

THE
PEACE
CHRIST GIVES

PASTOR'S SERIES

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Recognizing False Peace
and Resting in Christ

JOSEPH M. JACOWITZ

The Pastor's Series offers short, Scripture-centered books and booklets to help pastors in their shepherding and counseling ministries. Each volume seeks to equip them to feed Christ's sheep, apply His Word wisely to different spiritual needs, and encourage growth in faith, holiness, and maturity in Him. The aim is faithful pastoral care that leads people to know, trust, love, and follow the Chief Shepherd.

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GOVERNING SCRIPTURES

Romans 5:1

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

Galatians 3:13

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”),

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P R E F A C E

A pastor must sometimes disturb the very peace a person has come asking him to preserve. If that peace depends upon avoiding the truth, leaving it undisturbed would be a failure of love. I have written this book because souls are at stake in the difference between feeling safe and being reconciled to God. I want those who read it to have a peace that can bear the searching light of Scripture because it rests upon Jesus Christ.

That concern belongs to the ordinary work of feeding Christ's sheep. We must teach people where forgiveness is found, help them recognize what deceives them, and bring God's Word to bear upon the lives they actually lead. A person may know the language of salvation while trusting his church membership, his usefulness, or a decision made years ago. He may be surrounded by Christians and remain a stranger to the Savior. I cannot regard his confidence as a small matter when eternity will reveal what supported it.

I am also concerned for the believer who has grown careless. He needs to hear plainly that grace gives him no permission to protect a sin he ought to forsake. And I want to help the fearful Christian who loves the Lord yet finds it hard to believe that Christ's sufficient sacrifice answers his own guilt. Such a believer needs patient instruction, not an accusation drawn merely from the fact that he trembles. Faithful care requires us to listen closely and speak the truth each person needs. We can do harm by offering comfort where God calls for repentance, or by withholding comfort He has provided.

For that reason, exposing false peace is only part of my purpose. I want genuine gospel peace to be understood, received, and protected. The foundation is Christ Himself: through faith in Him we have peace with God, and by bearing the curse He has secured our redemption (Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:13). Everything in these pages must serve that truth. I want readers to know why they need Him, what He has accomplished, and what it means to trust and follow Him.

I do want you to examine yourself frequently and honestly. Open your beliefs, desires, habits, and hidden conduct to the judgment of God's Word. I must do the same. A pastor's calling does not exempt

him from the truth he brings to others. My prayer is that the searching passages in this book will help us stop defending what God condemns, acknowledge His grace where it is truly present, and turn to Christ with nothing concealed and no claim to deserve His mercy.

This is the first volume in the Pastor's Series, a collection of short, Scripture-centered books and booklets intended to help pastors in their shepherding and counseling ministries. I hope these pages will help a pastor prepare for a difficult conversation, instruct a troubled believer, or put needed counsel into someone's hands. I have also written directly to the reader who needs that counsel. You should not have to be a pastor to understand why the condition of your soul matters or where to seek help.

My desire is to feed Christ's sheep and see them grow in faith, holiness, and love for their Shepherd. May God use this book to awaken those resting in false peace, restore those who have wandered, and strengthen those who fear to trust His promise. Above all, may Jesus Christ be honored as readers come to Him and learn to rest in the peace He gives.

Joseph M. Jacowitz

INTRODUCTION

A promise of forgiveness can be underlined in a Bible while a cherished sin remains untouched. The reader returns to that promise whenever his conscience troubles him, yet turns away from the command that would require him to change. Elsewhere, a believer reads the same promise and scarcely dares to receive it. He confesses his sin, seeks to forsake it, and looks to Christ, but wonders whether mercy can really extend to someone so weak. The words on the page have not changed. What each reader does with them matters eternally.

We need more than the ability to find a comforting verse. We need to hear what God actually says, including whom He comforts, what He condemns, and how He receives sinners. A promise detached from the Savior's authority can become an excuse for disobedience. A promise withheld from the sinner who trusts Him can leave a wounded conscience carrying a burden Christ has answered.

This book begins with the peace Christ has made.

Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ".

Justification means that God declares the believing sinner righteous in His sight through Christ. The reason for that verdict lies in the Savior's obedience and sacrifice, not in our success at producing a peaceful heart. We receive Him through faith; we bring no payment. Before asking how secure we feel, we must ask whether we are resting upon the One through whom guilty people are reconciled to God.

The cross tells us what that reconciliation cost. Galatians 3:13: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us". These words confront every easy notion of forgiveness. God did not dismiss His law's sentence against sin. His Son bore the curse for His people. The Savior who died rose again, and those who trust Him have a righteousness and a hope they could never produce for themselves.

Peace with God therefore concerns our standing before Him. Our enjoyment of that peace concerns our experience of the relationship He has established. The two belong together, but they must not be confused.

A believer's feelings can falter without overturning God's verdict; an unbeliever's confidence can grow without removing his guilt. Knowing the truth about Christ gives faith something dependable to rest upon when feelings are unsteady. Merely knowing the correct explanation, however, must never be mistaken for trusting Him.

This distinction protects us from two serious errors. We dare not pronounce someone safe because he feels safe, nor pronounce him lost because he feels afraid. Fear by itself proves neither salvation nor its absence. Scripture must examine the confidence and the fear alike, bringing into view what a person believes, whom he trusts, and how he responds to the Lord's commands.

You may recognize yourself at different points in these pages. Perhaps religion has surrounded you for years without your ever truly coming to Christ. Perhaps you belong to Him but have grown careless, allowing a familiar sin privileges you would once have refused it. Or perhaps you are a genuine believer whose faith trembles under accusations, confusion, or sorrow. These conditions call for careful distinctions. None gives us permission to defend sin; none makes Christ insufficient for the sinner who comes to Him.

Frequent, honest biblical self-examination is healthy and essential. Paul directs professing Christians to examine themselves (2 Corinthians 13:5). We should bring our beliefs, desires, habits, and conduct under God's Word, welcoming its correction and receiving its promises. The question reaches beyond what we claim to believe into the life that claim produces. Repentance, love, and obedience are fruits of saving grace, never the purchase price of acceptance. We must neither demand that fruit pay our debt nor pretend its absence is unimportant (Ephesians 2:8–10; 1 John 2:3–6).

The chapters follow these distinctions into ordinary Christian experience. We begin with reconciliation, then examine false assurance and the purpose of conviction. We consider the careless Christian and the fearful believer before learning how Scripture searches us and how faithful preaching serves our souls. Throughout, the purpose is to expose false comfort and establish genuine confidence in Christ. The teaching annex develops the church's continuing need for the preached Word.

Read with an open Bible and enough patience to answer personally. Each Diagnostic presses the chapter's teaching into questions about your own trust and conduct. The ten CHAPTER AXIOMS gather that chapter's central truths; the separate ten doctrinal principles explain the biblical foundations of its subject. Use these sections to think, pray, and act, rather than to measure how quickly you can agree. The For Pastors sections carry the same truths into the responsibilities of shepherding.

Pastors must distinguish a defended rebellion from a struggling faith without making either distinction a refuge for evasion. Faithful care warns those who resist the Word, encourages the fainthearted, and helps the weak patiently (1 Thessalonians 5:14). Readers also need that care. Seek a faithful shepherd who will help you hear both the commands and the promises of Christ.

As you begin, ask God for honesty to receive what His Word uncovers and faith to receive what His Son promises. You need not protect a comforting mistake from the light. There is something better to discover: peace founded upon the crucified and risen Christ, strong enough to sustain a life lived openly before God.

CHAPTER 1

The Peace Christ Has Made

A Christian can finish praying and still feel accused. He has named his sin, asked for forgiveness, and turned again to the Lord, yet the same question follows him into the next hour: Has God really received me? Someone else can leave church perfectly satisfied without having brought his sin to Christ at all. Both describe their experience honestly. Neither experience, by itself, tells us whether there is peace between that person and God.

We must begin somewhere firmer than the way we feel when the service ends. Before we examine false assurance, we need to know what genuine peace rests upon. Otherwise, we may frighten people away from a confidence God commands them to enjoy. The purpose of exposing a false refuge is to bring people to the true one.

Romans 5:1: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Notice where Paul begins. He does not begin with a peaceful temperament, a respectable history, or a sufficiently painful conversion. He begins with justification. God declares righteous the sinner who believes in Jesus. This verdict rests upon Christ’s righteousness, not the believer’s progress in becoming righteous. The Christian’s peace has a foundation outside his changing condition: the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE TROUBLE BENEATH OUR TROUBLE

Sin does more than disturb our conscience. It brings us under the righteous judgment of God. We have disobeyed the One who made us, and we cannot repair that relationship merely by feeling better about

ourselves. A quiet conscience may be badly informed. A troubled conscience may recognize something terribly real. In either case, our deepest need is reconciliation with God.

Paul spends the opening chapters of Romans stripping away the defenses people bring to that judgment. Moral criticism of other people cannot justify us. Religious privilege cannot justify us. The law exposes our guilt; it does not provide a ladder by which guilty people climb back into God's favor. When the evidence is heard, every mouth is stopped (Romans 3:19–20).

Telling yourself, "Don't be so hard on yourself," will not remove your guilt before God. Neither will reminding yourself of the good you've done. If you have sinned against Him, you need His forgiveness. You may quiet your conscience by ignoring your sin, but ignoring it does not make you right with God.

God's answer is neither denial nor indulgence. He sent His Son. Jesus obeyed where we disobeyed, bore the judgment His people deserved, and rose from the dead. At the cross, God did not become careless about evil. He dealt with it at a cost no sinner could pay. Romans 3:26 declares Him both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. The Judge Himself has provided the righteousness we need.

RECEIVED, NOT EARNED

Romans 4:5: "But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness."

There is a word here that religious people can find difficult to accept: ungodly. We would prefer to arrive with a record that makes God's welcome seem reasonable. We might admit that we need help while secretly hoping He notices how much better we are than we used to be. Paul takes that bargain away. The person justified is not offering a sufficient performance. He believes in the God who justifies the ungodly.

Faith does not make our surrender an impressive replacement for good works. It receives Christ. Its saving value lies in the Savior upon whom it rests. A frightened person who truly trusts Jesus does not have a smaller Savior than the person whose faith feels strong. Both depend upon the same righteousness, the same sacrifice, and the same risen Lord.

This does not make repentance unnecessary. Repentance and faith belong together in conversion. We turn from sin to God, abandoning both our rebellion and our attempts to establish our own righteousness. But repentance does not settle the debt that Christ paid. Tears cannot improve His sacrifice. William Beveridge confessed, "my repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want washing, and the very washing

of my tears need still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer.”* Even our repentance is imperfect. Our hope rests in Christ’s perfect sacrifice, not in the purity of our sorrow. The sorrow of a returning sinner is precious, but it is not the price of admission.

Consider how easily we confuse these things. Suppose you have spoken cruelly to someone in your family. You recognize the sin and ask God for forgiveness, but afterward you decide you must remain miserable for several days before you can approach God freely. What are those days accomplishing? They cannot erase the cruelty. They cannot compensate the person you wounded. They may even become a private payment plan that keeps you occupied with your distress instead of making an honest apology and learning to speak differently.

Bring the guilt to Christ, and then take responsibility for the harm. Receiving forgiveness does not make the apology unnecessary. It frees you to make it without trying to save yourself through it. The grace that removes condemnation also teaches us to renounce ungodliness (Titus 2:11–14).

PEACE WITH GOD AND PEACE IN THE HEART

Romans 5 speaks first of peace with God. The hostility created by sin has been dealt with through Christ. This settled relationship can sustain the believer when his enjoyment of it is weak. Paul immediately speaks of access into grace, hope of glory, and even rejoicing in tribulations (Romans 5:2–5). Peace with God does not mean a life without pain. It means that pain no longer proves God is our enemy.

Spurgeon put it plainly: “Peace with God must come to us by the way of the cross.”**

The inward experience of peace matters. God does not invite us to be indifferent to His love. Scripture teaches us to bring our anxieties to Him and receive His guarding peace (Philippians 4:6–7). Yet our experience can be disturbed by sin, poor understanding, exhaustion, grief, temptation, and many other burdens. We should address those burdens carefully rather than turn every troubled day into a fresh verdict on whether Christ has received us.

* William Beveridge, *Private Thoughts upon Religion and a Christian Life*, vol. I (London: John Hatchard and Son, 1834), part I, article IV, pp. 42–43. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/beveridge_w/thoughts.iv.i.iv.html.

** C. H. Spurgeon, “Peace—A Fact and a Feeling,” sermon no. 1456, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit 25 (1879), section II, p. 6 (Spurgeon Gems PDF pagination), <https://www.spurgeongems.org/sermon/chs1456.pdf#page=6>.

There is also a difference between the Father's displeasure with His child's sin and the condemnation of someone outside Christ. A believer may need serious correction. He may lose the joy of fellowship through stubbornness. He must never use justification to excuse what grieves the Lord. But the Father does not require His child to provide another atonement. He calls him to confession and renewed obedience on the strength of the atonement already made.

Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

The Christian life described here belongs to people made alive by the Spirit. Paul is not offering comfort to an unchanged profession that refuses Christ's rule. Neither is he making a sinless week the condition of freedom from condemnation. The chapter places our hope in God's action through His Son and Spirit. That hope produces a new direction, even while the believer continues to put sin to death.

DO NOT BEGIN BY TAKING CHRIST AWAY

Pastors sometimes meet a distressed person and immediately begin searching for evidence that his conversion was false. There are occasions when a profession needs to be challenged. But suspicion is a poor substitute for listening. Ask what the person believes, what he is trusting, what troubles him, and how he responds to the Word. A fearful believer and an evasive unbeliever do not need identical counsel simply because both have a spiritual problem.

Nor should we reassure someone merely because we like him, remember his baptism, or depend upon his service. We do not possess the authority to turn our affection into God's verdict. We can explain the gospel, examine a profession in the light of Scripture, and encourage those whose lives give credible evidence of faith. Our confidence must remain tied to what God has said.

The first pastoral task, therefore, is to make Christ clear. Who is He? What has He accomplished? What does He promise those who come to Him? When those questions remain vague, people often substitute a feeling, an event, or the opinion of a trusted leader. A church may speak frequently about assurance while leaving its members unsure what assurance is supposed to rest upon.

Let us give them something better than repeated approval. Let us teach them the sufficiency of the Savior. The person who must always hear that he is doing well will become frightened when he is not. The

person learning to rest in Christ can confess that he has done badly and still come for mercy. That freedom does not weaken holiness. It removes the need to conceal the very sins that need to be confronted.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHERE DOES YOUR CONFIDENCE GO?

When you have failed, what do you reach for first: Christ's promise, an excuse, a record of earlier service, or a period of self-punishment? Your first instinct may reveal a misunderstanding that needs correction, not necessarily the absence of faith. Name it honestly, and bring it under Scripture.

When you have done well, do you feel that God owes you a warmer welcome? Ask whether obedience has quietly become your argument for acceptance. Thank Him for every evidence of grace, but let Christ remain your only plea for righteousness before God.

If someone asked why God should receive you, could you explain the answer without making your church history the center of it? Read Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5 slowly. Then state plainly what Jesus has done that you could never do for yourself.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. The feeling you carry out of church cannot tell you everything about your standing before God. Let His Word examine both the confidence that feels secure and the fear that refuses comfort. (Romans 5:1; 1 John 3:19–20)
2. When conscience names a real sin, reassurance alone leaves the matter unfinished. Bring that sin into confession before God rather than asking a quieter conscience to do the work of forgiveness. (Psalm 32:3–5; 1 John 1:9)
3. Yesterday's service cannot pay for today's disobedience. A record worth thanking God for becomes a dangerous refuge when you offer it as the reason He should receive you. (Philippians 3:4–9)
4. Examine your faith honestly, but look to Christ for the righteousness that examination cannot supply. His promise directs the sinner who comes to Him toward His welcome, not toward confidence in his own worthiness. (John 6:37; Romans 4:5)
5. Sorrow becomes a counterfeit payment when you decide that you must suffer long enough to deserve forgiveness. Repentance brings you back to Christ; it does not set a price He requires you to pay. (Romans 4:5; Hebrews 10:14)
6. Forgiveness gives you freedom to face the person you hurt without defending yourself. An honest apology and changed conduct

- belong to repentance; prolonged misery cannot perform either duty for you. (Matthew 5:23–24; Ephesians 4:28–32)
7. Bring your fears under the judgment of Scripture. Confess the sin it exposes, ask God for the help you need, and trust His promises as you take the next obedient step. (Psalm 139:23–24; Philippians 4:6–7)
 8. When the Father corrects you, receive the correction rather than running from Him. His purpose is to train His child in holiness, so the fitting response is renewed obedience rather than an attempt to earn adoption. (Hebrews 12:5–11)
 9. Wise counsel listens before it pronounces. The person clinging to Christ in fear needs encouragement; the person protecting cherished sin needs warning, and neither is helped when we mistake one for the other. (1 Thessalonians 5:14)
 10. Encouragement should leave a person more dependent on Christ, not more dependent on being praised. Teach the troubled believer where mercy is found when there is no recent achievement to report. (2 Corinthians 1:24; Hebrews 4:15–16)

A PEACE YOU DID NOT MAKE

Dear reader, Christ has not left the work of your reconciliation for you to finish. If you have been hiding behind religion, relinquish it as your defense and come to Him. If you have been trembling while truly resting in Him, do not treat your trembling as stronger evidence than His promise. The Savior who receives you is not waiting for your feelings to become worthy of His welcome. Rest in the One who died and rose again, and learn to obey as someone brought near by His blood.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Where you have made your approval the resting place of troubled people, acknowledge the error. You are a servant of their joy, not the lord of their faith (2 Corinthians 1:24).

RE-TEACH.

Explain justification plainly. Help people distinguish Christ's finished work, the faith that receives Him, and the fruit that follows. Do not assume familiar vocabulary means settled understanding (Romans 3:24–26).

REFORM.

In counseling, ask what the person is trusting before prescribing what he should do. Bring the relevant promises into the conversation, and connect concrete obedience to grace rather than to an attempt to earn acceptance (Titus 3:4–8).

REMAIN.

Continue preaching Christ when people prefer praise, accusation, or a technique. The church never outgrows its need to hear why a guilty person may approach a holy God (1 Corinthians 2:2).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

1. Our deepest problem is not that we feel guilty, but that our sin has made us enemies of God. We need more than relief from an accusing conscience; we need reconciliation with the God we have offended. (Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:21–22)
2. Reconciliation began with God's love, not our desire to return to Him. He sent His Son for sinners who had given Him every reason to condemn them and no reason to reward them. (Romans 5:6–8; 2 Corinthians 5:18–19)
3. Christ secured our peace by bearing the curse our sins deserved. God did not overlook our guilt; His Son answered for it in our place. (Galatians 3:13; 2 Corinthians 5:21)
4. Christ's sacrifice needs no contribution from us. Our tears cannot complete His work, and our obedience cannot improve the offering by which He made peace. (Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 10:10–14)
5. We receive peace with God through faith in Christ, not by making ourselves worthy of forgiveness. Faith brings no payment; it rests on the Savior who has paid. (Romans 5:1; Romans 4:5)
6. The Holy Spirit gives new life and teaches God's children to approach Him as their Father. His assurance directs us toward the Father's welcome, not toward confidence in our own goodness. (Titus 3:5–7; Romans 8:15–16)
7. Peace with God does not disappear whenever a believer feels afraid. Christ's work establishes our standing before God; our changing feelings do not overturn His verdict. (Romans 5:1; Romans 8:1)
8. God's correction is not a return to condemnation. He disciplines His children because they belong to Him, training them to share His holiness. (Hebrews 12:5–11)
9. The Spirit produces inward peace in those whom Christ has

reconciled to God. We learn to bring our fears to our Father and trust His care; this growing peace is a fruit of His grace, never the price of His acceptance. (Galatians 5:22–23; Philippians 4:6–7)

10. Reconciliation gives us access to God now and hope beyond death. The Savior who died to bring us near is alive to keep us; our future does not rest on our ability to hold everything together. (Romans 5:1–2, 10; Hebrews 7:25)

CHAPTER 2

When Feeling Safe Is Not Enough

There is a kind of reassurance that leaves a person in greater danger than it found him. He arrives with a conscience beginning to trouble him. Someone quickly explains why he need not be concerned. He remembers his baptism, his service, or the prayer he once prayed. The conversation ends pleasantly, and the question that might have led him to Christ is put away again.

Reassurance can be a mercy. It can also become a way of helping someone avoid the truth. The difference depends upon whether the comfort agrees with God.

Jeremiah 6:14: “They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace.”

Jeremiah was speaking to Judah in a particular crisis of covenant unfaithfulness and approaching judgment. Covetousness and false dealing had spread through the people, including prophets and priests (Jeremiah 6:13). The leaders announced peace while the nation resisted God’s Word. Their message treated a grave wound as though it required only a soothing word. The warning belongs first to that setting, but the principle searches every ministry that offers safety where God calls for repentance. Charles Spurgeon put the responsibility plainly: “Ministers are fearfully guilty if they intentionally build up men in a false peace.”*

* C. H. Spurgeon, “A Blast of the Trumpet Against False Peace,” sermon no. 301, preached February 26, 1860, *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 6, opening paragraph. <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/a-blast-of-the-trumpet-against-false-peace>.

WHAT THE REASSURANCE PROTECTS

False comfort does not always deny a biblical truth. Sometimes it takes a true statement and uses it to prevent another truth from being heard. God is merciful, so we need not face our rebellion. Salvation is by grace, so our continued defense of sin must be irrelevant. No Christian is perfect, so no pattern of disobedience should ever disturb our confidence.

Each sentence begins near the truth and carries the listener away from its meaning. God's mercy invites repentance. Grace delivers people from sin's dominion. The imperfections of genuine believers do not make a settled refusal to follow Christ harmless. A doctrine is being misused when it repeatedly shields the very thing that doctrine condemns.

Suppose a man repeatedly humiliates his wife, refuses correction, and insists that the subject is closed because he accepted Jesus years ago. The problem is not that his counselor has failed to appreciate salvation by grace. The man is appealing to grace to preserve his right to be cruel. His profession requires sober examination, and his conduct requires direct confrontation. The wife's safety and need for support must not disappear behind a discussion of his assurance.

Thomas Watson described the same refusal to confess sin: "Instead of having tears to lament it, they use arguments to defend it."*

Now consider a man grieved by his harsh speech who confesses it, receives correction, and is learning to change. He also needs repentance, practical help, and accountability. But it would be careless to treat his struggle as though it were identical to the first man's defended rebellion. The difference is not that one has sinned and the other has not. It is the relation each is maintaining to the sin and to Christ's Word. Proverbs 28:13 makes that distinction clear: concealing sin leads nowhere good, but confessing and forsaking it brings mercy.

We cannot see the heart perfectly. We can listen, observe, and refuse to pronounce peace in opposition to Scripture. Love does not require us to know everything before we address what is plainly before us.

RELIGION CAN BECOME A HIDING PLACE

Religious people have unusually respectable materials with which to build a false assurance. They know the words. They recognize the hymns. They may have served so faithfully that others find it difficult to imagine them outside Christ. None of those privileges should be despised. But

* Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance*, ch. 3, "The Nature of True Repentance (1)," Ingredient 3, "Confession of Sin," application (4). Online transcription, unpaginated. <https://www.fivesolas.com/Watson/repent1.htm>.

a privilege becomes dangerous when it is used as a substitute for the Savior to whom it points.

J. C. Ryle warned against mistaking the appearance of religion for its reality: “A painted fire cannot warm, and a painted banquet cannot satisfy hunger, and a formal religion cannot bring peace to the soul.”* Titus 1:16 exposes the contradiction: people can claim to know God while denying Him by the way they live.

Jesus warned people who could speak confidently about their religious activity. Matthew 7:23: “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’” His verdict in Matthew 7:21–23 overturns their appeal to impressive works. They had much to say about what they had done. The decisive issue was whether they belonged to Him.

We should not turn this passage into a percentage of unsaved people in our congregation. Jesus has not given us that number. He has given us a warning serious enough to prohibit easy assumptions. A church roll cannot bear the weight of a soul’s eternity. Neither can the memory of a minister who once assured us that a particular response settled everything.

A past profession matters as part of our history, but it must not be used to silence the present claims of Christ. The question is not whether we can remember an occasion on which we said the right words. Are we trusting the living Savior now? Has our profession become a reason to listen to Him, or a reason to refuse further examination?

The person raised in church may face a particular embarrassment here. To admit uncertainty after many years can feel like dismantling a public identity. What will the family think? What about the people I have taught? Yet those fears can make the respect of other people seem more valuable than being right with God. It is better to endure an honest conversation now than to preserve an illusion until judgment makes honesty unavoidable.

THE COMFORT OF COMPARISON

Another refuge is the company we keep. We measure ourselves against someone openly immoral and feel encouraged. Or we notice that people we respect make the same compromises we make. The comparison seems to settle the question before Scripture is allowed to ask it.

But another person’s disobedience cannot make mine innocent.

* J. C. Ryle, *Practical Religion*, ch. XI, “Formality,” p. 267. Project Gutenberg transcription of the Baker Book House edition. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38162/38162-h/38162-h.htm#Page_267.

Nor does someone else's apparently comfortable conscience prove that his way is safe. A room full of people can agree not to discuss a danger without removing it. Religious companionship is a blessing when it helps us follow Christ; it becomes destructive when it helps us explain away His commands.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector exposes this refuge. The Pharisee's prayer was full of favorable comparisons and commendable activities. The tax collector asked God for mercy. Jesus declared the tax collector justified rather than the other man (Luke 18:9–14). The issue was not whether fasting or giving was evil. The Pharisee was using his goodness to stand above sinners when he needed to join them in seeking mercy.

Ask yourself what happens when Scripture identifies something you have defended. Do you search for someone worse, someone similar, or someone who will tell you not to worry? Or are you willing to hear the Lord's judgment and come to Him without your defense? That response deserves attention because it shows what you are asking comfort to do.

A WARNING IS AN OPENING, NOT A SENTENCE OF DESPAIR

When false peace is exposed, the temptation is to conclude that there is nowhere to stand. But the exposure does not create our guilt. It reveals a danger that already existed and directs us toward the Savior. A truthful warning can be one of the kindest interruptions in a religious life. That is why Hebrews 3:13 calls us to exhort one another daily, before sin deceives us and our hearts grow hard.

The Lord who condemns false assurances does not require sinners to repair themselves before coming. He calls them to repentance and faith. Isaiah 55:7: "Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, And He will have mercy on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon."

The promise does not flatter the wicked man. It tells him to forsake his way. Yet it gives him a reason to return: abundant pardon. This is the shape of faithful pastoral care. We refuse to call rebellion safe, and we refuse to describe the returning sinner as beyond Christ's mercy.

If this chapter has exposed a confidence built upon church membership, another person's approval, or the right to remain unchanged, do not spend the next month trying to manufacture a more convincing religious experience. Tell the truth to God. Turn from the sin you have been protecting, and trust Jesus Christ, whose death is sufficient for guilty people. Seek help from a faithful pastor who will open Scripture with you rather than merely restore the reassurance you have lost.

If, however, you have begun imagining that every peaceful moment is suspicious, return to the foundation already laid. Peace grounded in Christ is to be treasured. The question is not whether you feel safe. It is whether you are resting where God has promised safety. We disturb false peace so that genuine peace may be found and enjoyed.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHAT MUST REMAIN UNEXAMINED?

Think of a concern you have dismissed recently. What settled it: a clear biblical answer, or the relief of finding someone who agreed with you? If a command applies to your conduct, name the obedience you have postponed.

What would you be afraid to tell a pastor who knew you well? The answer may reveal shame that needs tender care, or concealment that needs repentance. Bring the actual matter into an honest conversation instead of allowing fear to decide which it is.

Does your assurance depend upon a subject never being raised? Ask whether your peace requires silence about your money, your private habits, your treatment of people, or your reason for believing you are saved. Christ's truth does not become your enemy because it reaches the place you have protected.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Feeling safe is not the same as being reconciled to God. Our peace rests on Christ, who bore the curse for us, and we receive it through faith, not by persuading ourselves that all is well (Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:13).
2. Religious activity can impress people while hiding our need for Christ. What we have done in His name cannot replace knowing Him as our Savior (Matthew 7:21–23).
3. Grace is not permission to protect the sin Christ came to conquer. The grace that pardons us also breaks sin's dominion over us (Romans 6:1–14).
4. Confessing sin and defending it are not the same response to God. A believer's failures call for repentance and renewed trust in Christ, not the conclusion that every struggle proves his faith false (1 John 1:6–10; 2:1–2).
5. Comparing ourselves with worse sinners can keep us from asking for the mercy we need. The tax collector went home justified, not because he outperformed the Pharisee, but because he sought mercy instead of presenting his merits (Luke 18:9–14).
6. Reassurance becomes dangerous when it helps us dismiss what

God has said about our sin. A comforting message is not faithful merely because people welcome it (Jeremiah 6:13–15).

7. The purpose of conviction is repentance, not endless distress. We have not helped someone merely by making him feel worse; we must show him why he needs Christ and why he may come (2 Corinthians 7:9–10; Isaiah 55:6–7).
8. God's call to forsake sin comes with His promise of abundant pardon. The sinner who turns to Him need not earn a welcome by first becoming worthy of mercy (Isaiah 55:6–7).
9. Faithful shepherding does not give every troubled person the same counsel. Warn those resisting God, comfort the fainthearted, and patiently help the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
10. Believers should regularly examine their hearts and conduct in the light of God's Word. Such examination calls us to confess sin, turn from it, and renew our dependence on Christ. Pastors should encourage this practice, directing people to the Savior whose grace both forgives and changes us. (Lamentations 3:40; 2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 John 1:9)

BETTER THAN BEING LEFT ALONE

It may hurt to discover that you have mistaken religious familiarity for peace with God. But it would be far worse to be left undisturbed until there is no longer an opportunity to hear the gospel. Christ has not asked you to preserve the appearance that you have always understood Him. He calls you to come. You may have spent years defending a false confidence, but you need not spend another day protecting it. The truth that takes away your excuse also shows you the Savior who receives sinners.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Confess any occasion when affection, usefulness, or fear of conflict led you to reassure someone against the evidence of Scripture. A familiar face still needs faithful shepherding (Acts 20:26–31).

RE-TEACH.

Explain the difference between struggling against sin and defending a right to continue in it. Teach grace as both pardon and deliverance, without making spiritual progress the price of justification (Romans 6:1–14).

REFORM.

Make room for honest conversations about conversion. Ask people to explain the gospel and their trust in Christ without coaching them toward a reassuring answer. Address harmful conduct and protect those affected by it (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

REMAIN.

Refuse both easy reassurance and a culture of suspicion. Keep warning the resistant and welcoming the repentant, even when either task is misunderstood (2 Timothy 4:2).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF OUR PRESERVATION BY CHRIST

1. Christ takes responsibility for keeping every person the Father has given Him. His sheep are secure in His hand, and those same sheep hear His voice and follow Him; His promise never encourages us to stop listening. (John 6:39; 10:27–29)
2. Christ preserves us on the strength of His finished work, not the strength of our religious confidence. Because He bore the curse for us, faith seeks peace in His sacrifice rather than in our record, our feelings, or someone else's approval. (Galatians 3:13; Romans 5:1)
3. The Savior who died for us lives to intercede for us. Peter's confidence failed him, but Christ's prayer did not; our preservation rests on a living Advocate, not our ability to foresee every temptation. (Luke 22:31–32; Hebrews 7:25)
4. God keeps His people through faith, not apart from it. We must continue trusting Christ, and even that perseverance depends upon His sustaining power rather than our independent strength. (1 Peter 1:5; Philippians 2:12–13)
5. Christ uses His Word to expose the false grounds of confidence we are tempted to trust. Honest self-examination serves His preserving care when we test our profession by Scripture, confess what it exposes, and turn again to Him. (2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 John 2:3–6)
6. Christ's warnings are part of His care for our souls. He uses daily exhortation within His church to uncover sin's deceitfulness and keep us from becoming comfortable with what could harden our hearts. (Hebrews 3:12–14)
7. The Holy Spirit gives assurance while leading us to put sin to death. His comfort does not teach us to ignore disobedience; He

bears witness that we are God's children as He leads us in the life of those children. (Romans 8:13–16)

8. Faith actively lays hold of God's promises instead of merely admiring them. We bring our need to Him in prayer, rely on what He has promised, and obey because the One who speaks is faithful. (Hebrews 4:16; 10:23; 2 Peter 1:3–4)
9. Christ loves His people too much to leave their false comfort undisturbed. His rebuke calls us to repentance, and the Father's discipline trains us in holiness; correction can be the very means by which He preserves us. (Revelation 3:19; Hebrews 12:6–11)
10. Christ's preserving work will end with His people safely in His presence. We therefore pursue holiness with confidence in His power, giving Him the glory for bringing us through dangers we could never have overcome alone. (Jude 24–25; 1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)

CHAPTER 3

What Conviction Is For

Sometimes a sentence from Scripture follows you home. You have heard the passage before, but this time it will not remain a general truth about other people. It has reached your resentment, your dishonesty, or your refusal to forgive. The temptation is to become busy until the discomfort passes. Another temptation is to sit with the discomfort and mistake remaining miserable for responding to God.

Both can leave the sin untouched. One evades conviction; the other admires its seriousness without going where it leads. God's Word exposes us so that we may deal truthfully with Him. Such conviction is a mercy we should welcome. We cannot repent of sin we insist is innocent. The Spirit awakens us to its evil so that we will forsake it, not merely wait for our uneasiness to pass.

THE WORD REACHES WHAT WE CONCEAL

Hebrews 4:12: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

The surrounding passage warns against the unbelief that refuses God's promise. The writer recalls Israel's failure to enter because of disobedience and urges his hearers to respond to God today. Verse 12 explains why outward appearances cannot settle the matter. God's living Word reaches the inner person. It distinguishes what our explanations have blurred.

We may describe our anger as concern for truth when we are defending wounded pride. We may call our silence patience when we are withholding affection to punish someone. We may call our resistance careful

discernment when we simply do not want a command to apply to us. Scripture does not authorize us to guess such motives in everyone else. Through Scripture, God exposes them in us.

Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, identifying unbelief in Him at the heart of its guilt (John 16:8–11). Conviction reaches deeper than embarrassment over a damaged reputation. It brings us before the God against whom we have sinned. J. C. Ryle described the Spirit's work: "He applies that Word to the conscience—He brings that Word home to the mind."^{*}

Hebrews 4:13: "And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account."

This knowledge can be frightening because it removes our control of the story. God sees what we leave out. But it also means we need not spend our lives maintaining a version of ourselves that cannot survive His examination. Confession agrees with the One who already knows. We are not supplying information He lacked; we are surrendering the concealment that has kept us from dealing honestly with Him. Johannes Tauler described what the Holy Spirit's presence brings to light: "wherever he is, man perceives his faults plainly, and learns self-renunciation, humbleness, and all things that belong to eternal life."^{**}

THE PASSAGE DOES NOT END WITH EXPOSURE

The next movement in Hebrews is crucial. Having spoken of the God before whom nothing is hidden, the writer directs us to Jesus, the great High Priest. He has passed through the heavens. He sympathizes with our weaknesses, having been tempted in all points as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:14–15). The exposed person is not told to make himself presentable before approaching.

Hebrews 4:16: "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

^{*} J. C. Ryle, "The Holy Spirit," III(f). <https://www.monergism.com/holy-spirit>.

^{**} Johannes Tauler, *The History and Life of the Reverend Doctor John Tauler with Twenty-Five of His Sermons*, trans. Susanna Winkworth (London: Allenson & Co., n.d.), sermon XVI, "Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Easter," p. 323. <https://ccel.org/ccel/winkworth/tauler/tauler.viii.xvi.html>.

The invitation follows the exposure because Christ is sufficient for the need exposure reveals. We must not separate the searching Word from the merciful High Priest. If we preach only exposure, people may learn to fear honesty. If we speak of mercy without the truth about sin, they may never understand what mercy is for. Scripture brings both together. A. W. Pink explained the Spirit's purpose in troubling the sinner: "to show him his need of Christ, and not to drive unto despair."*

Christ's sympathy does not mean He excuses sin. His sinlessness makes Him the Savior we need. He understands temptation without having surrendered to it. He can help the weak without sharing their corruption, and His sacrifice answers guilt without pretending it is small. We come boldly because He is our High Priest, not because our conduct has made us bold. Our sorrow cannot bear the curse our sin deserves; Christ bore it for us (Galatians 3:13). Peace with God belongs to those justified through faith in Him (Romans 5:1). Conviction shows us the guilt; the crucified Savior supplies the answer.

Pastor, when a person begins to see his sin, do not hide the Savior while you decide whether the conviction has become deep enough. Explain the offense clearly. Call for repentance honestly. But keep Christ before him. You are not supervising the production of an acceptable degree of anguish. You are ministering the Word through which the Spirit brings sinners to faith. John Bunyan looked for more than an interest in religious opinions among his hearers. He rejoiced to find "sound conviction for sin, especially for unbelief, and a heart set on fire to be saved by Christ."**

CONVICTION IS NOT A COMPETITION IN SUFFERING

The Bible records different circumstances surrounding conversion. The Philippian jailer trembled and asked what he must do to be saved. Lydia listened as the Lord opened her heart to heed Paul's message (Acts 16:14, 29–34). We should not require Lydia's experience to sound like the jailer's before recognizing the work of God. The jailer's trembling did not answer his question. Paul and Silas directed him to believe on

* A. W. Pink, *The Holy Spirit*, ch. 22, "The Spirit Assuring," subsection "Not Received the Spirit of Bondage," Providence Baptist Ministries electronic edition, 2004, PDF p. 93. https://www.holybibleinstitute.com/files/Pink_-_Holy_Spirit_b_.pdf#page=93.

** John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1905), §291, "A Brief Account of the Author's Call to the Work of the Ministry." <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/654/654-h/654-h.htm>.

the Lord Jesus Christ, then spoke the Lord's word to his household. The common necessity is the Spirit's gracious work, repentance, and faith in Christ, not an identical emotional history.

Sorrow for sin is fitting. A person cannot honestly repent while insisting his rebellion is innocent. Yet Scripture gives no required number of tears, no minimum period of terror, and no dramatic crisis every convert must be able to describe. Some sins are recognized with sudden force. Others become clearer as the Word is understood. The issue is whether we receive God's verdict and turn to His Son.

Paul distinguishes godly sorrow from the sorrow of the world in 2 Corinthians 7:10–11. The difference is not merely that one sorrow feels worse. Godly sorrow leads to repentance. In the Corinthians, it produced earnestness and a changed response to the evil they had tolerated. Tears can accompany that change, but tears do not replace it. Thomas Watson observed, "There may be trouble of mind where there is no grieving for the offence against God."* The question reaches beyond how badly we feel to what we now think of the sin itself.

A man may weep because his deception has been discovered and still be determined to deceive again. Another may speak quietly, admit the truth without excuses, and begin making restitution. We should listen carefully before equating visible intensity with spiritual reality. The fruit of repentance deserves more attention than the performance of distress.

WHAT AN HONEST RESPONSE LOOKS LIKE

Suppose the Word brings to mind money you obtained dishonestly. A vague prayer about being a better Christian will leave the specific offense protected. Begin by agreeing with God about what you did. Stop the deception. Seek wise counsel about returning what belongs to another person and addressing the consequences. Trust Christ for pardon while taking these steps; do not make successful restitution the basis of your hope before Him.

Or suppose you have repeated a damaging story because telling it made you feel important. Conviction calls for more than feeling ashamed each time you remember it. Stop circulating the story. Correct what you misrepresented where you can. Ask forgiveness from those you harmed, without forcing them to comfort you. Receive the Lord's mercy, and learn to use your speech for their good (Ephesians 4:29–32).

These actions cannot regenerate a heart. People can reform outward conduct for many reasons. But repentance is not an inward seriousness

* Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, 4.2, "Repentance," I.[2], "Legal terrors." <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/commandments.vi.ii.html>.

that refuses outward obedience. The gospel calls the whole person to Christ. Grace reaches the choices through which our sins have been practiced.

There are also burdens that require a different conversation. A person may feel guilty for something that was done to him, or for failing to control circumstances never entrusted to him. The strength of that feeling does not make the accusation true. A faithful counselor asks what God actually commands and what the person actually did. We must not baptize every accusation of conscience as the voice of the Holy Spirit.

DO NOT POSTPONE THE SAVIOR

One of the most religious forms of delay says, I will come when I am more convicted. It sounds humble, but it places a requirement before Christ's invitation that Christ has not placed there. The sinner is trying to qualify through need rather than come because he is needy. Spurgeon directed the troubled sinner to the true refuge: "cast thy guilty self on Christ, and rest there, for there alone canst thou find salvation."^{*}

You do not need to discover every depth of your corruption before trusting Jesus. You need to acknowledge that you are a sinner who cannot save yourself and receive the Savior the gospel proclaims. The Spirit will continue exposing sin throughout the Christian life. If exhaustive self-knowledge were required before faith, no one could come.

Nor should you delay because you are afraid your repentance will be imperfect. It will be imperfect. Believers continue learning what obedience requires, continue grieving sins they once excused, and continue depending upon mercy. The command is to turn honestly, not to prove that you have already become complete.

Believers should therefore examine themselves frequently and honestly, with Scripture open and a willingness to be corrected. Of true repentance, Johann Arndt writes: "it requires that a man should enter his heart, and search into its inmost recesses."^{**} Lamentations 3:40 joins searching our ways with returning to the Lord; 1 Corinthians 11:28 requires self-examination before the Lord's Supper. We need this searching because sin can become familiar without ever becoming harmless. Ask what you are excusing, whom you have wronged, and

^{*} C. H. Spurgeon, "Mistaken Notions about Repentance," April 20, 1879, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 47, II. <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/mistaken-notions-about-repentance>.

^{**} Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. A. W. Boehm, rev. Charles F. Schaeffer (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Book Store, 1868), book I, ch. IV, §2, p. 12. <https://ccel.org/ccel/arndt/true/true.iv.v.html>.

where obedience has been postponed. Fresh conviction does not by itself prove that your faith is false. It calls you to deal faithfully with what God has shown you, trusting the Advocate provided for sinning believers (1 John 2:1–2).

There is urgency here. Hebrews repeatedly warns against hardening the heart when God speaks (Hebrews 3:7–15). Repeated refusal teaches us to live with what should trouble us. Do not assume the next opportunity will find you more willing. The present call is clear enough: hear His Word, confess your sin, and come to Christ.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHERE IS CONVICTION TAKING YOU?

Name the actual issue that has troubled your conscience. Can you show from Scripture why it is sin, or are you carrying an accusation that needs careful examination? Seek help where the answer is unclear rather than deciding by the strength of your distress.

What obedient action have you replaced with repeated expressions of remorse? An apology, truthful correction, or practical change may be needed. Take the next faithful step without treating it as a purchase of forgiveness.

Have you made your degree of sorrow the reason you think Christ may receive you? Bring that attempt to qualify into the light as well. Read Hebrews 4:14–16, and ask what the passage says about His sufficiency for your need.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. God's Word exposes the heart more accurately than our self-defense or self-accusation can. Submit both to its judgment (Hebrews 4:12–13).
2. The sin we can explain away before others remains fully visible to God. Confession abandons concealment rather than informing Him (Hebrews 4:13; Psalm 32:5).
3. The passage that exposes us also directs us to our High Priest. We must not offer either comfort without truth or exposure without Christ (Hebrews 4:12–16).
4. Distress can become another form of delay when we keep expressing remorse while refusing the obedience God requires (2 Corinthians 7:10–11).
5. Different conversion experiences do not establish different gospels. Lydia and the jailer needed the same Savior, though their circumstances differed (Acts 16:14–15, 29–34).
6. Restitution and corrected speech express repentance; they cannot

- purchase the pardon Christ alone provides (Luke 19:8–10; Ephesians 4:28–32).
7. A forceful accusation of conscience still requires biblical examination. The strength of a feeling cannot establish the truth of its charge (1 Corinthians 4:3–5).
 8. Waiting until we feel sufficiently guilty puts our emotional condition where Christ's invitation belongs. Come to Him with the need you already know (Hebrews 4:16).
 9. Frequent, honest self-examination belongs to faithful Christian living. Search your ways to confess sin and renew obedience, not to excuse what you find (Lamentations 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:28).
 10. Present conviction calls for a present response. Repeatedly refusing God's Word can harden us against the very warning we need (Hebrews 3:7–15).

THE THRONE IS A THRONE OF GRACE

You may have hoped that seeing yourself more clearly would make you feel stronger. Instead, it has shown how much mercy you need. Do not turn away at that discovery. The One who knows you completely has provided a High Priest who is able to save. Come with the sin you can now name, the weakness you cannot hide, and the need you cannot resolve. Christ does not ask you to cure yourself in His waiting room. He calls you to approach, receive mercy, and find grace for the obedience that lies before you.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Where you have praised anguish while failing to point clearly to Christ, acknowledge that failure. Where you have silenced conviction to end an uncomfortable conversation, acknowledge that too (Acts 20:20–21).

RE-TEACH.

Keep the searching Word and the sympathetic High Priest together. Explain repentance as a real turning to God, not an emotional entrance fee (Hebrews 4:12–16; Acts 20:21).

REFORM.

Teach regular biblical self-examination, and practice it yourself. Ask what the person now understands, believes, and needs to obey. Do

not use tears, a public response, or a rehearsed testimony as a shortcut around careful shepherding (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

REMAIN.

Trust the Spirit to give life through the truth. Refuse pressure to manufacture a dramatic result, and continue patiently instructing those who need help (John 3:5–8; 1 Thessalonians 5:14).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT'S CONVICTING WORK

1. The Holy Spirit brings God's verdict to bear upon sinners. His work concerns our standing before God, not merely our discomfort before other people (John 16:8–11).
2. God's law makes sin known. A conscience needs His revealed standard, not the changing approval of a family, congregation, or culture (Romans 3:19–20).
3. Unbelief is itself sin. Conviction must reach our refusal of Christ, not stop at correcting habits while leaving us independent of Him (John 16:9).
4. The Spirit works through the proclaimed Word. At Pentecost, the hearers were cut to the heart by the message concerning Jesus; Peter called them to repentance (Acts 2:36–38).
5. Awareness of guilt is not regeneration. A person may recognize wrongdoing yet resist God; new life is the Spirit's gift, not the automatic result of alarm (John 3:5–8; Acts 24:24–25).
6. Repentance is granted by God. Ministers must teach and correct patiently, depending upon Him to bring people to acknowledgment of the truth (2 Timothy 2:24–26).
7. Godly sorrow produces repentance. Its spiritual significance appears in a changed response to sin, not in a prescribed intensity or duration of distress (2 Corinthians 7:9–11).
8. The Spirit's ministry glorifies Christ. Faithful teaching must lead the convicted sinner to the Savior's person and work rather than make inward experience his refuge (John 16:13–14).
9. The Spirit continues His sanctifying work in believers. He enables us to put sinful deeds to death while bearing witness that we are God's children (Romans 8:13–16).
10. Conviction contributes nothing to the price of reconciliation. Christ's curse-bearing death is sufficient; we receive peace with God through faith in Him, not through suffering enough ourselves (Galatians 3:13; Romans 5:1).

CHAPTER 4

When a Christian Grows Careless

A neglected friendship rarely ends in a single afternoon. Calls go unanswered, small offenses remain unresolved, and other interests quietly take the place that once belonged to someone loved. Something similar can happen in a believer's walk with God. The confession remains orthodox while prayer becomes hurried, obedience becomes negotiable, and the familiar means of grace are treated as interruptions.

A. W. Pink warned, "Slothfulness and carelessness more often steal in upon believers than positive outbursts and commission of sin."*

That carelessness is serious. But we will not help the believer by pretending there are only two possible conditions: spiritual health or no spiritual life at all. Scripture addresses Christians who need correction, restoration, and renewed diligence. It also warns people who profess faith while their unrepentant lives contradict their claims. Good shepherding must make the distinction without making either condition comfortable.

THE FATHER TRAINS HIS CHILDREN

Hebrews 12 speaks to people weary under hardship and tempted to lose heart. The writer directs their attention to Jesus, who endured the cross, and then reminds them of the Father's discipline. He is not offering a method for identifying the hidden cause of every painful event. He is

* A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Sanctification*, ch. 15, "Its Practice," paragraph beginning "Second, slackness in the performance of duties," reproduced in "Sanctification: Its Progress and Practice." Monergism. <https://www.monergism.com/sanctification-its-progress-and-practice>.

teaching believers how to receive God's fatherly training rather than interpret hardship as proof of abandonment.

Hebrews 12:6: "For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

God's discipline includes His training of His children in holiness. It can involve correction for sin, but it must not be reduced to a code by which we match each illness, loss, or disappointment to a particular offense. Scripture does not give pastors the right to announce that a person's suffering proves a secret sin. Job's friends caused great harm by speaking confidently where they lacked understanding.

The text gives a purpose we may trust even when we cannot explain the particular providence: God acts for His children's profit, that they may share His holiness (Hebrews 12:10). His love is committed to their good, and their good includes becoming more like His Son. He does not treat the sins that deform them as harmless simply because He has received them.

Christ bore the curse His people deserved (Galatians 3:13). Those justified through faith have peace with God through Him (Romans 5:1). Spurgeon insisted, "It is essential to observe the distinction between punishment and chastisement."* Fatherly discipline does not reopen their condemnation or collect a debt Christ left unpaid. The Father corrects children whom the Son has redeemed. His correction is costly to our pride and painful to our flesh, but it does not supplement the cross.

This changes the way correction should be heard. A rebuke from Scripture need not mean that God has cast you away. It may be one of the means by which He refuses to leave you in a damaging path. The believer who assumes every correction means rejection will either despair or become defensive. The believer learning the Father's love can begin to listen.

TWO WAYS OF REFUSING HELP

Hebrews 12:5 identifies two wrong responses to discipline: despising it and becoming discouraged under it. One person shrugs it off. Another collapses beneath it. Both need the truth about the Father, but they need it applied differently.

The dismissive believer says he knows all this already. He has heard

* C. H. Spurgeon, "Chastisement," sermon no. 48, New Park Street Pulpit, vol. 1, October 28, 1855, introductory discussion. The Spurgeon Library. <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/chastisement>.

the sermons, knows the verses, and agrees that Christians ought to pray, forgive, and resist temptation. Yet agreement has become a substitute for obedience. Because the truth is familiar, he assumes its work in him is finished. He can explain a passage he is presently refusing to practice.

The discouraged believer hears a needed correction and concludes that nothing good can be true of him. One failure seems to erase every evidence of grace. He may be willing to obey but afraid that the Father has already closed the door. He needs to confess the actual sin without turning it into a verdict Scripture has not pronounced.

Both need holiness, but the shepherd must discern whether the next word should awaken the careless or steady the discouraged (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Peter shows us why both truths matter. Before his denial, he was confident that he would follow Jesus even to prison and death. Jesus knew how badly that confidence would fail. Yet He had prayed that Peter's faith would not fail, and He spoke of Peter's return and future service to his brothers (Luke 22:31–34). Christ's intercession did not make Peter's denial harmless. When the rooster crowed and the Lord looked at him, Peter remembered the warning and went out weeping bitterly (Luke 22:54–62).

The risen Jesus later confronted Peter with the question of his love and charged him to feed His sheep (John 21:15–19). The Savior neither excused the denial nor abandoned the disciple. He brought Peter through grief to renewed obedience. Do not use Peter's restoration to excuse what Peter wept over. Learn instead to distrust self-confidence, receive Christ's warnings, and depend upon the Savior who restores His people.

CARELESSNESS HAS CONSEQUENCES

Suppose a Christian has begun avoiding someone in the congregation because an old disagreement still rankles. At first he calls the distance a temporary cooling-off period. Months later he knows which entrance to use and where to sit to prevent a conversation. Nothing dramatic has happened, but his habits have begun serving his resentment. He can still talk warmly about fellowship while arranging not to practice it with that person.

The needed correction is specific. He must stop treating distance as a permanent substitute for dealing with the offense. He should seek a truthful, peaceable conversation, with pastoral help where needed. Reconciliation may require more than one person's willingness, and boundaries may be necessary where there has been harm. Yet he remains

responsible to relinquish vengeance and pursue what is right before God (Romans 12:17–21).

John Owen's warning belongs to believers who might grow complacent about remaining sin: "be killing sin or it will be killing you."^{*} Romans 8:13 identifies both our responsibility and our source of strength: "but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Carelessness also spreads. A neglected duty makes the next neglect easier to excuse. An indulged resentment alters how we hear a sermon. A hidden habit makes honest fellowship feel threatening. Eventually, we may describe the church as unhelpful when what troubles us is that someone there might ask a question we do not want to answer. Hebrews 3:13 calls us to receive the help we may be avoiding: "but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."

These possibilities should awaken us without becoming a formula for judging every withdrawal. A weary caregiver, a grieving widow, and a believer concealing sin may all appear less engaged than before. They do not need the same diagnosis. Love asks what is happening. It does not turn reduced activity into automatic evidence of rebellion.

RESTORATION IS MORE THAN REASSURANCE

A careless believer does not need merely to be told that he is saved. He needs to return to the Lord in the matter where he has wandered. Assurance can be misused even by someone truly converted when it becomes an attempt to avoid repentance. The right to call God Father gives us no right to disregard Him.

Galatians 6:1: "Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted."

Thomas Watson described repentance's direction: "In true repentance the heart points directly to God, as the needle to the north pole."^{**}

^{*} John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, ch. II, first main assertion, opening paragraph. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/mort.i.v.html>.

^{**} Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, §4.2, "Repentance," II, [2], (3), returning unto the Lord. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/watson/commandments.vi.ii.html>.

We want the wandering person to return to God, not merely become easier to manage.

Restoration requires truth and gentleness together. We name the trespass because vague sympathy cannot address it. We approach humbly because we are not immune to temptation. The goal is not to win an argument, secure an apology to ourselves, or establish our superiority. It is to help a brother or sister walk faithfully again.

That help should become practical. If private temptation has gained ground through secrecy, a trusted person may need to know enough to provide meaningful accountability. If Scripture and prayer have been crowded out by avoidable distractions, concrete arrangements must change. If a person has harmed others, restoration includes concern for those who suffered, not only the offender's relief.

Forgiveness does not automatically restore a person to every position of trust. Some consequences remain, and leadership qualifications must be honored. The church can receive a repentant person with love while proceeding carefully about responsibilities. We distort grace when we require harmed people to act as though nothing happened in order to prove that they have forgiven.

Frequent, honest self-examination helps us recognize this drift before an indulgence becomes an established habit. Scripture calls us to search our ways and return to the Lord (Lamentations 3:40). Ask plainly: What am I hiding? Whose correction have I dismissed? Which command do I intend to obey only when obedience becomes convenient? These questions belong to healthy Christian living. Bring the answers to Christ, confess the sin, and act upon what His Word requires.

WHEN THE PROFESSION ITSELF MUST BE QUESTIONED

We cannot use the category of a careless Christian to give everyone a permanent exemption from examination. A long-standing refusal to repent, contempt for Christ's commands, and a life devoted to defending sin place a profession under serious question. Scripture's warnings must be allowed to speak.

What does he do when confronted? Does he tell the truth without having every detail extracted? Will he accept help that costs convenience or reputation? Does he want freedom from the sin itself, or only relief from its consequences? These questions are not infallible tests, but they bring the conversation closer to the reality that religious language can conceal.

The aim is always a truthful response to Christ. If the person is His child, he needs restoration. If his profession has been empty, he needs

conversion. We need not settle every hidden question before calling him to repent and believe the gospel. We must, however, refuse to promise safety to a determined refusal.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED TO POSTPONE?

Name one duty you acknowledge but repeatedly defer. What explanation makes the delay seem reasonable? Consider the person affected, the habit being strengthened, and the command being treated as optional. Ask the Lord for help taking the next obedient step.

When someone corrects you, do you dismiss the concern or conclude that you are hopeless? Read Hebrews 12:5–11 and identify how the Father’s purpose challenges your particular response. Receive the correction without using either your assurance or your despair to avoid obedience.

Examine yourself regularly. Is there pornography you keep accessible, dishonesty you keep explaining, or resentment you keep feeding? Name the sin rather than calling everything a difficult season. What access must you remove, what truth must you tell, and whose help should you seek today?

Have you mistaken someone else’s weakness for rebellion because you have not asked what he is carrying? Seek understanding before giving a verdict. The same Lord who calls you to confront sin calls you to bear burdens (Galatians 6:1–2).

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Familiarity with a command can conceal refusal to obey it. Knowing what Scripture says does not discharge the duty it requires (James 1:22).
2. A believer’s failure calls for repentance and restoration, not automatic denial of all spiritual life (Galatians 6:1).
3. Correction need not mean rejection. The Father’s love is committed to freeing His children from sins they have learned to tolerate (Hebrews 12:5–10).
4. Dismissing correction and collapsing under it can both prevent a faithful response. Hear what God requires without denying what He promises (Hebrews 12:5–6).
5. Neglected duties strengthen habits of disobedience. Address the resentment or deception before its familiarity makes it easier to defend (Hebrews 3:12–13).
6. Reduced activity does not establish rebellion. Faithful shepherding

- distinguishes weakness, suffering, and willful resistance (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
7. Assurance must never become an excuse to avoid repentance. Calling God Father makes obedience fitting, not optional (1 Peter 1:14–17).
 8. Restoration seeks renewed faithfulness and attends to those harmed; forgiveness does not erase every consequence or qualification for service (Galatians 6:1–2; 1 Timothy 3:1–7).
 9. A profession persistently used to defend rebellion must be examined rather than protected from Scripture (1 John 2:3–6).
 10. Frequent, honest self-examination should lead to confession and renewed obedience. Search your ways and return to the Lord (Lamentations 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:28).

THE SON WHO BRINGS US BACK

If you have grown careless, stop defending the distance. You know the conversation you have avoided, the secret you have guarded, or the duty you have postponed. Bring it honestly to the Lord. Do not wait for another painful consequence to make obedience seem urgent. The sin is already doing harm, and Christ is worthy of your obedience now.

Neither must you wait until you can promise never to stumble again. Come trusting the Savior who gave Himself for sinners and intercedes for His people. Confess what you have neglected, receive the correction you need, and ask for grace to take the next faithful step. His keeping power does not make warnings unnecessary; He uses His Word, repentance, active faith, and His promises to preserve His people. Look to Him as you turn from the sin. The Lord who calls you back has not asked you to find your way home without Him.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Acknowledge where impatience has made you harsh with the weak, or fear has made you passive with the resistant. Examine your own conduct before treating carelessness as someone else's problem (1 Peter 5:2–3).

RE-TEACH.

Explain discipline as fatherly training without assigning hidden reasons to particular afflictions. Teach both the seriousness of sin and the possibility of restoration. Show why Christ's finished work gives no permission for willful disobedience (Hebrews 12:5–11; Titus 2:11–14).

REFORM.

Arrange specific help, appropriate accountability, and follow-through. Teach regular self-examination. Protect those harmed, honor biblical qualifications, and avoid making immediate restoration to office a test of forgiveness (Galatians 6:1–2; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:22).

REMAIN.

Stay with people through the slower work of change. Do not confuse patience with tolerating evasion, or firmness with abandoning someone who is struggling. Keep bringing the promises and commands of Christ to bear upon actual conduct (2 Timothy 4:2).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF FATHERLY DISCIPLINE

1. Adoption establishes the family relationship in which God disciplines His children. Through Christ, believers receive the standing of sons and the Spirit who teaches them to call God Father (Galatians 4:4–7).
2. Christ's atonement removes the curse for His people. Their Father's discipline is therefore distinct from the condemnation Christ bore on their behalf (Galatians 3:13; Romans 8:1).
3. Divine love includes correction. God's affection for His children commits Him to their holiness rather than indifference toward their disobedience (Hebrews 12:6).
4. Fatherly training belongs to every child of God. Exemption from discipline is no mark of superior spiritual standing (Hebrews 12:7–8).
5. God's wisdom governs His discipline perfectly. Human fathers correct with limited understanding; our heavenly Father acts for our true profit (Hebrews 12:9–10).
6. Holiness is the stated purpose of divine discipline. God trains His children to share His holiness, producing righteousness rather than merely relieving their discomfort (Hebrews 12:10–11).
7. Providence cannot be decoded by assuming that every affliction punishes a particular sin. Jesus rejected that inference concerning the man born blind (John 9:1–3).
8. God can also correct particular sins through severe temporal judgments. Paul identifies such discipline at Corinth and distinguishes it from condemnation with the world (1 Corinthians 11:27–32).
9. The Father's training calls for an active response. Believers must submit, endure, and pursue holiness; the promised fruit belongs to those trained by His discipline (Hebrews 12:9–14).

10. Christ preserves His people through His intercession and appointed means. His warnings, the exhortations of fellow believers, and His promises sustain persevering faith rather than excuse spiritual neglect (Luke 22:31–32; Hebrews 3:12–14; 7:25).

CHAPTER 5

When Faith Feels Afraid

The frightened believer may be the last person in the room to recognize himself as a believer. He hears warnings about false profession and immediately supplies evidence against himself. The hypocrite seems to live somewhere inside every weakness he can name. Meanwhile, his grief over sin, his longing for Christ, and his willingness to be corrected are dismissed as possibly insincere.

Such a person does not need us to remove the searching passages from his Bible. Frequent, honest self-examination is essential. He needs help applying Scripture's tests faithfully, including its promises to those who believe. Fear alone proves neither conversion nor hypocrisy. The question is what is true of his relationship to Christ, not how frightened he feels while considering it.

DARKNESS DOES NOT SETTLE THE QUESTION

Isaiah 50:10: "Who among you fears the LORD? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness And has no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD And rely upon his God."

The person described fears the Lord and obeys the voice of His Servant, yet walks in darkness. The passage does not identify every kind of distress with saving faith. It establishes that darkness and reverence for God can exist together. We cannot infer from the absence of felt light that there is no genuine relationship with Him.

What is this person told to do? Trust in the Lord's name and rely upon his God. He is directed to the One whose character remains trustworthy when circumstances are dark. The following verse warns against walking by a fire of one's own making. Self-supplied reassurance is no substitute for dependence upon God (Isaiah 50:11).

This matters because the peace Christ gives rests on His work, not on our ability to feel its comfort. Romans 5:1: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Christ redeemed His people from the curse by bearing it Himself (Galatians 3:13). A believer’s trembling does not leave part of that curse unpaid. Nor can an unbeliever’s calm make him justified. Both must be directed away from feelings as the final authority and toward the crucified and risen Savior.

J. C. Ryle distinguished faith from its fuller assurance: “Faith, let us remember, is the root, and assurance is the flower.”* The believer seeks that fuller confidence without treating his present weakness as proof that Christ has failed him.

A believer can become so occupied with obtaining a particular feeling that he neglects the promises through which God teaches him to trust. He reads a verse and immediately asks whether it produced enough relief. If it did not, he assumes the verse has failed him. But Scripture is not a test of how quickly his feelings can improve. It reveals the God upon whom his faith may rest.

THE SAVIOR DOES NOT DESPISE WEAKNESS

Matthew applies Isaiah’s description of the Lord’s Servant to Jesus. Matthew 12:20: “A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench, Till He sends forth justice to victory.”

The reed is bruised; the flax barely smolders. Christ is not careless with either. His gentleness belongs to His strength and His successful mission. He does not need to crush the weak in order to establish His authority.

Christ does not receive only people who can report strong faith, clear memories, and uninterrupted joy. The bruised believer may come to Him without pretending to be whole. Yet we must not call a defended sin a bruised reed. Christ’s tenderness toward the weak gives no shelter to someone determined to disobey Him. His grace teaches us to deny ungodliness and live obediently (Titus 2:11–14).

A troubled conscience needs accurate teaching about the evidence of grace. Tell a fearful believer that Christians bear fruit, and he may conclude that imperfect fruit is worthless. He must examine whether there is real obedience, love for the brethren, and repentance where he sins. But Scripture does not require him to find sinlessness before acknowledging

* J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots*, ch. VII, “Assurance,” II, p. 109 in the CCEL electronic edition. <https://ccel.org/ccel/ryle/holiness.iii.vi.html>.

God's work. John both commands obedience and directs believers who sin to Jesus Christ their Advocate (1 John 2:1–6).

Pastor, ask the person what he heard you say. You may have been describing the actual direction of a Christian life while he has been searching for a flawless moment in his own. Explain the distinction without lowering the command. Real obedience can be imperfect; a deliberate refusal to obey must never be renamed weakness simply to preserve someone's assurance.

WEAK FAITH STILL HAS AN OBJECT

The important question is not simply, How strong do I feel? It is, In whom am I trusting? Saving faith receives Jesus Christ as He is offered in the gospel. Richard Sibbes put it simply: "A weak hand may receive a rich jewel."* Faith can grow stronger, but its object must not change. We do not graduate from depending upon Christ to depending upon our ability to describe that dependence with confidence.

Mark records a father bringing his afflicted son to Jesus after the disciples had been unable to help him. The boy's suffering was longstanding and terrible. His father asked Jesus to have compassion and help if He could. Jesus answered that all things were possible to the one who believed (Mark 9:17–23).

The father did not answer with a polished declaration of certainty. Mark 9:24: "Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!'" He confessed what was wrong and brought it to the only One who could help. Jesus delivered his son (Mark 9:25–27).

The account is not a complete guide to assurance, and we must not turn a particular deliverance into a promise that every present affliction will be removed. But notice the father's response to Christ. He neither denied his unbelief nor defended it. He asked to be helped against it. Weakness brought honestly to Christ differs profoundly from unbelief protected against Christ's correction.

Spurgeon urged, "Whenever faith is weak let prayer be strong."** Bring your doubts to Christ in prayer. Ask for clearer understanding, stronger trust, and deliverance from unbelief. Do not cherish doubt

* Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Monergism Books, 2018), ch. 6, "Marks of the Smoking Flax," under "Our Rule Is the Covenant of Grace." https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/sibbes/The_Bruised_Reed_-_Richard_Sibbes.pdf.

** C. H. Spurgeon, "The History of Little-Faith," sermon no. 1856, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 31, August 23, 1885, section I, "Little-Faith's History." The Spurgeon Library. <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/the-history-of-little-faith>.

as though it were a superior form of spirituality. Neither should every involuntary alarm or troubled feeling be charged as deliberate rebellion. Examine what you are believing and doing. Where you distrust God's word, confess it; where fear presses upon you, bring it to Him and obey what He has said (Psalm 56:3–4).

Think of a believer who becomes afraid after hearing a testimony unlike his own. Another person can name the hour of conversion and describe a dramatic release from guilt. He cannot. His knowledge of Christ developed gradually, and his memory of childhood is incomplete. He now wonders whether he has any right to trust the promises. The pastoral question is not whether he can reproduce someone else's story. What does he believe about Christ? Is he resting in Him now? What evidence of grace appears in his life?

A clear memory can be a gift. It cannot become an additional condition of salvation. God has promised life to those who believe in His Son, not only to those who can reconstruct the beginning of their faith with precision (1 John 5:11–13).

LISTEN TO THE WHOLE PERSON

Some spiritual fears arise amid exhaustion, bereavement, illness, or wounds inflicted by others. Those circumstances do not excuse sin. They do require us to listen before deciding what a person's distress means. Scripture tells us to comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, and be patient with all (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

Imagine a woman who has cared for a dying relative for months. She is worn down, finds it difficult to concentrate, and feels little of the joy she once knew in worship. A careless counselor assumes that her dullness reveals concealed rebellion. A patient shepherd asks about her burdens, listens to her understanding of the gospel, offers practical support, and helps her address any actual sin Scripture exposes. He will not invent an accusation because her distress has resisted a quick exhortation.

Illness is not proof of a particular offense, and a pastor must not pretend to diagnose what lies beyond his knowledge. Appropriate medical care and practical assistance need not displace prayer, Scripture, or the church's loving attention. Bear the burden you can see rather than claiming knowledge God has not given you (John 9:1–3; Galatians 6:2).

The same care is necessary when someone has lived under manipulative spiritual leadership. He may hear a pastor's disagreement as a threat that God has rejected him. We must show from Scripture where pastoral authority begins and ends. Christ rules the conscience through His Word. A minister's displeasure is not another name for divine condemnation (1 Peter 5:2–3).

EXAMINE YOURSELF IN THE LIGHT GOD GIVES

Self-examination is not the enemy of assurance. 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves." The command must remain open before the fearful reader as surely as before the confident one. We need its searching light frequently, not merely at the beginning of the Christian life.

Ask what Scripture asks. Are you relying on Christ or on your religious history? Do you love His people? Are you keeping His commands? When sin is exposed, do you confess and forsake it, or rearrange your explanation so you can keep it? These questions search actual faith and conduct. They must not be replaced by, Do I feel as certain as someone else sounds? (1 John 1:6–9; 2:3–6; 3:14).

When examination exposes sin, repent specifically. When it reveals genuine grace, thank the Lord rather than refusing His work because it is not yet complete. A trusted pastor can help you apply these tests, but neither his approval nor your self-accusation outranks Scripture. Humility receives truthful encouragement as well as necessary correction.

Continue using the means God has appointed. Read Scripture to know and obey the Lord. Pray honestly, even when your words are few. Gather with the church to hear the gospel and receive the care of Christ's people, rather than waiting until you feel fit to be seen (Hebrews 10:22–25). Examination should send you back to Christ in repentance, faith, and obedience. Do not make it a place to hide from the very Savior whose promises you are examining.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHAT DO YOU REQUIRE BEFORE YOU WILL REST?

Have you made a particular feeling, remembered date, or dramatic experience necessary before you will trust Christ's promise? Identify that added requirement and ask whether Scripture actually imposes it (1 John 5:11–13).

Examine yourself honestly and frequently. Name the conduct behind your concern. Is there a sin you must forsake, a command you must obey, or a promise you are refusing to believe? Bring that matter into the light rather than settling for a vague verdict about your entire life (Lamentations 3:40).

Are you using fear as proof that you are already converted, or as proof that you cannot belong to Christ? Neither conclusion follows from fear alone. Test your profession by Scripture, including your present

reliance upon Christ and the fruit of that reliance (2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 John 2:3–6).

What burden have you concealed from those who could help you? Tell a trustworthy person what you are carrying. Ask for biblical counsel and practical help without asking anyone to excuse your sin (Galatians 6:1–2).

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Darkness does not by itself disprove faith. The person who fears the Lord is called to trust Him even without felt light (Isaiah 50:10).
2. Fear is not evidence sufficient to establish conversion. Examine what you believe and how you live rather than treating distress as a saving grace (2 Corinthians 13:5).
3. Weak faith must seek strength from Christ. Confess unbelief instead of defending it or waiting for it to disappear before praying (Mark 9:24).
4. A remembered conversion date cannot replace present faith. God's promise concerns life in His Son, not precision in recounting your history (1 John 5:11–13).
5. Christ's gentleness gives the weak reason to come. It gives no one permission to protect a sin (Matthew 12:20; Titus 2:11–14).
6. Imperfect obedience must not be confused with a settled refusal to obey. Examine the actual response to Christ's commands and correction (1 John 2:1–6).
7. Frequent, honest self-examination is essential. Let Scripture identify what requires repentance and what gives reason for thanksgiving (Lamentations 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:28).
8. Exhaustion and grief require patient attention. Listen before deciding that someone's reduced activity reveals rebellion (1 Thessalonians 5:14).
9. Neither a pastor's displeasure nor your fearful verdict settles your standing before God. Submit both human counsel and your conclusions to His Word (1 Peter 5:2–3; 1 John 3:19–20).
10. Take the next obedient step while asking God to strengthen your faith. Fear need not have the final word about whether you trust Him today (Psalm 56:3–4).

LEAN UPON THE ONE WHO HOLDS YOU

Dear Christian, you may wish you could offer Christ a steadier heart. Ask Him to strengthen it, but do not wait for that strength before relying upon Him. Bring the sin that needs forgiveness, the unbelief

that needs correction, and the burden you have scarcely found words to describe. He does not require you to hide what you need Him to heal.

Look again at what He has done. He bore the curse; He rose from the dead; He now intercedes for those who come to God through Him (Galatians 3:13; Romans 8:34). Examine yourself under His Word, confess what it exposes, and obey what it commands. Then receive His promise as His promise, not as something your feelings must first authorize. The Savior who calls you to trust Him has given you Himself to trust.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Acknowledge where you have mistaken distress for rebellion or supplied reassurance without examining a person's profession. Correct your counsel honestly; do not make the troubled person responsible for comforting you (James 1:19).

RE-TEACH.

Explain peace with God through justification and distinguish it from the believer's changing sense of peace. Teach biblical evidence of conversion without requiring sinlessness, a dramatic testimony, or uninterrupted joy (Romans 5:1; 1 John 2:1–6).

REFORM.

Teach frequent, honest self-examination by Scripture. Listen for the actual burden, confront the actual sin, and arrange practical help and pastoral follow-through rather than leaving a fearful person with general instructions (1 Thessalonians 5:14).

REMAIN.

Keep bringing the promises and commands of Christ to bear with patience. Refuse both harshness toward weakness and reassurance that leaves someone defending disobedience (2 Timothy 4:2).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN ASSURANCE

1. Peace with God rests on justification through faith in Christ. Its foundation is His saving work, not the believer's emotional steadiness (Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:13).
2. God intends believers to know that they have eternal life. Assurance

is therefore a proper Christian pursuit, not a presumptuous desire (1 John 5:13).

3. The promises of God provide a trustworthy basis for assurance. Their authority rests on the truthfulness of the God who speaks (Hebrews 6:17–18).
4. Saving faith receives Christ, while assurance concerns the believer's knowledge that he belongs to Him. Genuine faith may coexist with weakness and a need for stronger confidence (Mark 9:24; 1 John 5:13).
5. The Holy Spirit bears witness with believers' spirits that they are God's children. His witness belongs to the life of adoption and cannot be reduced to a passing sensation (Romans 8:15–16).
6. Obedience and love provide evidence of spiritual life. They confirm the reality of knowing Christ without earning the justification received through faith (1 John 2:3–6; 3:14; Romans 3:28).
7. Scripture commands the testing of a profession of faith. Biblical assurance welcomes honest examination rather than claiming exemption from it (2 Corinthians 13:5).
8. Sin can darken a believer's enjoyment of God. Restoration calls for confession and renewed obedience, never the use of assurance to silence conviction (Psalm 32:3–5; 1 John 1:6–9).
9. Assurance is cultivated through diligence in the Christian life. Growth in the graces God commands strengthens the believer's confirmation of his calling (2 Peter 1:5–11).
10. Christ's continuing intercession sustains the believer's confidence before God. Our risen Advocate directs hope beyond our weakness to His righteousness and finished sacrifice (Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1–2).

CHAPTER 6

Examine Yourself by the Word of God

A man can defend his peace so carefully that he never discovers what it rests upon. He remembers his baptism, his years in church, the prayer he once prayed. When Scripture searches his present life, he reaches for those memories before considering the question. His confidence has become a reason not to examine himself, though the God he professes to trust commands that very examination.

2 Corinthians 13:5: “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.” This command is a kindness we dare not refuse. False assurance needs exposing; genuine faith welcomes the light that distinguishes Christ’s work from our religious assumptions. Frequent, honest self-examination belongs to a healthy Christian life. We need it in daily prayer, under the preaching of the Word, and as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table (Psalm 139:23–24; 1 Corinthians 11:28).

Our flesh prefers the least resistance. It would rather call yesterday’s confession sufficient than surrender today’s cherished sin. We therefore need more than a passing glance at ourselves. We need the searching Word of God, applied honestly to what we believe, love, excuse, and do. Calvin wrote, “To examine ourselves properly, our conscience must be called to the judgment-seat of God.”* We must receive His verdict rather than negotiate a more comfortable one.

* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.12.5, trans. Henry Beveridge. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.v.xiii.html>.

WHY JOHN WROTE

John tells believers why he has written: that they may know they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). His letter gives searching tests because genuine assurance must agree with the truth. He does not help his readers feel secure by leaving their profession unexamined.

The assurance he seeks is tied to God's testimony concerning His Son. Eternal life is found in Christ; those who do not have the Son do not have life (1 John 5:11–12). The examination helps us consider whether our profession agrees with the reality of belonging to Him. We must therefore hear both the promise to believers and the warnings against a profession contradicted by unbelief and disobedience.

This order matters. John begins with the Christ proclaimed by the apostles, the light of God's truth, and the cleansing blood of His Son (1 John 1:1–7). We then consider our lives in that light. Our private estimate cannot overrule God's testimony, whether we are inclined to flatter ourselves or condemn ourselves without listening to what He says.

Spurgeon urged his hearers, "Go through the rank and file of your actions, and examine all your motives."* The examination must reach beyond what we display in church. Our private choices, withheld kindnesses, and reasons for obedience belong under the same light.

THE GROUND AND THE EVIDENCE

The ground of a believer's acceptance is Christ's righteousness and sacrifice. Evidence of new life includes repentance, obedience, love for God's people, and adherence to the truth about His Son. Some people turn evidence into the price of acceptance. Others protect their claim to acceptance by insisting that evidence does not matter. Scripture allows neither evasion.

Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christ redeemed His people from the curse by bearing it Himself (Galatians 3:13). Our obedience adds nothing to His payment. Bunyan described the foundation of his confidence with these words: "for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself."** Yet the Savior who justifies also gives new life; we cannot

* C. H. Spurgeon, "Self-Examination," sermon no. 218, New Park Street Pulpit, vol. 4, October 10, 1858, section I, paragraph comparing examination to inspecting an army. The Spurgeon Library, <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/self-examination>.

** John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, paragraph 229, Religious Tract Society edition, 1905. Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/654/654-h/654-h.htm>.

claim His saving work while dismissing the change His Spirit produces (Titus 3:5–7).

1 John 2:3: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.” John refuses the claim that a person can know Christ while treating His commands as irrelevant. The grace that brings us to Him changes our relation to His authority. We begin to hear His Word as the Word of our Lord.

The same apostle provides for believers who sin. He writes to prevent sin and directs those who sin to Jesus Christ the righteous, their Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1–2). Christ’s advocacy never makes repentance unnecessary. It gives the repentant believer reason to come honestly rather than conceal what his Lord already knows.

When a Christian fails, his proper response is confession and renewed obedience, not a claim that the failure was harmless. A man who asks forgiveness while arranging to continue his sin must examine what he means by repentance. Grace does not teach us to preserve the offense for which Christ suffered (Titus 2:11–14).

LET THE WORD UNCOVER WHAT YOU HAVE EXCUSED

David could see the cruelty in Nathan’s account before he would face the cruelty in his own conduct. A rich man had taken a poor man’s beloved lamb, though he had flocks of his own. David’s anger rose against the offender. Then Nathan identified the king as the man under accusation (2 Samuel 12:1–7).

David had committed adultery and arranged Uriah’s death. Yet he could still pronounce a moral verdict upon someone else. Knowing what wickedness deserves is not the same as admitting what we have done. The Word had to bring his judgment home.

We can read a searching passage and immediately think of a careless relative or a difficult church member. The application may even be accurate. But if another person always stands between the text and our own conscience, we have learned to use Scripture without submitting to it. Ask where the passage addresses your conduct before using it to explain someone else’s. John Owen counseled us to “be not afraid to speak that plainly unto our souls which the word speaks unto us.”* Plain dealing with ourselves honors the God who speaks.

* John Owen, *The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually Minded*, Part I, ch. III, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 7 (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1852), p. 286. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/spirituallyminded/spirituallyminded.i.v.iii.html>.

David confessed his sin; he did not ask Nathan to protect his peace by softening the charge (2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51). Forgiveness did not erase the grievous consequences announced against his household. The account gives us no reason to postpone repentance. It shows how desperately we need God to uncover the evil we have concealed and how directly we must answer when He does.

TEST YOUR PROFESSION BY ITS FRUIT

A generous act may come from pride; a grievous failure may occur in someone who genuinely loves the Lord. We need to consider actual conduct, responses to correction, and the way a person relates to Christ over time. We must also examine the particular sin before us. An appeal to an otherwise respectable life cannot excuse dishonesty, cruelty, or a secret indulgence. A. W. Pink explained the reasoning: "I have to work back from effect to cause, to examine the fruit so as to discover the nature of the tree."* The fruit reveals the life; it does not purchase it.

Suppose a believer who once brushed aside other people's needs learns that a church member's family is going short of food. He quietly brings groceries, checks again the following week, and listens long enough to discover what help is actually needed. He still catches himself resenting the interruption or hoping to be thanked. Instead of using those mixed motives as an excuse to withdraw, he confesses them and continues to help. Such imperfect love cannot justify him before God. It may provide real encouragement that grace is bearing fruit.

Jonathan Edwards identifies the place of such evidence: "Christian practice, or a holy life, is a great and distinguishing sign of true and saving grace."** Faithful examination acknowledges both the obedience and the selfishness that needs repentance. Gratitude for grace should make us eager for greater faithfulness, not content with the least we can call evidence. John makes love concrete: he asks whether we respond to a brother's need in deed and truth (1 John 3:16–18).

That may mean an inconvenient visit, patient listening, generosity no one notices, or seeking another person's good after being overlooked. Gifts, strength, opportunities, and responsibilities differ. The bedridden believer and the active deacon will not serve in the same ways. The

* A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Assurance* (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2000), ch. 3, "Its Basis," p. 10. Digitized text, <https://www.onthewing.org/user/Pink%20-%20Doctrine%20of%20Assurance.pdf#page=10>.

** Jonathan Edwards, *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections*, Part III, sign XII, paragraph beginning "From what has been said." Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/affections.vi.xi.html>.

question is whether love for Christ and His people is taking form within the life God has actually entrusted to each. Johann Arndt observed that God has made “this love of our neighbor the very touch-stone by which we are to examine the sincerity of our love to God.”*

Examine repentance just as honestly. Are you grieving over the offense against God, or chiefly over being discovered? Have you forsaken what you confess? Where you have wronged someone, are you willing to tell the truth and make the restitution you owe? Paul describes godly sorrow by the earnest response it produced, not merely by its intensity (2 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Fear of judgment can awaken serious concern, but anxiety alone proves no one regenerate. Neither tears nor relief can replace the biblical questions. Do you trust Christ? Do you love Him? Do you submit to His Word? What happens when obedience costs you something you wanted to keep?

EXAMINE WHAT YOU BELIEVE ABOUT JESUS

Moral improvement alone does not establish Christian faith. John also insists upon the truth concerning the Son. His readers must resist teaching that denies the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ (1 John 2:22–24; 4:1–3). Assurance cannot safely rest in an invented Christ who merely endorses our religious preferences.

Do you receive Him as the eternal Son who truly became man, died for sinners, and rose again? Are you trusting His work rather than treating Him as an assistant to your own righteousness? Will you listen when His Word contradicts something you want to believe? These questions reach beyond whether you consider yourself spiritual or generally kind. Luther pressed the question of our trust: “Ask and examine your heart diligently, and you will find whether it cleaves to God alone or not.”** What we rely upon deserves as close an examination as what we profess.

A person can be deeply impressed by Christian teaching and still resist the Savior it proclaims. Another can understand the gospel imperfectly while genuinely trusting Christ and being willing to learn. We

* Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, trans. A. W. Boehm, rev. Charles F. Schaeffer (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Book Store, 1868), Book I, ch. XXV, “The Love Of Our Neighbor, More Particularly Considered,” §2, p. 83. Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/34736/pg34736-images.html>.

** Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, Part I, First Commandment, §28, trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, in *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921). Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/large_cat/large_catechism03.htm.

must not confuse limited knowledge with deliberate rejection. Patient instruction should clarify the truth and call for a believing response, never reassure someone that the truth about Christ is unimportant.

BRING EXAMINATION INTO DAILY OBEDIENCE

Lamentations 3:40: “Let us search out and examine our ways, And turn back to the LORD;” Scripture joins searching our ways to returning to God. Where you discover sin, confess and forsake it. Where you discover a false basis of confidence, relinquish it and trust Christ. Where you see genuine evidence of grace, thank God and seek to grow in it.

Read a passage in context and ask three plain questions. What does this teach about Christ and His will? What does it reveal about my profession or conduct? What response does it require now? Carry the answer into the day: the apology you owe, the temptation you must resist, the truth you must believe, the person you should serve. George Müller learned that “the word of God alone is our standard of judgment in spiritual things.”* Let that standard govern your answer, especially when obedience disturbs a settled habit.

When a serious question remains, bring it to a faithful pastor or mature believer with an open Bible. Give an honest account, including the facts that encourage you as well as those that trouble you. Seek help applying God’s tests, not permission to avoid them. A pastor’s approval cannot make an unbelieving profession true, and his task is to direct you to Christ rather than become the foundation of your confidence.

Return to this examination regularly. Sin does not become harmless because it is familiar, and an old evidence of grace does not excuse present neglect. The Lord who searches you also supplies grace to obey. Ask Him to uncover what you overlook and lead you in His way (Psalm 139:23–24).

DIAGNOSTIC: WILL YOU RECEIVE THE TRUTH ABOUT YOURSELF?

What do you reach for when Scripture questions your profession: Christ and His promises, or a remembered experience that you refuse to test? Examine your present faith and conduct rather than defending your history (2 Corinthians 13:5).

* George Müller, *A Narrative of Some of the Lord’s Dealings with George Müller*, Part I, 9th ed. (London: J. Nisbet & Co., 1865), account of August 1829 at Teignmouth, first numbered lesson. Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/20379/pg20379.html>.

Name a command you have postponed obeying. What explanation has made the delay seem acceptable? Confess the disobedience and take the step the Word requires (James 1:22–25).

When did correction last change your conduct? If you regularly acknowledge faults but protect the same practices, examine whether your confession includes a willingness to forsake them (Proverbs 28:13).

Can you identify actual love for Christ's people and submission to His Word? Thank God for real grace without excusing the sin that remains. If your confidence has no biblical support, do not manufacture evidence; repent and come to Christ (1 John 2:3–6; 3:14–18).

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Frequent, honest self-examination belongs to healthy Christian living. Welcome the searching Word in daily devotion and church life (Psalm 139:23–24; 1 Corinthians 11:28).
2. A profession of faith must be tested, not merely remembered. Present confidence cannot rest on an unexamined religious history (2 Corinthians 13:5).
3. Scripture must search the reader before he applies it to others. Accurate judgments about another person do not establish personal obedience (2 Samuel 12:1–13).
4. Christ supplies the ground of acceptance; changed lives supply evidence of His grace. Neither truth may be used to erase the other (Romans 5:1; 1 John 2:3).
5. A respectable pattern cannot excuse a particular sin. Bring the offense itself into the light and forsake it (Proverbs 28:13).
6. Repentance involves an honest response to God, not sorrow alone. Examine what your grief produces in conduct (2 Corinthians 7:10–11).
7. Love must reach the person in need. Religious affection without practical concern fails John's searching test (1 John 3:16–18).
8. Assurance requires the true Christ. Neither moral improvement nor spiritual enthusiasm can replace faith in God's Son (1 John 2:22–24).
9. Recognize genuine grace with gratitude and pursue greater faithfulness. Imperfect obedience gives no permission to remain content with sin (2 Peter 1:5–11).
10. Give examination an obedient response. Carry what Scripture reveals into repentance, faith, prayer, and action (Lamentations 3:40; James 1:22).

COME HONESTLY TO THE SAVIOR

Dear reader, you lose nothing worth keeping when God exposes a false refuge. If you have been resting in your church membership, your usefulness, or someone else's estimate of you, do not spend another day defending what cannot save. Come to Christ. He receives those who come to Him, and His promise needs no improvement from your past (John 6:37).

Dear Christian, keep welcoming His searching light. Confess the sin it exposes, receive the correction it brings, and thank Him for the grace it reveals. Your peace with God rests on the Savior who bore the curse and rose again, not on your ability to present an impressive account of yourself. He is worthy of your trust and your obedience. Open your life before Him; there is no safer place to tell the truth.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Acknowledge where you have discouraged searching examination, excused cherished sin, or pronounced assurance without biblical evidence. Begin by bringing your own conduct under the Word you preach (1 Timothy 4:16).

RE-TEACH.

Explain Christ's finished work and the evidences of regeneration together. Teach the congregation to distinguish justification through faith from the fruit that confirms a living profession (Romans 5:1; 1 John 2:3–6).

REFORM.

Make frequent self-examination part of discipleship and preparation for the Lord's Table. Ask about actual faith and conduct; help people name the repentance and obedience required, and follow through with pastoral care (1 Corinthians 11:28; Galatians 6:1).

REMAIN.

Refuse reassurance purchased by silence about sin. Continue patiently teaching, correcting, and encouraging from Scripture, even when people prefer an easier verdict (2 Timothy 4:2–5).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL SELF-EXAMINATION

1. God knows the heart completely. Human self-knowledge depends upon His searching revelation rather than our private confidence (Jeremiah 17:9–10).
2. Scripture commands believers to test their profession. Self-examination is an appointed duty within Christian discipleship (2 Corinthians 13:5).
3. God's Word supplies the standard. The conscience must answer to His truth rather than custom, comparison, or feeling (Hebrews 4:12–13).
4. Justification rests on Christ's righteousness and redeeming work, received through faith. Examination neither earns acceptance nor supplements His sacrifice (Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:13).
5. Regeneration produces a changed life. Those born of God cannot rightly treat obedience, righteousness, and love as irrelevant to their profession (1 John 2:29; 3:9–10).
6. Saving faith receives the Son revealed in Scripture. A denial of His person contradicts the claim to possess life in Him (1 John 2:22–23; 5:11–12).
7. Repentance turns from sin toward God. Confession that protects the offense contradicts the biblical call to forsake it (Proverbs 28:13; Acts 26:20).
8. Obedience and brotherly love are evidences of knowing Christ. They attest to His saving grace without becoming its purchase price (1 John 2:3–6; 3:14–18).
9. Remaining sin calls for continuing confession and obedience. Christ's advocacy sustains believers without authorizing disobedience (1 John 1:8–2:6).
10. God intends His children to grow in settled assurance. Scriptural examination serves that purpose by exposing false confidence and confirming genuine faith in His Son (1 John 5:13; 2 Peter 1:10–11).

CHAPTER 7

When a Sermon Troubles You

You leave church troubled. A command you have postponed obeying will not leave your mind. An excuse that sounded reasonable yesterday has been exposed by the passage you heard today. Before trying to recover your comfort, ask whether the Lord has mercifully uncovered something you need to confess. A faithful sermon may disturb the very peace that has kept you from repentance.

Neither pain nor relief can establish whether a sermon was faithful. A message may comfort because it opens a genuine promise, or because it leaves a serious sin untouched. A searching message may expose our disobedience; a mistaken one may burden us with something God has not commanded. We must return to Scripture with a willingness to hear and obey, asking what God said and how faithfully His Word was brought to bear upon us.

OPEN THE BIBLE, NOT ONLY YOUR REACTION

Luke commends the Bereans for the way they received apostolic preaching. Acts 17:11: “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”

Thomas Watson described meekness as “a submissive frame of heart to the word — a willingness to hear the counsels and reproofs of the word.”* Bring that willingness to the passage, especially when its correction reaches something you want to keep.

Readiness and examination belong together. They did not use

* Thomas Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, §4.3, “The Word,” question “How may we hear the word that it may be effectual and saving to our souls?,” point (4). Christian

scrutiny as a reason to refuse a hearing, nor did they use an impressive messenger as a reason to stop thinking. They received the message seriously and searched the Scriptures. That posture challenges both the reflexively suspicious listener and the unquestioningly loyal one.

The first response to a troubling sermon should therefore be to return to the passage. Read what comes before and after it. Identify the actual claim that troubled you. Ask whether the preacher explained the text's meaning or moved too quickly from a phrase to a conclusion. Consider how the teaching fits with other clear passages of Scripture.

You do not need to become a scholar before receiving the Word. You do need to distinguish what the Bible says from what someone says about the Bible. A faithful pastor should welcome a sincere request for help understanding that distinction. He may need time to answer, and you should approach him respectfully, but honest questions are not an assault upon biblical authority.

WHEN THE BOOK TROUBLED A KING

When the Book of the Law was found during repairs to the temple, Shaphan read it before Josiah. The king tore his clothes. He recognized that Judah had not obeyed the Lord and sent men to inquire concerning the words he had heard (2 Kings 22:8–13). His distress arose from the terrible distance between God's command and his people's conduct. He did not ask for a reassuring interpretation that would leave their disobedience undisturbed.

The Lord's answer through Huldah confirmed the judgment announced against Judah. It also acknowledged Josiah's tender heart and his humiliation before God (2 Kings 22:15–20). The king's sorrow was not a spiritual defect to be soothed away. He had heard what God said and taken it seriously. A heart that trembles before the Word may be responding far more faithfully than a heart that leaves worship perfectly comfortable.

Josiah then gathered the people, read the covenant, and committed himself to follow the Lord. Reformation reached the objects and practices of idolatry that had been tolerated in the land (2 Kings 23:1–20). The lesson reaches our Sunday hearing: conviction must enter the places where disobedience lives. A sermon against deceit has not done its full work while the false account remains uncorrected. A warning against cherished sin calls for more than a troubled afternoon.

Godly fear listens because God is holy and His judgment is real. It

does not bargain for a smaller claim upon the life. If the Lord has used faithful preaching to uncover your false peace, thank Him for His mercy and turn to Him now. The danger is not that His truth has disturbed you; it is that you may quiet your conscience without obeying it.

THE PREACHER HAS A CHARGE, NOT A LICENSE

Paul's instruction to Timothy is plain. 2 Timothy 4:2: "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching."

Spurgeon said, "The great object of the gospel ministry, at first, is to convince men of sin, to humble them before God"; he also insisted that only the Holy Spirit can apply the truth with saving power.* The preacher must declare what God has said and depend upon God to awaken the hearer.

The command includes rebuke. A ministry that promises never to disturb anyone cannot fulfill it. Sin must be named, false teaching corrected, and people summoned to repentance. Paul warns that hearers will gather teachers who satisfy their desires rather than endure sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3–4). A congregation can train itself to reject the very ministry it needs.

God uses preaching to expose sin in the believer's life, including the cherished sins we have learned to excuse. His Word reaches beneath respectable appearances and uncovers the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12). We need that searching ministry to lead us into honest confession, repentance, and renewed obedience. The same preaching that confronts our sin directs us to the Savior whose blood cleanses us and whose promises assure us of forgiveness (1 John 1:7–9). Our peace with God rests upon Christ's finished work, received through faith; we do not earn it by the depth of our sorrow (Romans 5:1). As we turn from sin and trust Him, we recover the joy of fellowship that cherished disobedience had troubled. Receive the rebuke, forsake the sin, and rest in Christ.

Nor is every wounded response evidence that the preacher was courageous. Some people are wounded by truth they need; others are wounded by careless words or unjust accusations. A pastor must be willing to examine his own ministry rather than congratulate himself

* C. H. Spurgeon, "The Royal Prerogative," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 25, sermon no. 1465B, section I. The Spurgeon Library, <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/the-royal-prerogative-2>.

whenever someone is upset. The Lord judges both the message and the manner in which His servants handle His people (2 Timothy 2:24–25).

WHAT FAITHFUL WARNING MAKES CLEAR

A faithful warning identifies a biblical danger, explains why it matters, and shows the response God requires. It does not merely leave a congregation afraid of an unnamed spiritual defect. If a sermon exposes false assurance, listeners should understand what false assurance rests upon and where genuine assurance may be found. If it confronts a particular sin, they should be able to identify that sin without guessing which private person the preacher had in mind.

Faithful warning also directs people to Christ. The preacher must not leave listeners thinking that their only hope is to satisfy his expectations, attend every meeting, or demonstrate loyalty to his leadership. Christ alone saves. Pastoral care helps people hear and follow Him; it must not become a rival condition of acceptance.

Consider the difference between confronting dishonest conduct and declaring that anyone who questions a church decision is rebellious. The first can be established from Scripture and the facts. The second may confuse a leader's preference with God's command. Some church decisions involve wisdom rather than a single binding biblical requirement. Disagreement should be handled according to its actual nature, not upgraded into a test of salvation.

This does not give members permission to become contentious or dismiss legitimate oversight. Scripture calls believers to esteem faithful leaders and respond to their care (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:17). Yet that authority is exercised under Christ. Shepherds are accountable for their teaching, their conduct, and their treatment of the flock. They may not demand the place in a conscience that belongs to its Lord.

RECEIVE WHAT IS TRUE, EVEN WHEN IT COSTS YOU

There is a danger in discussing pastoral failures: we may use them to evade a true word. A preacher can be imperfect and still expose our sin accurately. An awkward illustration does not make the biblical command beneath it optional. Before rejecting the whole message, ask whether something in it remains plainly true and personally necessary.

Suppose a sermon on forgiveness was delivered with insufficient sensitivity to the harm you suffered. That failure should be addressed. But it does not authorize you to cherish revenge. You may need both a more careful pastoral conversation and a genuine surrender of vengeance to

God. Truthful care will distinguish forgiveness from immediate trust, reconciliation from pretending the harm did not happen, and necessary safety from a wish to punish.

Or perhaps you dislike the preacher's tone because he has reached your use of money. It is easier to discuss his delivery than the purchase, debt, generosity, or dishonest practice that the passage has brought to mind. Do not let a secondary concern become a refuge from a primary duty. Deal with both honestly, in their proper order.

Frequent, honest self-examination is essential here. Ask what you are defending, what the passage requires, and what obedience will cost. Do not stop at admitting that the sermon was searching. Confess the sin it uncovered and forsake it. The flesh can learn to admire a strong sermon while refusing its application; agreement becomes another way to postpone surrender (James 1:22–25).

WHEN THE ACCUSATION IS NOT BIBLICAL

Calvin wrote, "But the Spirit will only thus guide us to a right discrimination, when we render all our thoughts subject to God's word."* That submission governs our examination of both the message and ourselves.

If a message binds you to something Scripture does not require, seek clarification. State the claim as accurately as you can, and ask the pastor to show how it follows from the passage. Allow for misunderstanding. A sentence heard in isolation may not represent the whole argument, and a pastor may gladly correct an imprecise expression.

If a serious error remains, involve other trustworthy, qualified leaders through an appropriate process. Do not circulate accusations carelessly, but do not accept the idea that secrecy proves loyalty. Scripture provides accountability for leaders as well as members (1 Timothy 5:19–21). Allegations of serious harm require careful attention to evidence and protection of those affected, not automatic dismissal because the accused person has a respected office.

You need not abandon the church because one sermon was poorly handled. Nor must you remain indefinitely under manipulation in order to prove submission to Christ. Wise counsel can help distinguish an isolated mistake, an unresolved doctrinal problem, and an entrenched pattern of harmful leadership. The aim is faithful fellowship under the Word, not isolation from every person who might correct you.

* John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, translated and edited by John Owen, commentary on 1 John 4:1, "Try the spirits," p. 203. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/calcom45/cache/calcom45.pdf#page=212>.

For pastors, the corresponding duty is humility. If your sermon misstated a text or injured someone through an unjust accusation, correct it. An honest correction may teach the congregation more about submission to Scripture than an elaborate defense of your original wording. Your authority does not depend upon appearing incapable of error.

THE SOUND OF A WHOLE MINISTRY

No single sermon can say everything. A warning may rightly carry unusual urgency, and a message of consolation may rightly dwell upon promise. Over time, however, the congregation should hear the whole counsel of God. People need doctrine, correction, encouragement, worship, and the steady proclamation of Christ.

A church that refuses examination can mistake settled self-deception for assurance. A church that severs examination from Christ's promises leaves awakened people without the gospel refuge they need. Neither failure is cured by a mechanical balance of severe and soothing sermons. Let the Scriptures govern the subjects, the weight, and the response. The same Lord speaks in all of them.

Ask what the congregation is learning to do with truth. Are people becoming more willing to confess sin and receive mercy? More able to distinguish biblical commands from preferences? More ready to help the weak and confront the resistant? These are better pastoral concerns than whether every sermon leaves the room impressed with the preacher's force.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHAT ARE YOU DEFENDING?

Identify the precise claim in a troubling sermon. Can you connect it to the passage in context? If not, seek an explanation before either accepting it as God's verdict or rejecting it as error.

Is there a clear duty you have avoided by concentrating on the messenger's imperfections? Name the duty and address it, while raising any legitimate concern about the message truthfully.

Have you accepted a leader's judgment merely because questioning it feels dangerous? Ask a trustworthy, qualified person to help you examine the teaching from Scripture. Fear of a human response must not replace the fear of God.

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Test a troubling sermon by Scripture rather than by the relief or pain it produces. Your reaction needs examination too (Acts 17:11).

2. Receive the Word with readiness. Searching the text must serve obedience, not supply a respectable delay (Acts 17:11; James 1:22).
3. Godly fear takes divine warning seriously. Josiah's tender heart heard danger and sought the Lord (2 Kings 22:11–20).
4. A preacher's imperfection does not cancel a true rebuke. Address his error without protecting your own (2 Timothy 4:2).
5. Frequent self-examination belongs under faithful preaching. Ask what the Word uncovers in your actual beliefs and conduct (2 Corinthians 13:5).
6. Conviction requires a response beyond admiration or distress. Forsake the sin you have acknowledged (James 1:22–25; Proverbs 28:13).
7. Faithful warning identifies biblical danger and directs sinners to Christ. Loyalty to a minister cannot replace faith in the Savior (Acts 20:20–21).
8. Pastoral authority remains subject to Scripture. No office turns human preference into God's command (1 Peter 5:2–3).
9. Examine the whole ministry by the whole counsel of God. Necessary warnings and genuine promises come from the same Lord (Acts 20:26–27).
10. Welcome correction as mercy while there is time to respond. Do not harden your heart against the truth you have heard (Hebrews 3:12–15).

HEAR THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE

Dear reader, do not hurry to recover the peace you had before the sermon. First ask whether that peace rested on Christ or on something His Word has now exposed. If you have been calling an unrepentant life secure, the loss of that confidence is a mercy. Come to the Savior rather than finding another argument for remaining as you are.

Christ does not require you to repair yourself before coming. His blood cleanses sinners, and His righteousness supplies what your religious history never could. Come confessing your sin and trusting Him. The One who died and rose again is sufficient for the guilt you have finally admitted (Romans 4:25–5:1; 1 John 1:9).

Dear Christian, receive His searching care without treating His finished work as uncertain. His correction calls you away from sin and into renewed obedience, not toward another foundation of acceptance. Keep opening your life to His Word. Receive His warning where you have resisted, His comfort where He has promised it, and His instruction where you need understanding. There is no better outcome from a sermon than to hear Christ more clearly and follow Him more faithfully.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Confess where you have withheld necessary warnings to protect approval, or used the pulpit to defend personal grievances. Bring your own life under the Word before demanding a hearing from others. Neither popularity nor forcefulness establishes faithfulness (1 Timothy 4:16; James 3:1).

RE-TEACH.

Restore the biblical place of godly fear, frequent examination, repentance, and assurance in Christ. Explain the passage so the congregation can see why the warning belongs to God's message. Teach people to receive correction and test teaching with open Bibles (Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

REFORM.

Give applications that identify actual sins and required obedience. Make room for honest questions and pastoral conversations after searching sermons. Correct public misstatements plainly, and follow up with those who need help turning conviction into repentance and faith (2 Timothy 2:24–26).

REMAIN.

Keep preaching the truth when hearers resent its claims. Refuse both the cowardice that avoids rebuke and the pride that refuses correction. Your charge is to serve Christ's flock faithfully before the Lord who will judge your ministry (2 Timothy 4:1–5).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1. Scripture is inspired by God. Its teaching, correction, and instruction carry divine authority rather than the authority of religious opinion (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
2. Christ rules His church. Ministers serve under the risen Head and have no independent right to govern belief or worship (Ephesians 1:20–23; Matthew 28:18–20).
3. Preaching is an appointed means of bringing the gospel to hearers. Faith comes through hearing the message of Christ, not through a minister's power to manufacture conversion (Romans 10:14–17).

4. The Holy Spirit makes the Word effective. Human eloquence cannot impart spiritual life or replace dependence upon God (1 Corinthians 2:1–5; 1 Peter 1:23–25).
5. The law reveals sin and accountability before God. Its searching work strips away self-justification and establishes our need of divine mercy (Romans 3:19–20).
6. The gospel proclaims justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Peace with God rests upon His redeeming work rather than the hearer's distress, resolutions, or religious performance (Romans 3:21–26; 5:1).
7. Christ gives shepherds for the building up of His body. Their teaching should produce maturity, doctrinal stability, and growth in love (Ephesians 4:11–16).
8. The church must guard the apostolic message. Sound doctrine is a trust to preserve and transmit, not material to reshape according to changing appetites (2 Timothy 1:13–14; 2:2).
9. Hearers are accountable for their response to revealed truth. Exposure to faithful teaching increases responsibility and gives no shelter to deliberate disobedience (Hebrews 2:1–3; James 1:22–25).
10. Ministers will answer to Christ for their stewardship. His coming judgment governs their charge to teach, rebuke, exhort, and endure with patience (2 Timothy 4:1–5; Hebrews 13:17).

TEACHING ANNEX

Why Believers Need the Preached Word

CHRIST GIVES HIS PEOPLE A MINISTRY THEY NEED TO HEAR

A Christian may ask God for greater peace while neglecting the preaching through which God strengthens faith. We want the comfort, but we make little room for the Word that teaches us where comfort rests. Christ knows how readily His sheep wander into fear, error, and disobedience. He gives pastors and teachers to build them up, bringing them toward maturity and protecting them from deceptive teaching (Ephesians 4:11–16). Receiving that ministry belongs to receiving His care.

Romans 10:17: “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Paul traces the sinner’s calling upon Christ back through believing, hearing, and the sending of a preacher. The message comes from outside us. We cannot discover the gospel by listening more closely to ourselves.

Nor do we outgrow our need to hear. Describing the ministry of the Word, Charles Bridges wrote, “This, therefore is the ordained means of conversion, and of subsequent establishment in every stage of the Christian life.”* Richard Baxter likewise included the care of believers in

* Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, 6th ed. (London: Seeley, Burnside and Seeley, 1844), part 1, ch. 3, p. 10. Scanned edition, <https://s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com>.

the pastor's charge: "We must study to build up those who are already truly converted."* Conversion begins a life of dependence upon Christ, and His people need instruction suited to that life.

The authority lies in the Scripture faithfully opened, not in the preacher's fame. Do not overlook a faithful ministry because its messenger lacks the gifts you admire elsewhere. Ask whether you are receiving the truth God has placed before you. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put the need plainly: "The most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching."**

THE WORD REACHES SINS WE HAVE LEARNED TO PROTECT

Remaining sin does not always announce itself as rebellion. Resentment can borrow the language of discernment; pride can present itself as concern for truth. Private reading matters greatly, but even there we may hurry past the passage that searches us. In faithful preaching, another man must explain and apply the text, including the command we would rather leave unexamined.

Hebrews 4:12–13 describes the Word discerning the heart's thoughts and intentions before the God to whom we must give account. That searching work is mercy. The Lord uncovers what we excuse so that we will confess and forsake it. A peace maintained by refusing His light cannot help us grow in holiness.

Asahel Nettleton observed that "the very same truths which fill sinners with alarm, often after a season, fill them with joy unspeakable and full of glory."*** He was describing awakening and conversion, not promising relief to everyone who feels disturbed. His observation helps us see why the painful beginning of conviction must not be mistaken for the final purpose of preaching.

com/apuritansmind.com/PDF/pastoral/CharlesBridgesTheChristianMinistryPDF.pdf#page=31.

* Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ch. 2, section 1, point 3. CCEL, <https://ccel.org/ccel/baxter/pastor/pastor.iii.i.html>.

** D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 40th anniversary ed. (Zondervan, 2012), ch. 1, "The Primacy of Preaching." Publisher's quotation, <https://zondervanacademic.com/products/preaching-and-preachers>.

*** Asahel Nettleton, "Thoughts on Revivals," "Miscellaneous Remarks," in *Remains of the Late Rev. Asahel Nettleton, D.D.*, compiled by Bennet Tyler (Hartford: Robins and Smith, 1845), p. 396. Original page, <https://archive.org/download/remainsofflaterev00nett/page/n407.jpg>.

Paul rejoiced when his correction produced godly sorrow and repentance among the Corinthians. Their response became earnestness, indignation against sin, fear, and zeal to put matters right (2 Corinthians 7:8–11). They did more than endure an uncomfortable message. They acted upon it.

If a sermon exposes your dishonesty, correct the lie. If it uncovers cruelty at home, confess to those you have hurt and change your conduct. Do not ask the pastor to restore your comfortable feelings while you refuse the obedience his biblical warning requires. Godly fear takes the Lord seriously enough to turn from what displeases Him.

FAITH MUST HEAR AGAIN WHAT CHRIST HAS ACCOMPLISHED

The preacher who exposes sin must proclaim the Savior. An awakened conscience needs more than instructions for doing better. It needs to know how guilty people can stand before a holy God.

Romans 5:1: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”. Justification is God’s declaration that the believer is righteous in His sight through Christ. Its foundation lies in the Savior’s obedience and sacrifice, not in the intensity of our conviction or the success of our reforms. Galatians 3:13 explains that Christ redeemed His people from the law’s curse by bearing that curse for them. The judgment our sins deserved fell upon Him.

Faithful preaching keeps bringing that accomplished redemption into view. William Gurnall wrote, “That which was instrumental to beget thy faith will be helpful to preserve it, viz. the word of God.”* He directed believers to both public preaching and their own reading and meditation. Faith needs truth to feed upon, especially when guilt tempts us to measure Christ’s sufficiency by our present feelings.

Peace with God is not earned again after each failure or recreated by each sermon. The justified believer hears the gospel again because he needs to understand, trust, and live upon the reconciliation Christ has secured. Repentance brings no payment to the cross. It turns from sin to the Savior whose payment is sufficient.

* William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, “Fourth Piece,” “Directions to Believers for the Preserving of Faith,” introductory answer. CCEL electronic PDF, p. 41, <https://ccel.org/ccel/gurnall/armour/files/armour2.pdf#page=41>.

THE SPIRIT STRENGTHENS ASSURANCE THROUGH THE TRUTH

We must distinguish peace with God from our enjoyment of that peace. A believer may belong to Christ while struggling to understand his standing or while losing the comfort of fellowship through cherished disobedience. Preaching addresses both confusion and sin, teaching the promises clearly and bringing the life under their searching light.

In discussing preaching that distinguishes genuine faith from counterfeit, Albert N. Martin wrote, “The most searching applicatory preaching in this area will serve to bring the true child of God to a more solid assurance.”* Scriptural examination need not leave a believer perpetually unsettled. It exposes false grounds of confidence and helps him recognize the work of grace, while directing his trust to Christ Himself (1 John 2:3–6; 5:11–13).

John Bunyan testified, “I sat under the ministry of holy Mr. Gifford, whose doctrine, by God’s grace, was much for my stability.”** Stability came through doctrine received by grace. A pastor’s confident manner cannot supply what the Spirit gives through truth.

In Romans 15:13, Paul prays for God to fill believers with joy and peace as they believe, through the Holy Spirit’s power. We therefore listen prayerfully, asking for more than an explanation we can repeat. We ask God to settle our hearts upon His promises. Assurance grows as we learn to trust the Christ proclaimed, rather than chase the sensation of being assured.

CARRY WHAT YOU HEAR INTO THE LIFE YOU LIVE

James describes a hearer who looks at himself in a mirror, goes away, and forgets what he saw (James 1:22–25). The failure occurs after the encounter. He has seen enough to respond, but the truth does not govern what follows. We can leave a sermon discussing its strength while quietly abandoning its application.

Jonathan Edwards wrote, “And God has appointed preaching as a

* Albert N. Martin, *What’s Wrong with Preaching Today?* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), “The Message,” “Practical Application.” Published text reproduced, <https://www.the-highway.com/preaching2.html>; original sermon transcript, <https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermons/10180414163>.

** John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, §117, CCEL electronic edition, p. 29. PDF p. 33, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/b/bunyan/grace/cache/grace.pdf#page=33>.

means to promote in the saints joy”.* He understood that truths already known must reach the affections. Familiar doctrine should stir fresh love for God, rather than remain information we can recite while our desires pursue something else.

Hearing must continue in meditation, prayer, and obedience. Return to the passage during the week. Put the particular sin into words before God. Trust the particular promise when the familiar fear returns. If you need help obeying, seek it from your pastor or a mature believer rather than allowing embarrassment to preserve the problem.

This obedience does not purchase acceptance. It is the response of someone being brought into the light. John joins walking in the light with fellowship and cleansing through Christ’s blood (1 John 1:5–9). A Christian who conceals sin is resisting the very fellowship he wants to enjoy. As the Word leads him into confession and renewed obedience, he can approach God without maintaining the pretense that nothing is wrong. The Father already knows, and His Son is the believer’s advocate (1 John 2:1–2).

COME READY TO RECEIVE, AND KEEP RECEIVING

Jesus tells us to take care how we hear (Luke 8:18). Preparation begins before the sermon. Pray for the preacher’s faithfulness and for a receptive heart. Where you can, order your time so that unnecessary exhaustion and distraction do not consume the attention you ought to give. Come willing to be corrected as well as comforted.

John MacArthur urged, “The idea here is to grasp every opportunity to increase your hearing of God’s Word.”** That eagerness should deepen attention, not merely enlarge a collection of sermons. Martin Luther insisted that “you must be concerned not only about hearing, but also about learning and retaining it in memory.”*** Remember enough to pray over the teaching and practice it.

George Whitefield urged hearers to “lend an attentive ear to his

* Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, part 1, section 2, point 9, in *Works*, revised by Edward Hickman, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 242. CCEL, <https://ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works1.vii.iii.html>.

** John MacArthur, “Responding to the Word,” sermon 80-154, January 14, 1996, on James 1:19–27. *Grace to You*, <https://www.gty.org/sermons/80-154/responding-to-the-word>.

*** Martin Luther, *Large Catechism*, I, “The Third Commandment,” §98, translated by F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau, *Triglot Concordia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House,

ministers, when they are declaring, in his name, how our pardon, peace, and happiness may be secured”.* Attend as someone who needs the message, not merely as someone qualified to assess its delivery.

Do not demand a dramatic experience from every sermon. Describing earlier ministers’ confidence in God, Iain H. Murray wrote that “God would grant his blessing in the measure that was appropriate – whether in its heightened form . . . or in quieter ways.”** Ordinary growth matters: a sin confessed sooner, a promise trusted through trouble, a duty obeyed without applause. Keep receiving the Word when its fruit grows quietly.

Pastor, help your people hear in this way. Explain the passage so they can follow its meaning; name the sins it exposes; show the obedience it requires; proclaim the grace it supplies. Pray for the Spirit to accomplish what your clearest words cannot accomplish by themselves. Do not withhold rebuke from those you love, and do not leave the rebuked without a clear sight of Christ (Acts 20:20–21, 28–32).

Dear Christian, come to the preached Word because you need the Lord who speaks through it. Bring the sin you have defended, the promise you have struggled to believe, and the duty you have delayed. Christ has not abandoned you to discover your own way into peace. He has made peace through His blood, and He continues to shepherd His people by His truth. Hear Him with the intention of following Him.

1921). Project Wittenberg, <https://www.projectwittenberg.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/catechism/web/cat-05.html>.

* George Whitefield, “Directions How to Hear Sermons,” on Luke 8:18, *Selected Sermons*, sermon 28, second division, direction 2. CCEL, <https://ccel.org/ccel/whitefield/sermons.xxx.html>.

** Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 385, quoted in Bobby Jamieson, “Revival and Revivalism—A Review,” March 20, 2012, \$7, “Celebrate the Normal.” *Banner of Truth*, <https://banneroftruth.org/uk/resources/book-review-resources/2012/revival-and-revivalism-a-review-by-bobby-jamieson/>. Ellipsis retained from the review.

CHAPTER 8

Come to Christ and Keep Looking to Him

You may reach the last page of a book about peace and still be hiding from the One who gives it. You understand the danger of false assurance. You can distinguish conviction from condemnation and explain why religious activity cannot save. But what have you done with Jesus Christ? Knowledge can furnish a hiding place when we use it to discuss the surrender we keep refusing.

I do not want you to finish these pages merely better informed about your soul. I want you to come honestly before the Lord who already knows it. Bring Him the sin you have concealed, the reputation you have protected, and the fear you have not known how to express. His gospel gives us no reason to disguise our need.

John 6:37: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out."

THE SAVIOR HAS ANSWERED THE GUILT

Christ's welcome has a foundation stronger than our desire to be welcomed. He came from heaven to do His Father's will, and the cross was no interruption of that purpose. The eternal Son became truly man, obeyed where we had disobeyed, and bore the judgment His people deserved. He rose bodily from the dead. The Savior who receives sinners has accomplished the redemption they could never accomplish for themselves.

Romans 5:1: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ". God declares the

believer righteous through Christ. This peace concerns our standing before Him, not merely a quieter state of mind. Galatians 3:13 tells us how costly that peace was: Christ redeemed us from the law's curse by becoming a curse for us. We must never speak of His mercy as though God simply decided that sin did not matter.

The guilt is real, the judgment is righteous, and the sacrifice is sufficient. Faith receives the Savior; it contributes no payment. Neither the depth of our sorrow nor the strength of our resolutions can improve upon His obedience and blood. That is why a guilty person may come without first producing a more acceptable version of himself.

John Bunyan pressed the promise upon hesitant sinners: "If he was not willing, why did he promise? Why did he say he would receive the coming sinner?"* Christ has not left His willingness for you to discover by measuring your feelings. He has spoken. Coming to Him means receiving His testimony and depending upon Him personally for salvation.

Repentance and faith belong together in that coming. We turn from sin to God and trust His Son; we cannot sincerely receive the Savior while reserving the right to reject His lordship (Acts 20:21). Yet repentance does not buy His willingness to save. Grace brings a sinner to relinquish the very rebellion from which Christ delivers him. What could you bring that His blood has left unpaid? Come guilty, needing mercy, and willing to have your sins exposed and forsaken. Do not come bargaining to keep them.

THE REPUTATION YOU CANNOT TAKE INTO JUDGMENT

Perhaps your confidence has depended upon being known as a Christian. Your family assumes it. Your church assumes it. You have found it easier to keep answering to that identity than to admit that your trust has never truly rested in Christ. Each year of maintaining the appearance has made the admission seem more costly.

But those years have not made the appearance more able to save you. Other people's opinions cannot answer God's judgment. Do not add another religious accomplishment to the history you are using as a

* John Bunyan, *Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, edited by George Offor, "The Promise to Those Coming to Christ," subsection "Import of the Word Him," discussion of Christ's willingness. Full text, https://biblehub.com/library/bunyan/the_works_of_john_bunyan_volumes_1-3/come_and_welcome_to_jesus.htm.

defense. Tell the truth to God. Confess your sin and your false refuge, and entrust yourself to the crucified and risen Lord.

John 9 brings that cost into view. The parents of the man born blind feared exclusion from the synagogue if they confessed Jesus as the Christ. Later, after their son refused to deny what Jesus had done, the religious leaders cast him out. Jesus heard what had happened, found him, and revealed Himself to him. The man believed and worshiped (John 9:22, 30–38). The judgment of the religious authorities was not the last word over his life. Christ Himself received his faith.

Your circumstances may differ, but the question of allegiance reaches you. Will you preserve other people's impression of you at the cost of refusing the Savior? Admitting that your profession has been empty may unsettle those who know you. It may require painful conversations. Remaining deceived carries a cost no reputation can repay.

Do not wait until you can explain how every part of your history fits together. The gospel does not require you to settle the date of your conversion before trusting Christ today. Seek faithful pastoral help, but do not make that conversation a substitute for coming to Him. The urgent question is whether you will believe Him now.

LET EXAMINATION LEAD TO AN HONEST RETURN

Dear Christian, keeping your eyes upon Christ includes opening your life to His scrutiny. Frequent, honest self-examination is essential. Bring your beliefs, affections, habits, words, and hidden conduct under Scripture. Ask whether you are trusting the Savior you profess and whether your life bears the fruit of that faith (2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 John 2:3–6). Love for Christ welcomes the light that exposes what grieves Him.

Examination must reach particulars. Perhaps you have asked God repeatedly to forgive your anger while leaving your family to endure the same contempt. Perhaps you regret a deception but continue to enjoy its advantage. What are the people nearest you still suffering while you call yourself sorry? Put the sin into truthful words. Confess it to God, forsake it, and address the harm you have done. A general admission that you are imperfect must not conceal a specific refusal to obey.

Your return is not a second payment for sin. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient. There may nevertheless be consequences to accept, restitution to make, trust to rebuild, and access to temptation to remove. Grace enables you to face those duties without making self-preservation your chief concern. Ask a faithful shepherd for help that includes accountability, not merely reassurance (Galatians 6:1–2).

Examine yourself again as you walk with God. Notice what you excuse when tired, what you defend when corrected, and what you desire when no one is watching. Bring what you discover to Christ in confession and faith. His blood is the ground of forgiveness; His Spirit supplies strength to put sin to death (1 John 1:7–9; Romans 8:13). Honest examination and dependence upon Him belong to the same obedient life.

RECEIVE THE PROMISE WITH YOUR TREMBLING

Some readers have been protecting themselves from the truth. Others have heard the truth and fear that Christ's welcome must contain an exception meant for them. If that is your fear, read His promise again. He receives the one who comes. He has not required you to arrive free of trembling.

Bring your doubts into the light as honestly as your sins. Let Scripture test the grounds of your confidence; receive correction wherever it is needed. But do not turn the strength of a feeling into an entrance requirement God has not imposed. The question is whether you are relying upon Christ, not whether you can describe an experience impressive enough to persuade other people.

When an accusation returns, answer it truthfully. If you have sinned, confess and forsake that sin; appeal to Christ's finished work for forgiveness. If you are being told that His sacrifice cannot suffice for the sinner who trusts Him, reject that accusation on the authority of His Word. Your fear must be examined too. It cannot reverse His promise.

We often want a new experience powerful enough to make further trust unnecessary. Yet tomorrow's need for Christ will be as real as today's. He does not become less trustworthy because you need to remember His mercy again in the morning.

FOLLOW HIM INTO THE LIFE BEFORE YOU

J. C. Ryle wrote, "The secret of a vigorous, powerful, everyday Christianity is to be ever 'Looking unto Jesus.'"^{*} That looking belongs in the circumstances where obedience is required. We depend upon the living Christ as we resist temptation, speak truth, love difficult people, and fulfill duties we would rather postpone (Colossians 2:6–7).

C. H. Spurgeon asked, "Has Christ finished his work for me? Then

^{*} J. C. Ryle, "Looking Unto Jesus," introductory discussion of Hebrews 12:2. Full text, https://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/looking_onto_jesus.htm.

tell me what work I can do for him.”* His completed redemption frees believers to serve without attempting to purchase acceptance. Gratitude begins to ask what pleases the Lord instead of calculating how little obedience will leave us feeling safe.

Hebrews 10:19–25 brings this life into the fellowship of the church. Through Christ's blood, believers draw near to God, hold fast their confession, and consider how to stir one another to love and good works. Gather with His people. Receive His Word, pray, and remember His death at His table. Who needs the practical love you have kept intending to show? Take an interest in the believer whose weariness you might otherwise overlook. Christ has joined you to people you are called to love.

There will be days when faithfulness has little outward drama. You refuse a dishonest advantage, keep a difficult promise, or ask forgiveness without explaining away the offense. The Lord sees that obedience. Keep examining your heart and seeking His strength; growth does not make dependence unnecessary.

Hebrews 10:23: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” His faithfulness reaches beyond the tasks of this week. The risen Savior will raise His people at the last day (John 6:40). We follow Him toward a future in which sin will no longer trouble our fellowship and death will no longer separate us from those who are His. This hope makes present obedience worth the cost.

DIAGNOSTIC: WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE TRUTH?

What are you presenting as your reason for believing you are accepted by God? Put the answer into words. Does it rest upon Christ's righteousness and sacrifice received through faith, or upon a religious history you are afraid to question? Examine that answer under Romans 3:21–26 and 5:1.

Which sin have you acknowledged without forsaking? Identify the excuse that protects it, the obedience Scripture requires, and any person you have wronged. Begin that obedience; seek faithful help rather than hiding behind another private resolution (Proverbs 28:13; James 1:22).

When will you deliberately examine your heart and conduct before

* C. H. Spurgeon, “Christ's Dying Word for His Church,” sermon no. 2344, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, vol. 40 (1894), preached November 3, 1889, section IV, “To Our Own Arousement.” The Spurgeon Library, <https://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/christs-dying-word-for-his-church>.

God? Make room for that examination in prayer and Scripture, and receive the searching help of His people. What you discover must lead to confession, faith, and obedience (Psalm 139:23–24; Hebrews 3:12–13).

Is a fear keeping you from believing what Christ has actually promised? Name the fear and compare its claim with His words. Will you submit both your confidence and your doubts to the Savior who speaks in John 6:37?

CHAPTER AXIOMS

1. Christ has answered the guilt that makes peace necessary. His redemption, rather than our emotional relief, establishes the believer's acceptance (Galatians 3:13; Romans 5:1).
2. Faith receives the Savior without contributing to His payment. No degree of sorrow can supplement His sacrifice (Romans 3:24–28).
3. Repentance and faith are inseparable responses to the gospel. Christ's welcome gives no shelter to a determination to retain sin (Acts 20:21).
4. Religious reputation cannot survive as a defense before God. Come to Christ rather than protecting an appearance of belonging to Him (Matthew 7:21–23).
5. Frequent, honest self-examination belongs to faithful discipleship. Bring your profession and practice under the light of Scripture (2 Corinthians 13:5).
6. Confession must reach the sin we have actually committed. General admissions must not become hiding places for deliberate disobedience (Proverbs 28:13).
7. Christ receives those who come to Him in faith. Trembling supplies no reason to contradict His promise (John 6:37).
8. Finished redemption produces grateful service. Good works express the life grace gives; they do not purchase that life (Ephesians 2:8–10).
9. Looking to Christ continues in ordinary obedience and mutual care. Faith follows Him where present duties call (Colossians 2:6–7; Hebrews 10:24–25).
10. The believer's hope reaches bodily resurrection. Christ's final victory gives weight and purpose to today's faithfulness (John 6:40; 1 Corinthians 15:58).

COME TO HIM NOW

Dear reader, I cannot know every refuge these pages have uncovered. You know where the truth has reached you. Please do not close the book and quietly rebuild what Scripture has exposed. False peace asks you to

leave the truth alone. The peace Christ gives allows you to come into the light because He has answered the guilt the light reveals.

If you have been hiding behind your place in the church, come as the sinner you are. If you have defended a cherished sin, stop defending it. Turn to God, confess it, and seek His mercy in Jesus Christ. Do not wait for a more convenient season to obey the gospel. You have no promise of another opportunity, and you have no need of another Savior (2 Corinthians 6:2; Acts 4:12).

Dear Christian, continue bringing your whole life before Him. Let His Word search you often and thoroughly. Follow its rebuke into repentance and its promises into renewed trust. You will never discover a sin that makes Christ's sacrifice insufficient or a duty for which you no longer need His grace.

Come to Jesus Christ, and keep looking to Him. He died for sinners, rose from the grave, and lives to intercede for those who draw near to God through Him (Hebrews 7:25). The Savior to whom I commend you is alive. Trust Him with your guilt, submit to His Word, and follow Him with the life He gives.

FOR PASTORS

REPENT.

Confess where you have offered reassurance without examining its grounds, or made people dependent upon your verdict rather than Christ. Examine your own life as honestly as you examine theirs. The pulpit cannot shelter its occupant from the Word he preaches (1 Timothy 4:16).

RE-TEACH.

Make Christ's accomplished redemption unmistakable. Show why justification brings peace with God, why repentance and faith belong together, and why obedience follows grace. Teach regular self-examination that exposes false confidence and directs sinners to the sufficient Savior (Romans 5:1; Acts 20:21; Titus 2:11–14).

REFORM.

Join searching preaching to patient pastoral care. Seek out those whose convictions have not become obedience; instruct those who cannot distinguish faith from feeling. Provide practical help for confession, restitution, and renewed faithfulness. Refuse to pronounce people safe while they defend known rebellion (1 Thessalonians 5:14; James 5:19–20).

REMAIN.

Continue this work when gratitude is scarce and resistance is costly. Neither alarm nor reassurance measures success by itself. Feed Christ's sheep with His truth, pray for His Spirit's work, and keep your counsel directed toward the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2–4).

TEN PRINCIPLES OF LIFE IN CHRIST

1. Salvation joins believers to the living Christ. Its blessings are received in Him, not obtained independently from Him (Ephesians 1:3; 1 Corinthians 1:30).
2. Those in Christ are accepted through His righteousness. Their standing rests upon the obedient Savior, not their own religious record (Romans 5:18–19; Philippians 3:9).
3. Union with Christ brings a decisive break with sin's dominion. Those united to His death and resurrection are called to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1–14).
4. The Holy Spirit dwells in Christ's people. He enables them to put sinful deeds to death and live as God's children (Romans 8:9–16).
5. Christ brings believers into the Father's household. Adoption gives them access to God and a child's obligation to honor Him (Galatians 4:4–7; 1 Peter 1:14–17).
6. Fruitfulness depends upon abiding in Christ. His disciples bear fruit through continuing dependence upon Him and submission to His words (John 15:4–10).
7. Believers belong to one body in Christ. Their gifts and responsibilities serve the good of others rather than private spiritual advancement (Romans 12:4–8).
8. Fellowship with Christ transforms the meaning of suffering. His people may suffer for His sake while looking toward the glory they will share with Him (Romans 8:17–18; Philippians 3:10).
9. Life in Christ makes holiness a present calling. Because believers have been raised with Him, they must put sinful practices to death and put on love (Colossians 3:1–14).
10. Christ Himself is the believer's final hope. When He appears, His people will be like Him and will see Him as He is; the peace He secured will be enjoyed in unbroken fellowship with Him (Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2–3; Revelation 21:3–4).

CONCLUSION

Do Not Leave the Truth Here

Soon you will put this book down and return to familiar people, duties, and temptations. What will you carry into that life? A clearer vocabulary for discussing peace can leave the heart unchanged. The truth you have recognized now calls for a response before God.

If you have rested in religious respectability, I plead with you to abandon that refuge. Neither years of service nor a remembered profession can answer for your sins. Comparing yourself with someone worse cannot make you righteous; moral improvement and religious enthusiasm cannot replace the true Son of God. Our peace rests upon Christ's obedience and sacrifice, received through faith. He bore the law's curse for His people. Come to Him without offering your history as payment (Romans 5:1; Galatians 3:13).

If you have been concealing sin, what are you still trying to preserve? God already sees what you have hidden. Name the offense, abandon the excuse, and forsake it. The respectable parts of your life cannot cancel that duty. Nor can prolonged remorse perform it. Do not wait for sufficient misery before seeking mercy, and do not mistake another sorrowful confession for repentance while the disobedience continues. Repeated refusal makes tomorrow's obedience harder, not easier (Proverbs 28:13; Hebrews 3:12–15).

Who has been hurt? Go humbly, correct the lie, return what you owe, and seek to repair the damage. Let forgiveness free you from defending yourself. Accept necessary consequences and remember that restoration to fellowship does not automatically restore qualifications for an office. Repentance cares about the people harmed, not merely the offender's relief (Ephesians 4:28–32; 1 Timothy 3:1–7).

Dear troubled believer, bring your fear under the same Word. Darkness does not prove that faith is absent; distress does not prove that faith is present. Neither the force of an accusation nor the vividness of a conversion story settles the matter. Examine what you believe and how you respond to Christ. Confess unbelief, ask for stronger faith, and take the next obedient step. His gentleness welcomes the weak without granting permission to cherish sin (Isaiah 50:10; Mark 9:24).

When the Father corrects you, will you receive His care? Do not despise His discipline or collapse as though correction must mean rejection. A believer's failure calls for repentance and restoration; it does not justify either defending rebellion or declaring every struggle proof of spiritual death. Hear the command you have long known, and obey it now (Hebrews 12:5–11; Galatians 6:1).

Keep examining yourself frequently and honestly. Let Scripture search you before you apply it to someone else. Ask what your sorrow produces, what your profession rests upon, and whether your love reaches a person in need. Thank God for genuine grace and pursue greater faithfulness. Christ supplies the ground of acceptance; changed conduct supplies evidence of His work. Neither truth gives us permission to neglect the other (2 Corinthians 13:5; 1 John 3:16–18).

Carry that readiness into church. Test the sermon and your reaction by Scripture. Receive a true rebuke even when the preacher is imperfect; address his error without using it to protect your own. Let warning reach you with the seriousness Josiah showed when he heard God's law. Seek a ministry governed by the whole counsel of God, where human preference cannot masquerade as divine command. What good is discerning preaching if you will not obey the truth you discern (Acts 17:11; 2 Kings 22:11–20; James 1:22)?

Pastor, these souls need more than your approval. Listen carefully enough to distinguish defended sin from weakness, exhaustion, grief, and trembling faith. Warn the resistant, encourage the fainthearted, and patiently help the weak. Never soothe away a biblical warning or expose guilt without showing the High Priest to whom sinners may come. Submit your own judgments to Scripture. Where you have misled or injured people, repent and correct it. Leave the flock resting upon Christ rather than dependent upon praise, loyalty, or your displeasure (1 Thessalonians 5:14; Hebrews 4:12–16).

And let us live together as people purchased by His blood. Draw near to God, receive His Word, remain in fellowship, and help one another persevere. Grateful service belongs wherever Christ has placed us: at the bedside, across the kitchen table, in the difficult conversation, beside the

brother who needs someone to stay. The peace He gives equips us to love (Hebrews 10:19–25).

I cannot give you tomorrow, and I will not offer you comfort at the price of truth. But I can direct you to the Savior who refuses no sinner who truly comes to Him. Trust Him now. Forsake what His Word condemns, receive what He promises, and follow Him through the days He gives. His finished work needs no supplement, and His people need never seek another refuge. The Lord who receives them will raise them at the last day. Our final hope is to be with Him, free from sin, and to see His face (John 6:37–40; Revelation 22:3–4).

