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West Suffolk Epistle

West Suffolk Baptist Church

“Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant”



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Recovering Lost Disciplines

As I write, I am looking out over the vast and cold Atlantic Ocean as I come to the end of a short family get-away at the beach. I have shut off my mobile phone. I have closed all unnecessary programs on my computer. I have turned off the music I had been listening to while I read a few articles online, and, as is my habit before sitting down to write, I prayed and asked the Lord to grant me discernment as I strive to write for his glory and for the edification of his people.

The missionary and martyr Jim Elliott (1927–1956) wrote, *“The devil has made it his business to monopolize on three elements: noise, hurry, crowds. . .Satan is quite aware of the power of silence.”* It is difficult to escape the busyness, noise, and crowds of life. We are bombarded by a host of amusements and contraptions, most of which we have enthusiastically welcomed into our lives, homes, communities, and churches. We have conditioned ourselves to distraction, and we are leading the next generation down the same path in a hurry. C.S. Lewis wrote, *“We live, in fact, in a world starved for solitude, silence, and private.”* We stand at a crossroads, and we will either rediscover the lost virtues of listening, meditating, and thinking, or we will amuse ourselves to death.

However, our problem lies not in our twenty-first-century tools and toys, but in our inability to use them without them using us. Every gadget we own was invented to make life easier and simpler, and, in God’s providence, every device, network, and program is given to us by God to use for His kingdom, His gospel, and His glory. God has called us to subdue the earth, and we do this by listening intently to His Word, meditating on it, carefully thinking through how to apply it, and being doers of it as we commune with God and live in community with one another in the family, the church, and the world. We are made for family, we are made for worship, we are made for community, and we are made to engage the world as we follow Jesus Christ, bringing the light of His gospel to a dark world. But in order to do this well, with biblical discernment, ancient wisdom, and enduring passion, we must recover the disciplines of listening, meditating, and thinking as we live *coram Deo*, before the face of God. ~ **Dr. Burk Parsons**

The Lord Is My Shepherd; I Shall Not Want

It was many years before I could say, *“I love Psalm 23.”* I can still see the cover of my child’s storybook version. There stands David, ruby cheeks and curly hair, shepherd’s crook beside him, spotless sheep nearby. He was the model child—everything I was not. This perfect boy condemned me.

It took more than twenty years and some major sorrows before the key turned in the lock. That boy did not write this psalm. The David of Psalm 23 needed soul restoration (v. 3): he had visited *“the valley of the shadow of death”*; he faced *“evil”* (v. 4); he had enemies (v. 5). This was a well-tested believer speaking from long experience with God. His confidence about the future was based on experiences in the past.



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The Lord Is My Shepherd; I Shall Not Want - Cont'd

But David was not staking everything simply on his own experience. He is not the first person in the Bible to say, “*The Lord is my shepherd.*” He was simply applying to himself something he had learned from Jacob.

Genesis 48:15–16 records the moving scene at the end of Jacob’s life when he blesses Joseph and his two sons:

The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys.

Jacob had not been the easiest of sheep. Even after his encounter with the angel at Jabbok, he needed more untwisting. His sad repetition of his parents’ folly of having favorite children led to family dysfunction, jealousy, sin, and sorrow. But now he looked back with clear vision and marveled at the way the Shepherd had pursued and preserved him, hurt him only to protect him, and brought about so much good. His son Joseph had already seen that (45:5–8), and he would later confirm it: what others meant for evil, God meant for good (50:20)—the Old Testament version of Romans 8:28.

David had learned that what was true for Jacob was also true for him. And without mentioning any specific situations in his own life, he describes the Lord’s shepherding in a way that shows how applicable it is to every situation in our lives as well.

When you know that the Lord is your Shepherd, you can be confident you will lack nothing. Elsewhere, David records that even in old age he had never “*seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread*” (Psalm 37:25).

The verb David uses (“not want”/“lack nothing”) occurs elsewhere. During the wilderness wanderings, the people “*had no lack*” (Exodus 16:18). Moses could say: “*These forty years the Lord your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing*” (Deuteronomy 2:7). God promised the same would be true in the land He was giving to them (8:9). He had made provision for this in the law concerning gleaning (Leviticus 19:9–10).

Thus, David was probably also thinking of how Yahweh had led the multitude through the wilderness (Psalm 77:20; 78:32) and had proved Himself to be the “*Shepherd of Israel*” (80:1). If Yahweh could sustain that enormous flock, David concluded, then surely He could provide for one sheep. And now the Lord had vindicated his faith by meeting all his needs.

What looks at first like a shepherd’s lessons from shepherding turns out to be the confidence of a believer based on the truth of the Word of God and the revelation of His character. Perhaps this is less David the pastor thinking of caring for sheep and more David the expositor applying God’s Word to himself. He thus came to share the faith of Jacob and to experience the sovereign provision of the God of the exodus.

Jesus saw depths of meaning in these words; He must have sung them with joy. He looked back to His fathers Jacob and David and like them trusted His Father to provide all His needs. Indeed, as He explained to His puzzled disciples, His Father provided His nourishment: “I have food to eat that you do not know about. . . . My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (John 4:32, 34).



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The Lord Is My Shepherd; I Shall Not Want - Cont'd

But Jesus must also have read Psalm 23 with a deep sense of burden. For He knew that, ultimately, He Himself was “*the good shepherd*” who “*lays down his life for the sheep*” (10:11, 14). What Jacob and David saw only dimly, Jesus saw clearly. The Shepherd must suffer for His sheep.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus would take the place of His sheep and be led to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). For them He would be smitten (Zechariah 13:7; see Matthew 26:31). He would give everything of Himself to provide everything for us. The implication? Since He was not spared but delivered up for us all, we can be sure He will give us everything we need (Romans 8:32).

This is what a Christian means by saying, “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*” ~ **Dr. Sinclair Ferguson - Ligonier Ministries teaching fellow and Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary**

Living under Authority

As I read the scriptures, particularly the New Testament, there is a theme that recurs again and again regarding the Christian's willingness to be in submission to various types of authority. Given the rebellious spirit of our age, that frightens me. It's all too easy for us to get caught up in an attitude that will bring us into open defiance of the authority of God.

Let's turn our attention to 1 Peter 2:11–16:

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

Peter is speaking to people who were subjected to brutal, fierce, and violent persecution—the kind of activity that can incite within us the worst possible responses, including anger, resentment, and hatred. But Peter pleads with those people who were the victims of the hatred of their culture to behave in an honorable manner before the watching world. Paul gives a similar plea time and time again that we're to try to live at peace with all men as much as possible.

The “therefore” of verse 13 introduces a key manifestation of living honorably before the watching world. We're to submit ourselves to the ordinances of man. Why? I find the answer startling and fascinating. The Apostle's admonition is that we're to submit for the Lord's sake. But how is obedience to human ordinances done for the Lord's sake? How does my obedience to my professors, my boss, or the government in any way benefit Christ?



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Living under Authority - Cont'd

To understand this, we have to understand the deeper problem that all of Scripture is dealing with—the problem of sin. At the most fundamental level, sin is an act of rebellion and disobedience to a higher law and Law-giver. The biggest problem with the world is lawlessness. The reason people are violated, killed, and maimed in battle, the reason there are murders, robberies, and so forth is that we're lawless. We disobey, first of all, the law of God. The root problem in all of creation is disobedience to law, defiance of authority. And the ultimate authority of the universe is God Himself.

But God delegates authority as He reigns and rules over His creation. God raises up human governments. It is God who instituted government in the first place (Romans 13). That's why Christians are called to honor and pray for the king, pay their taxes, and submit as much as possible to the authorities in all things—because the authorities are instituted by God. Moreover, He shares supreme authority with Christ, who said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given [by the Father] to me” (Matthew 28:18). So, no ruler in this world has any authority except that which has been delegated to him by God and by His Christ, who is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Thus, disobedience to the lawful commands of earthly authorities is ultimately disobedience to God and to Christ because they ordained the governing authorities.

The world has gone crazy in lawlessness, but we're to be different. Wherever we find ourselves under authority—and we all find ourselves submitting to various authorities—we're to submit to that authority. Nobody in this world is autonomous. Every one of us has not just one boss, but several bosses. Everyone I know, including me, is accountable not to just one person but to all kinds of authority structures. Throw a brick through a store window, and you'll find out quickly that you're accountable, that you're under authority, that there are laws to be obeyed and law enforcement officers to make sure the laws are obeyed.

Christians are free in Christ, but we aren't to use our liberty as a license for sin, because even though on the one hand we're free, on the other hand we remain indentured servants.

We're bondservants to God. We're slaves of Jesus Christ. So, even if the rest of the world is running on the track of anti-authority and anti-submissiveness, we aren't allowed to join in. We're called to be scrupulous to maintain order. There is such a thing as law and order that God Himself has ordained in the universe. And we're called to bear witness to that, even by suffering through uncomfortable, inconvenient, and sometimes painful submission to the lawful rules of even those authorities who do not recognize God, for even the godless authorities have been established by God.

I think we all have experiences where we bristle and chafe under authority and under mandates with which we vehemently disagree. Let me just suggest as a matter of practical consideration that if we look to these human institutions or these human persons who are tyrannical, unfair, unjust, and all that, and we seek to submit to them individually or even institutionally, considered in and of themselves, we will find it extremely difficult to submit with any kind of good attitude. But if somehow we can look through them, look past them, look over them, and see the One whom the Father has invested with ultimate cosmic authority, namely, Christ Himself, we'll have an easier time submitting. We'll find help with our struggle to submit when we recognize we're submitting ultimately to Christ, because we know He'll never tyrannize or abuse us. ~ **Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.**



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The Danger of “I” in Christian Prayer

There is No “I” in Prayer: Combating Individualism in Our Prayers

Over the past several decades I have noticed that many Christians tend to begin their prayers by presenting their needs. Of course, in some sense, I understand why we naturally turn to petition almost immediately upon entering into prayer. We tend to begin with petitions because prayer reminds us of our deep need for God to sanctify us in our circumstances and save us from our trials. Additionally, our circumstances and trials are often the very thing that drives us to pray in the first place. Thus the tyranny of the urgent has a remarkable way of consuming our intellectual life and our thought patterns. As a result, our prayers, from beginning to end, are often marked by petition.

But the Lord’s Prayer begins in a very different place. Petitions certainly are a part (a major part, in fact) of the Lord’s Prayer, but Jesus does not begin with requests. He begins, instead, by identifying the character of the God to whom he prays while at the same time challenging our individualism in prayer. Jesus does all of this in the first two words, *“Our Father.”*

The word *“our,”* at first glance, seems like an insignificant little pronoun. But Jesus is making a tremendously powerful theological point by beginning his prayer with the word *“our.”* Jesus is reminding us that when we enter into a relationship with God we enter into a relationship with his people. When we are saved by Christ, we are saved into his body, the church. In fact, this emphasis on our place in the corporate identity of the church is reiterated throughout the prayer. One way to notice this emphasis is simply to read through the prayer and stress each personal pronoun:

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

Do you notice what is stunningly absent? There is no first-person singular pronoun in the entire prayer! Jesus did not teach us to pray, *“My father who is heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give me this day my daily bread and forgive me my debts as I also have forgiven my debtors. And lead me not into temptation but deliver me from evil.”* The point is not to deny our own sins or our own needs, but never to leave ourselves there.

One of the besetting sins of evangelicalism is our obsession with individualism. This obsession with individualism chronically besets us as evangelicals. The first-person singular pronoun reigns in our thinking. We tend to think about nearly everything (including the truths of God’s Word) only as they relate to me. This is why when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he emphasizes from the very outset that we are part of a corporate people called the church. God is not merely *“my Father.”* He is *“our Father”*—the Father of my brothers and sisters in the faith with whom I identify and with whom I pray.

If we are honest, even many of our prayer meetings fail to take into account Jesus’ emphasis on the corporate character of prayer. Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that even when we pray by ourselves, we must pray with an eye toward and with love for Christ’s church.



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The Danger of “I” in Christian Prayer - Cont’d

We must remember the pattern of our Lord’s speech in the model prayer and recall not only the words he used, but the words he didn’t use. The first-person singular (I, me, my, mine) is completely absent from the Lord’s Prayer. Evidently, prayer should not center on you or me.

The problem of overemphasizing ourselves in our prayers reminds me of G. K. Chesterton’s famous answer to a question put forth by a major London newspaper, “*What is the problem with the world?*” This question was sent to many public intellectuals in Victorian England, many of whom sent back long essays delineating the complexities of everything wrong with the world. Chesterton, however, responded with a simple handwritten note that read, “*I am. Sincerely yours, Chesterton.*”

What is the biggest problem with our prayers? Perhaps the most fundamental answer mirrors Chesterton’s: “*I am.*” One of our greatest problems and deficiencies in prayer is that we begin with our own concerns and our own petitions without regard for our brothers and sisters. Many of us falter in prayer because we begin with the wrong word: “*I*” instead of “*our.*” Jesus reminds us that we are part of a family, even when we pray. Thus the first word of Jesus model prayer is the word “*our.*” We are in this together.

To be a Christian is to be a part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. By God’s grace we are incorporated into the body of Christ so that our most fundamental spiritual identity is not an “*I*” but a “*we.*” This runs against the grain of our fallen state. This also runs against the grain of American individualism—an individualism that has seeped into many sections of evangelicalism. But we must be normed by Scripture. Jesus teaches us to drop the “*I*” and start with “*our.*” ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

What God Hasn’t Said - Isaiah 45:19

We can gain a great deal of comfort by considering what God has not said. What He has said is full of comfort and delight; but what He has not said is scarcely less rich in consolation. It was what God had not said that preserved the kingdom of Israel in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash, for “*the LORD had not said that he would blot out the name of Israel from under heaven*” (2 Kings 14:27). In our text we have an assurance that God will answer prayer because He “*did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in vain.’*”

Those of you who are prone to self-condemnation should remember that, lest your doubts and fears say what they will, if God has not cut you off from mercy, there is no need for despair: Even the voice of conscience carries little weight if it is not seconded by the voice of God. We should tremble at what God has said! But do not allow your rambling thoughts to overwhelm you with despondency and sinful despair. Many timid persons have been vexed by the suspicion that there may be something in God’s decree that shuts them out from hope, but we have here a complete rebuttal of that troublesome fear, for no true seeker can be decreed to wrath. “*I did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say [even in the secret of my unsearchable decree] . . . , ‘Seek me in vain.’*”

God has clearly revealed that He will hear the prayer of those who call upon Him, and that declaration cannot be contradicted. He has spoken so firmly, so truthfully, so righteously that there can be no room for doubt. He does not reveal His mind in unintelligible words, but He speaks plainly and positively. “*Everyone who asks receives.*” Doubter, believe this sure truth—that prayer must and will be heard, and that never, even in the secrets of eternity, has the Lord said to any living soul, “*Seek me in vain.*” ~ *Dr. Alistair Begg*



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Birthdays and Anniversary Corner - September 2018

Birthdays

*Ben P. (3)
Zachary A. (9)
Ruth T. (23)*

Anniversaries

None to Report

“When we understand the character of God, when we grasp something of His holiness, then we begin to understand the radical character of our sin and hopelessness. Helpless sinners can survive only by grace. Our strength is futile in itself; we are spiritually impotent without the assistance of a merciful God. We may dislike giving our attention to God's wrath and justice, but until we incline ourselves to these aspects of God's nature, we will never appreciate what has been wrought for us by grace. Even Edwards's sermon on sinners in God's hands was not designed to stress the flames of hell. The resounding accent falls not on the fiery pit but on the hands of the God who holds us and rescues us from it. The hands of God are gracious hands. They alone have the power to rescue us from certain destruction.”
~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr. - The Holiness of God*



West Suffolk Leadership

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Please submit information to Walt Lawrence by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

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