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Doing Good Things Better

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"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 3:12-14, ESV)

This article is not about exposing sin, demanding you renounce some wickedness, quit lying or stealing. While those guilty of these misbehaviors need to repent and be forgiven, this kind of thing is not the subject of this article. This article is about pressing on and straining forward to start doing good things better.

Can you pray better? Not just longer prayers, though that might be part of the progress you need to make. Consider giving more thought in framing your prayers, or expanding who and what you pray for. Initiate petitions that honor Christ, praise God, and advance the proclamation of the gospel. But also, pray for people you don't agree with and don't like. You've been engaged in prayer for many years. Now find ways to do that better. "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much." Can your prayers become more effective and fervent?

Can your attendance be improved? Can you give up some of the weak excuses, gain better control of your schedule, re-think your priorities and improve your attendance? By attending every service you enjoy the advantages of edification and the encouragement you lend to others and receive from them. Christians in the early church were together and that unity was critical to their survival and their capacity to share the gospel with others. "All who believed were together," (Acts 2:44).

Can you reach out to people in a better way? Are there people you know who need you to move closer to them, get to know them and help them? For most of us, I believe, there are people we are acquainted with who need something we can give. But we have not taken the time. We have been too busy with so many of "our things." I speak not of money primarily, but of encouragement, listening, praying with, studying with and befriending.

Can you help someone begin reading the Bible? Make a list of 5 people you know. Are all five of those people reading the Bible? Pick out one and ask if they read the Bible daily? If not, offer to show them and help them get started. Periodically review or re-make your list. There is no better endeavor you can invite someone to begin. All many people need is a little encouragement.

Again, this article was not written to the idolater, the liars or false teachers. Rather, to Christians who are doing good things already. I believe we can do these things better. Let's press on toward the goal.

Gray Areas

Sewell Hall

For much of my life I have been hearing about those "gray areas" in Bible teaching involving doctrine and morals. But in various essays on the subject I do not find scripture references either to identify or to prove the existence of such gray areas.

Instead, the Bible seems to draw a distinct line between right and wrong, truth and error, good and evil. In a series of rhetorical questions Paul asks, "What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with

darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols” (2 Cor. 6:14-16)?

John, who is often called the apostle of love, is especially given to speaking in “black and white” language. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:6-9). According to John we either walk in light or we walk in darkness; there is no gray path. If there were a gray path we should still choose to “walk in the light.”

Granted, there are passages in the Bible that are hard to understand. But if the Bible reveals the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:6-14), there is nothing in it that is gray. Remember, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” Conflicting views regarding God’s will cannot both be true. We must “go back to the drawing board” and study carefully to learn the mind of God. “Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord *is*” (Eph. 5:17).

A doctrine is not gray simply because it has produced controversy. In Jesus’ day the Pharisees and Sadducees debated whether there was a resurrection; and it might have appeared to be a gray area since such knowledgeable people disagreed. But Jesus said to the Sadducees, “You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God” (Matthew 22:29). In the latter years of John’s life there was controversy about whether Jesus was the Christ and had come in the flesh. John did not say this was a gray area. Rather, he said, “Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son” (1 John 2:22); and “Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world” (1 John 4:3).

If the fact that views differ about an issue makes it gray, with the possibility of opposing views being right, then the creation story, the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus, the inspiration of the scriptures and numerous other facts of our faith are in gray areas about which we cannot be sure.

To say that a thing is a matter of conscience is not to say that there are gray areas. Conscience cannot make a wrong thing right (Compare Acts 23:1 and 1 Tim. 1:15). Neither can it make a commandment of God wrong. It can only make an innocent thing (like eating meat) wrong for the person whose conscience is offended by eating it (Romans 14:17, 23). It is not that the thing itself becomes wrong.

It is a fact that Christians attain to different levels of understanding as they mature in Christ. Even Paul said, “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing *I do*,...I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13-14). We must be patient with one another as we reach different stages in our press toward the goal. It is not ours to say that brothers and sisters are “going to hell” because they differ with us on a matter of right and wrong. It has been a long time since I have heard a Christian tell anyone he/she was going to hell for such reasons; in fact, I am not sure I have ever heard it. The grace of God is the only hope that any of us have, but grace is His to extend and not ours. And saying that one can be saved in violation of God’s revealed will is judging just as surely as saying that such a one will be lost.

However, while avoiding any temptation to condemn others to hell, we must not allow either our humility or the hope of grace to prevent our speaking out against the sins and errors that we see. “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*” (Eph. 5:11).

Scriptures clearly predict the fate of those who walk in darkness, whether in morals or in doctrine. For example, “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Rev. 21:8) And “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God” (2 John 9). Scripture also requires us to “withdraw from every brother that walks disorderly and not according to the tradition delivered” by the apostles (2 Thess. 3:6).

All too often the “gray areas” are proposed in an effort to blend the truth of God with the errors of human doctrines, and to harmonize the morals of the kingdom of God with those of the world. This effort fits our post-modern culture, but not the unchanging word of God.