soaking in His Presence. *(I'm a Sixth Day Adventist. Heh-heh.)* And as if that wasn't enough, a few years later he stops working mondays. (Mannie: *Mondays too?!*)

How can Merf work less and give more? Answer # 1: He can't. Answer # 2: "With God all things are possible."

Now Merf still has to learn to be directed by the Holy Spirit where to direct his givings. Where is no less important than how much. The Holy Spirit, the topic of another article.

C h a l l e n g e : *Either you cannot outgive God or you can. If you can't, you can bless multitudes and it won't cost you a dime. Think about it. Multitudes saved, thousands fed, wells drilled, orphans sponsored, medicine distributed, evangelists and missionaries financed. And who will finance the calling God has placed upon* your *life? Don't look to others to finance your calling; you will be sorely disappointed. "Cursed is the man who trusts in man."*

P r a y e r : *Jesus, because we are who we are, it is strenuous to give. If we walk far from You we will not learn to be givers. So draw us to Your side, writer and reader. And Lord, Your anointing, please.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # eight: **Prayer Life**

F A R

Mannie prays religiously, morning and night, to a God way up there. Praying to a God way up there isn't very effective, so she repeats her petitions over and over and over again, hoping a little faith times twenty or thirty or fifty is enough to get her prayers answered.

Instead of walking in the awareness of His Presence, Mannie walks in the awareness of her problems, meditating more on her problems than the problem-solver. Not good.

D a v i d : *In His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper.* (Psalm 1:2,3)

"His law" is His *word*. Our New Testament *word* is different (and far superior), but the principle of

meditation certainly applies. Poor Mannie cannot be likened to a tree planted by the river, but more like a shriveled shrub in dry land. And that's because she doesn't meditate upon the words of Jesus. (And that's because she keeps Jesus at a distance. And that's because of her idols.)

Snuggled up to her problems she prays to a faraway God. (Yes, our precious Lord is everywhere, but I'm speaking relationally.) Not a good way to get prayers answered.

J E S U S : *Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.* (John 14:27)

Every christian who distances herself from Christ has a heart troubled and afraid. Peace is available only through Christ. Everyone has troubles but not all have a troubled heart. We can only protect our heart by getting the Lord to protect our heart. To believe and receive, hearts must be free, "for with *the heart* man believes."

J a m e s : *Let him ask in faith, with no doubting.* (James 1:6)

Could you peek inside Mannie's heart you would see a pile of belief and a pile of unbelief. Guess which pile is larger. You got it, belief is an ant hill, unbelief a ski slope. If only unbelief would stop rising up every time she prayed, but no, unbelief never slumbers, always eager to war against her faith.

To receive one must believe. How can Mannie know if her belief outweighs her unbelief or vice versa?

Mannie's life reveals Mannie's heart. The one not having faith to give does not have faith to receive. The one disobedient to the words of Christ does not believe the promises of Christ. To the degree one relies on others is the degree one is not relying on Christ. Mannie's life reveals her heart, her faith, her unbelief.

Some evangelicals are tricky, trying to get to God without going through Christ. Their m.o. is to quote and claim biblical promises until they get what they want, the focus being on the promises, not the promise-giver. The Pharisees boasted in their faithfulness to Scripture, but when the author showed up they crucified Him.

Prayers are no more or less powerful than our faith in Jesus. Faith is trust. Trust is an Old Testament word, faith a New, but they mean the same. *Trust* is an easier word to understand than *faith*. We know what childlike trust is, we can understand the trust a child has in mom and dad, deserved or otherwise, and we know the devastation of broken trust. Trust is the fruit of relationship. A child trusts her scoundrel daddy much more than nice Mr. Smith next door.

How can we trust in an unfamiliar God? We can't. That's why the lukewarm have little prayer power. Prayer power is relative to trust in Christ. Most of us are trusting people, but trust directed at someone else is useless. It must be directed to, placed upon, He who is able. We must trust in God and….

Nothing…. nada…. no one…. Him alone. No plus, plus, plus.

A. W. T o z e r : *Let me tell you straight out that Jesus Christ will never stand at the right side of a plus sign.* (Who Put Jesus On the Cross)

N E A R

Ask Merf, "How are you doing?" and he will reply "Great!" without fibbing too much. When people ask, "How are you doing?" they want to know if you got lots of problems. Doing "Great!" means life has been treating you pretty good lately. But although Merf has as many problems as most he doesn't notice them so much. It's hard to pay attention when you're pursuing Christ.

Like wifey, Merf has unbelief. But unlike wifey, his unbelief is shrinking. He is gradually becoming a believing believer. Believing believers are guys who know how to receive, guys switching over from a life of unbelief to a life of belief. It's a process, a difficult one, takes years.

To change from a couch potato to an athlete it's important what you put in your tummy. Physically, what you eat today helps determine who you are tomorrow. Mixing junk food with health food is not as advantageous as eating only the good stuff. You can see that. And you can see that two hours of tv (unbelief) helps neutralize the benefit of two hours of prayer and study.

Merf's trust is increasing because he is spending more time in the Presence. Merf's unbelief is decreasing because he is spending more time in the Presence. First it was an hour a day. Then two, then three. Next year it will probably be four. It all has an accumulative effect. Faith increases.

The first hour of Merf's day is spent praising Jesus. No petitions that first hour; they can wait for the second. Just quiet time, alone time, an hour of remembering, surrendering, thanking, worshiping Jesus. It may sound wonderful but, as you know, it's a battle to stay focused. Thoughts insist on mind-entry, all kinds of thoughts - business thoughts, Mannie thoughts, I-got-to-do-this-and-that thoughts, yesterday thoughts, would-have/should-have thoughts, money thoughts, they-did-me-dirt thoughts. But eventually Jesus thoughts crowd out the others.

Merf often tells the Lord, "I'm not much, but I'm here." Jesus likes us *here,* in the awareness of His presence. To help focus on Him, Merf has his own communion service, breaking the bread and drinking the "fruit of the vine" in memory of Him. It's a special time of bonding and intimacy. What has this got to do with prayer power? Everything.

J E S U S : *According to your faith let it be to you.* (Mat. 9:29)

It is being done to Merf and Mannie, you and I, *according to* our faith. Think about it. Life is being played out *according to* our faith, our trust in the Son of God. Daily we receive blessings *according to* that trust.

Faith (please get this) is relative to relationship.

Do you think Paul would have been the great man of faith if he hadn't seen Jesus and heard His voice (the Damascus road and elsewhere), if he did not "die daily," had not developed a rich relationship with Christ?

Merf is no different than Paul - his faith is also relative to relationship. Relationship between two is something two develop. Lots of faith requires lots of developing, lots of time, lots of giving up distractions.

C h a l l e n g e : *Can you see your trust is revealed by your living? And can you see your unbelief is revealed by your living? And can you see the world you live in, spiritually, is the world both your faith and your unbelief has created for you? And can you see you are able to create a better world for yourself?*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, apply in greater measure Your Holy Spirit upon our lives, that we would hunger and thirst for You increasingly, that we would be filled and satisfied, that our trust in You would deepen, that Your purposes would be fulfilled in our lives. And Lord…. anoint this article.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # nine: **The Holy Spirit**

F A R

Mannie's church has a lot to say about the Holy Spirit. At least once a year the pastor or a visiting reverend will give a series of talks. Also, Mannie has read books and listened to televangelists.

She knows the Holy Spirit is a person, He is everywhere at once, dwells within the believer, there's nothing He can't do, we live in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, He wrote the Bible through various writers, He is Holy, He is all-powerful. But for all the head knowledge, Mannie does not *know* the Holy Spirit.

Mannie has memorized the nine gifts of the Spirit, and sincerely longs to have them operational in her life. The reverends scold her, from various pulpits, about her lack of love, so she tries hard to love. She should be joyful and peaceful, so she gives them a try. Next thing you know they're prodding her to have patience, so she determines to be patient, and that ain't easy especially with certain people (like Merf). As soon as she thinks she's making headway, there is kindness and faithfulness and gentleness to deal with. Sometimes she inwardly mutters back to the reverends, "Give me a break, will you?!"

Mannie really wants the Holy Spirit, the power and all that, to lay hands on the sick and have them jump joyously out of their sick bed. She even envisions herself raising the dead once in a while. How neat to have signs and wonders following her wherever she goes.

So what's the problem?

L a r r y J o n e s : *Because the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" one cannot have "fellowship of*

the Spirit" without having fellowship with Christ. How much of the Spirit do you have? This is relative to how much of Jesus you have. (The Way It Is)

Many in Mannie's church choose to comfortably distance themselves from Jesus but nonetheless want the Holy Spirit. Evangelicalism is crowded with such.

L a r r y J o n e s : *This reveals that they want the power for illegitimate reasons, not to glorify Christ, but to elevate self or to fortify* the way it is. (Ditto)

The fruit of the Spirit is just that, the fruit (or the characteristics or the nature) of the Spirit. To the degree Mannie has the Spirit she has the fruit of the Spirit. To try to get the fruit by self effort is a waste. Isn't going to happen.

Try to get the picture. As evangelicalism lacks Christ, so evangelicalism lacks the Holy Spirit. *To the degree* evangelicalism lacks Christ, evangelicalism lacks the Holy Spirit. Much study about the Holy Spirit won't change that.

J E S U S : *You will know them by their fruits.* (Mat. 7:16)

Good fruit, good tree. Bad fruit, bad tree. Present-day evangelicalism can be assessed by its fruit. Little fruit indicates little of the precious Holy Spirit. Mannie is a fruit of, a product of, evangelicalism, and Mannie is typical.

In your opinion, what does a Christ-centered, Spirit-filled "church" look like? And….

What does a man-centered, man-controlled church with little of the Spirit look like? And….

Which of the two best describes the typical evangelical church?

I will say it again: As and because evangelicalism lacks Christ, evangelicalism lacks the Holy Spirit. Little of Christ is *the* problem, *the* tragedy.

J E S U S : *You will know them by their fruits.*

Should Mannie continue to be guided by evangelicalism she will always be a stunted evangelical. She will never (consistently) "be filled with the Spirit."

N E A R

Merf doesn't seek the Holy Spirit, he seeks Christ.

L a r r y J o n e s : *How does a Christian get "filled with the Spirit"? By sincerely and fervently turning to Jesus, by embracing Him fully in one's life. It is a package deal; with Jesus comes "the Spirit of Jesus Christ."* (The Way It Is)

Merf received an interesting revelation during a morning alone time: The Holy Spirit loves Jesus.

The Holy Spirit is every bit as nice and as holy as Jesus, every bit as worthy of our praise. But He

doesn't seek our praise - He seeks the praises of Jesus and His (and our) Father. Jesus is central in heaven and the Holy Spirit works to make Him central in the church on earth.

Merf has a relationship with the Holy Spirit. The two walk together, not a perfect union by any means, but time brings them closer. Merf acknowledges his need for the Holy Spirit to bring him relationally closer to Christ and submits to His governorship. And then he strays (again), becomes independent, leaning on his own prowess, discovers (again) that doesn't work too good and returns to His lordship.

Poor Merf. Shifting from one lord (Merf) to another (the Holy Spirit) isn't easy. It calls for dying to self. (And we all know how hard that is.) It calls for abandonment, surrender and trust. *(Ouch!, ouch! and ouch!)*

A F r i e n d : *The road ahead is abundantly worth the journey.*

Going the way of the Holy Spirit hurts, but the hurt leads to a better life. Without the Holy Spirit Merf has no chance of completing his noble commission. He will be part of the problem. He will suffer loss at the judgment seat. Heaven will be less populated.

With the Holy Spirit comes adventure. He brings us to Jesus and Jesus is never boring. Keeping company with Jesus causes lots of problems but never a boredom problem. He is the only One we could never tire of being with. "When we've been there ten thousand years" we will not have lost one ounce of enthusiasm.

C h a l l e n g e : *Bored? Be a radical for Christ. How? Pray (sincerely and often) to become a radical for Christ. Submit to the lordship of the Holy Spirit.*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, Your anointing upon this article, I pray.* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")

Article # ten: **Church Life**

F A R

Mannie's local church is Mannie's idol, one of several, perhaps the biggie. Of course Mannie would be miffed at such a thought and deny it profusely. *My church helps me keep the faith, teaches truths of the Bible, gives me a boost sunday mornings, keeps me on the straight and narrow.*

Several years ago Mannie and Merf responded to an altar call right here in this building. A relative prodded them to attend healing services featuring a renowned evangelist, both had physical issues above their doctor's head, and anyway it all added up to the young couple going to the front and getting saved. So there's this loyalty thing.

Pastor emphasized, "Blossom where you are planted." Sounds right, so since this is where God planted Mannie this is where Mannie was going to hang out forever. In time church life became her life, almost entirely. When she needed encouragement she looked to church. Same for direction and

teaching and comfort in troubled times. With bonding came dependence. Church became her spiritual family, her ally, mentor and….

Lord.

Lord?

Yes, lord…. superior…. shepherd…. authority…. guide. Let me tell you Mannie's story. (Perhaps Mannie's story is your story.)

One sunday morning, about six months after her conversion to the Lord Jesus Christ, Mannie entered what had become her 'home church' wearing her beautiful purple coat. Two hours later she left the building wearing a drab black coat. (Now bear with me, I'm talking spiritually.) The purple coat symbolizes Christ's authority. Purple, as you may know, is the color of royalty. I'll let you guess what black represents.

The evangelist had told her the way to obey Jesus was to simply obey the Bible as she understood it, depending on the Holy Spirit to continually reveal the truths of the Word. She knew, just knew, what he said was true. Eagerly she embraced Jesus Christ and the Bible as the supreme authority of her life. That authority was like a divine cloak wrapped around her spirit. It felt real good.

No one can see the magnificent coat, but those spiritually sensitive can detect a noble woman of God; they who walk in the authority of the King do walk in nobility.

It took six months for Mannie's church to break her resolution to obey Christ and His Word, perhaps average time for most evangelical churches to accomplish this feat. Now the new convert was *their* new convert, and she would prove herself faithful to her new lord.

P a u l : *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel.* (Gal. 1:6)

The *sudden* shift from one authority to another resulted from a *gradual* shift of love from One to another.

Because she was brand new in Christ the group gave her an overdose of attention and adulation, and she drank thirstily at this inferior well, neglecting the well of "living water." That fateful sunday the pastor gave his "Be accountable to each other," and "Commit yourself to God *and* God's family," and "United we stand, divided we fall," and "No man is an island," and "Obey those who rule over you" message, and resisting Mannie finally caved. Deep in her heart she made a decision to exchange robes. On the way out of the building she called Pastor Whoever *Pastor* for the first time, and *Pastor* acknowledged her token of submission by turning up his economy-seat warm to first-class warm.

After exchanging lords Mannie soon adopted the church's love for, and loyalty to, custom and tradition. Compromise got easier with practice. She dare not resist the group because she was now a

dependent of the group. Since Mannie is socially and emotionally attached, and since her maturing kids need, even more than her, stability and acceptance, and since her church is her sole opportunity to minister to others, it is in her best interest to steer away from any appearance of dissension.

There is an unwritten rule which we all quickly learned: Don't step out of line, don't rock the church boat, be a team player. There's a price to pay for challenging authority (we're talking the black kind), pushing buttons, questioning the way it is. Since Mannie's life revolves around her church she is most eager to protect her status…. agreeing, cooperating, volunteering, smiling.

A. W. T o z e r : *The simple liberty of early Christianity is being lost to us…. the right to obey the Holy Spirit, the right to think our own private thoughts, the right to do what we will with our lives, the right to determine under God what we shall do with our money.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

A. W. T o z e r : *The desire to make a good impression has become one of the most powerful of all the factors determining human conduct.* (God Tells the Man Who Cares)

Church, not Christ, is now Mannie's focus. Her first thoughts in the morning are church thoughts, pastor thoughts. Mannie is much more sensitive to the pulse of the group then the leading of the Spirit. Tradition words are honored, Bible words quite secondary. And she can't see it. (Have you noticed the blind don't see too good?)

A. W. T o z e r : *It is entirely possible for us to imagine ourselves to be all right when we are not all right.* (Who Put Jesus On the Cross)

No longer is Mannie a flame for Christ. No longer is she filled with the Holy Spirit. She still calls Christ "Lord," but He isn't. His now sit where He once sat, on the throne of Mannie's life. She can deny it all she wants, church is Mannie's idol.

L a r r y J o n e s : *It is an issue of lordship.* (The Way It Is)

This tragedy is typical. What happened to Mannie happens regularly. Church and church history are packed with Mannies.

J o h n : *Keep yourselves from idols.* (1John 5:21)

It's easy to spot an idol in another's life (much easier than in one's own life). An idol is something you don't critique, refuse to bring under the light of Scripture. A friend who touches your idol won't be a friend long. An idol is something you don't talk about to Jesus.

An idol isn't necessarily a bad habit or sin or addiction. An idol is something one refuses to give the Lord permission to deal with. An idol is an idol by invitation, not weakness. You admit to a flaw, you defend an idol.

(It's important to realize weaknesses do not usually go instantly or all at once, and one should not

confuse flaws with idols and thus allow discouragement to hinder spiritual growth. I have been a christian 35 years and freely attest I have flaws, many and varied. My wife and family would certainly give a hearty "Amen!")

An idol consumes your time, affection, energy and money. It costs joy and it costs fruitfulness and it costs eternal rewards. Nasty things, those idols.

P a u l : *Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.* (Gal. 5:1)

N E A R

Church and Merf don't get along too good simply because church and Merf are going different directions. Everybody (and every group) is on the move, becoming, changing, either losing ground or gaining. No one is fixed. Merf is gaining Christ, church is descending deeper into lukewarmness.

It's not a steady backsliding; there are times when church bounces back heading for higher ground they once held. They had even brought in a revivalist, but he seemed to cause division, and church decided they would rather be united than fervent. If one could chart the spirituality of Merf's church, like most churches it would look like a failing stock that has occasional upward bounces, but the general trend is down, down, down.

People going down resent people going up, sibling jealousy perhaps. Christians who do not want (an intimate and meaningful relationship with) Christ don't want to hang with those who do. Water seeks its own level.

The pastor is resentful because he senses Merf doesn't need him. Pastor's perspective: *If we are all going in the right direction (and of course we are), and Merf is going in a different direction, Merf must be going the wrong way.* He's nervous that whatever Merf's got might be contagious, and he is quite protective of the flock in his charge.

Now everyone knows when the pastor is less than enthusiastic about someone, and making buds with that someone puts them at risk; no one wants the pastor's disapproval - all need his approval to serve and be accepted. So poor Merf is a bit lonely and getting lonelier.

Merf threatens unity because he doesn't place himself under the authority (yes, the black kind) of leadership. Not that Merf would ever be disruptive or do anything dumb, but he has this air of independence, seems to live in another world. Whatever makes him tick, it certainly isn't church.

Not that Merf doesn't enjoy church, he does…. somewhat. He looks forward to praise and worship time when heaven seems to open up a bit. And he does learn from the man behind the pulpit, especially guest speakers. He likes to linger after a good service and bask in the manifested Presence. On the other hand….

Merf just doesn't fit in, doesn't want to fit in, finds himself being critical of just about everything. *Why*

do we have to have the same guy preaching sunday after sunday after sunday? How can a man preach for almost an hour and rarely mention Christ? Is this what the New Testament church was like? Seems to me if the Holy Spirit were really in control the service wouldn't be so boring. Why don't we experience the power of God instead of just reading about it? "Shut up, Merf!" Merf says to Merf.

Often Merf daydreams while the pastor preaches. Quite an imagination, that boy....

He sees each in the congregation, after praise time, reach for a muzzle from the row of black muzzles hanging neatly on the back of the pews in front of the pew-warmers, watches them all put the muzzle over their mouths, quite proficiently Merf notices, like they've done this a thousand times. *They sure look silly,* Merf chuckles to himself, and he knows if he had a mirror he would see himself equally so. Mannie can't figure why her man has that silly little grin during preach time. And, *Why does he look at me like that, like there's something wrong with my face?*

So they are all muzzled, all except one, the pastor. No one muzzles the pastor, not even his wife. He gets to say funny things, talk about what a good week he has had - though very busy doing his pastoral duties - and expound his spiritual insights. He pampers, jokes, corrects and scolds to his heart's content.

Merf is the only one in the church who sees the denominational biggies seated behind the pastor, each suited and tie-d and sparkly and somber. Only Merf and the pastor know these guys follow the pastor around wherever he goes, be it preaching, counseling, playing tennis, relaxing in his recliner soaking in unbelief from the box, whatever. They are his lord, and to them does he bow, and in them he abides.

P a u l : *To whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves.* (Rom. 6:6)

Also, Merf is the only one to notice the ball and chain attached to the pastor's ankle. And the men behind him, they have one too. As does almost everyone in the congregation (almost everyone, there are exceptions in every church), including the little lady beside him.

Mannie? Little? You see, Mannie is a midget, just like most others in the building, including the guys in front. The midgets, though midgets, are not all the same height, all are according to their spiritual maturity. As Merf scans the people he spots the few giants, their grand stature obvious only to him and to each other.

Merf notices the pastor getting annoyed whenever one of the midgets carelessly crosses his legs and rattles his chain. The men behind him are careful to cross their legs soundlessly, not wanting anyone to know they are in the building.

Merf's ball and chain lies stretched out on the stage next to the pulpit, M E R F in bold letters on the ball, ankle-lock wide open, pining the return of its once captive. And then Merf's imagination really gets going. The pastor picks up the ball and chain in outstretched hands and looks longingly at Merf. All the muzzled midgets, always so very supportive of their pastor, noisily stand and turn - *clink,*

clink, clink, clink - to gaze at Merf with equal longing, all silently chorusing their plea, "Won't you join us, Merf? Won't you come back?"

To Merf's horror he feels himself drawn to the ball and chain he recently escaped. The muzzled, distraught faces, the pleading eyes, the outstretched arms of welcome even from the dignitaries up front, magnified the drawing power humans have upon humans. The people began to rattle their chains in unison, and mesmerized Merf slowly rises from his seat, makes his way to the aisle and heads repentantly to the altar. (Not your typical altar call, is it?)

Mannie's elbow in Merf's ribs saved Merf from the M E R F ball and chain, waking him from his terror. "What's with you, Merf?" now muzzleless Mannie demands. "You've got beads of sweat on your forehead!"

Songs sung, tithes taken, announcements announced, preaching preached, the people, muzzleless and shackleless and tall once again, are rejuvenated for at least a couple of hours, and the released chatterers chatter enthusiastically in the large foyer about nothing spiritually relevant.

A. W. T o z e r : *It is hard to have any insight and not be considered a cynic. It is hard to be a realist and not be classed with the pessimists.* (Who Put Jesus On the Cross)

C h a l l e n g e : *If you follow the crowd and the crowd is not following Christ, neither are you. Jesus said, "Come, follow Me."*

P r a y e r : *Lord Jesus, we say, "Yes, Lord." By the grace You so freely give we respond to Your beckoning. And we say, "More grace, Jesus."* (And hopefully the reader says, "Amen!")