

How to Live a Life of Thanks

"Thanksgiving" weekend is an appropriate time to bring you thanks from numerous groups of people around the world. This year (2005) I was able to keep the Day of Atonement with the brethren in Belfast. They are an irrepressible group - even on the Day of Atonement - a delightful group of people, very expressive and very appreciative of being part of God's Church!

My wife and I were able to keep the Feast in Ghana and Nigeria, in West Africa. Both of the groups were very desirous that their greetings be passed on to you - and their thanks for everything that is done for them. Many of these people are unable to make more than a small contribution to the Church. They just wanted to express their gratitude that they do have what they have, that they are able to receive that and to benefit from that.

After the Feast I had the opportunity of joining Mr Bartholomew in Kenya, to spend a few days with a group of people who were originally part of the "Church of God Seventh Day, Jerusalem" which, for a point of reference, you might better describe as being "Dugger's people."

Those of you who have read Mr Armstrong's Autobiography will be aware of Mr Dugger. He was a leader in the "Church of God Seventh Day" when Mr Armstrong associated with them in the 1920s and 1930s. Mr Dugger eventually went to Jerusalem and set up a headquarters there. I believe that was in the 1950s. He continued to operate from there. He has since deceased.

In the 1970s, a group of people in Kenya invited someone from Jerusalem to come and address them - and the "Church of God Seventh Day, Jerusalem" was established in Kenya. Surprise, surprise that over the last 15 years it has splintered, fragmented and literally come to almost nothing now.

From that particular group of people, an individual had been in contact with Mr Bartholomew since about 1996. He is constantly asking to talk with us, so Mr Bartholomew and I went and spent a number of days with them answering their questions which had all been neatly typed out - not on a typewriter, but on a word processor! The questions started with: "What are your statements of beliefs?" and ended, 25 questions later, with "How do you teach young people about marriage?" They covered everything in between.

So each and every one of these people have been expressing their thanks to you as individuals and as a group for what you do for them. Seeing it is the time of "Thanksgiving," I thought I would entitle this sermon, "How to Live a Life of Thanks."

Matthew 24 is central to prophecy in the New Testament, especially the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. In that particular chapter it makes reference to "the elect," a group of people that we hope applies to us individually, a group of people for whom "the days will be shortened." We hope that the shortening of time takes place quickly.

What can be easily overlooked in this chapter is that the chapter provides an insight into what is NEEDED to be part of the elect. Christ told the disciples that no one knows the day or the hour of His coming:

Matthew 24:36 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only."

Yet, in some ways, that becomes the focus of many people's attention in this chapter as they try to "better" Jesus Christ in working out WHEN He is going to return!

Jesus Christ made the comment that while no man knows the time, the time will be manifest because it will be like the days of Noah. Then He starts to instruct the disciples:

42 "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming.

43 "But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into.

44 "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

Jesus Christ said there is a responsibility to be ready. The elect are those who, for a start, are SEEKING to be ready for the return of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ then carries on:

45 "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?"

It talks about being a faithful and wise servant. The extension is made that an "elect" person is considered by Jesus Christ to be a faithful and wise servant, whom his Master is able to make ruler over His household, to give them food in due season.

How can we be these faithful and wise servants at the start of this 21st century? This chapter actually provides some very fundamental requirements and instructions for each and every one of us who wish to follow Jesus Christ, who look forward to His return and who desire to be part of the elect!

Jesus Christ continues:

46 "Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing.

The question is, "Doing what?" As verse 45 shows, the servant was able to provide food for his household in due season. Here was a person who was able to provide for and take care of those that had been given to him. Jesus Christ said:

47 "Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods.

In reality, I would like to posit to you that what Jesus Christ wants to find us "doing" is living a life of thanks; that thanks is not just something that we do in a casual way: "Ah yes, we'll give thanks," but that it is an integral, fundamental part of our lives.

Looking at verses 45 - 47, the responsibility is given to take care of others. That is immediately offset in the following few verses by a negative example, where Jesus Christ said:

48 "But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,'

49 "and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards,

50 "the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of,

51 "and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus Christ, in making these comments, was teaching the disciples, and by extension you and me. This is not instruction on the part of Jesus Christ for the world. This is instruction to the Church, to each and every one of us. He was teaching the Church, and in providing these lessons, used both a positive and a negative example to teach us what we should be LOOKING for as we await the return of Jesus Christ.

It brings us to the end of the chapter and because it's the end of the chapter we automatically stop there because in the 12th or the 15th century somebody decided that this was a good place to end the chapter. In reality, what Jesus Christ was talking about did not end there. That is not the end of the matter because it carries on into the next chapter.

Matthew 25 is not just a chapter of parables set in a book by itself. Christ gives three parables to explain what He has been talking about in Matthew 24.

So we have a division created in the Bible by people who have no real appreciation of what Jesus Christ was instructing. Oftentimes, because there are numbers and divisions there, we can think it is a convenient place to stop. In reality, it is not. We need to read on.

We can appreciate what it means to be a faithful and wise servant by understanding and appreciating Matthew 25. We can also appreciate, if we have the ears to hear, what it means to be an "evil" servant by these parables. Because these parables are given, not to the world. We are not talking about some individual who is on death row for some heinous crime, or someone who is serving time because of the conduct of their lives. Christ is talking to people who consider themselves to be His followers.

So we start with the ten virgins, five of whom are wise. This is the very first connection with the faithful and wise servant in Matthew 24.

Matthew 25:1 "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

2 "Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish.

What differentiated between them? They are all looking for the Bridegroom. They all anticipated the return of the Bridegroom but some were wise and some were foolish.

3 "Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them,

4 "but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

5 "But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept.

6 "And at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'

7 "Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps.

8 "And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.'

In other words, they had some oil in their lamps. They had the necessary ingredient in the lamp to begin with, but they did not make suitable provision for themselves.

9 "But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.'

10 "And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

11 "Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!'

12 "But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.'

"I have no relationship with you!"

13 "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

So we have the second connection back to Matthew 24 because we have the return of Jesus Christ and an instruction that we are to watch. We are to be aware - but we are to be aware in a PARTICULAR WAY.

The first lesson to be learned is that the wise servants have oil: the oil being symbolic of God's Holy Spirit. And they have a RESERVE of it. They don't live their lives on the "reserve light." I guess that's a "man-thing!" When the reserve light comes on in the car my wife wonders whether we are going to get home. She does not like to live her life with the car being on "reserve."

But how many of us live our lives with our spiritual supply of God's Holy Spirit on reserve? Is that a criteria, a situation within our own lives? It is a personal responsibility to ensure that we have oil.

We have a calling, an opportunity of repentance and baptism as a result, and of entering into a relationship with God. God offers us His Holy Spirit as a result of that relationship. Now the responsibility is on us to ensure that we have what is needed, that we have a supply of God's Holy Spirit!

For what purpose do we have God's Holy Spirit? The parable is rather an interesting parable because it really gets to the heart of what God's Holy Spirit is about. Where was the oil used? It was used in a lamp. God uses the example in the Psalms. The Psalmist said:

***Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet
And a light to my path.***

The things of God are a lamp - to illuminate the way of life that we are to live, to help us understand the way that we should live and conduct our lives.

Solomon reiterated that the things of God are to teach us lessons of life, to keep us from harm.

***Proverbs 6:23 For the commandment is a lamp,
And the law a light;
Reproofs of instruction are the way of life,***

Speaking to His disciples at the last Passover He spent with them, Jesus Christ talked about the Holy Spirit being given to them as a Comforter, and how it was so essential that they had it, to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment.

***John 16:7 "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.
8 "And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:
9 "of sin, because they do not believe in Me;
10 "of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more;
11 "of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.***

It is given so that we can have the correct insight, so that we can see this world as God sees this world, and that we can make decisions and go in a direction that is based upon Godly insights. If we don't have that oil, we are letting down. We won't be able to see where to go!

Interestingly, the parable talks about it being "midnight." It is a time of darkness. This world is a world of great darkness which bears the consequences of it. It is very sad to see the consequences of this world and what is happening.

God gives us the responsibility of having His Spirit and making sure we have a supply of it. Can we know whether we have much or little of that oil in our lives? I believe we can. We can apply some tests to ourselves.

Where do we go for instruction? I am not talking about instruction for building a house or fixing a car. Although where you go for that may be instructive as well. But what about the way in which our lives are to be lived in relationship to one another? To whom do we go?

Do we go to God's Word to find out what God's Word says about the life that we are to live, or do we rather turn to things of this world, the pundits in the opinion columns or the gurus on the talk shows? To whom do we turn?

Do we go to God's ministers for instruction, or do we go to a close friend at work for instruction about spiritual problems? We can apply those questions to ourselves. We can ask ourselves. We can evaluate our own lives and we can start to see what place God's Holy Spirit has in our lives.

Whose decisions do we want to see established in our lives? Do we wish to be "hip" or do we wish to be "Godly"? What is it?

What do we want to spend our time doing? Do we want to meditate on the things of God or do we want to involve ourselves totally in something that is of this world?

I am not saying that people can't spend time on the physical things of this life. We have to do so. We have jobs. We have physical responsibilities we have to take care of. But even with those, who guides and directs those? Is it the Word of God or is it the wisdom of the age? What is it?

The wise and faithful servant is always REPLENISHING the oil to enable him or her to make Godly decisions in their lives. That is why the faithful and wise treat people in the way described. They treat an individual in a Godly manner because they want to see Godly standards applied - not the standards of the world.

In Matthew 24, Jesus Christ contrasts the wise and faithful servant with the evil servant. The wise and faithful takes care of that which he has been entrusted with. The evil servant abuses, takes advantage of others.

The faithful and wise servant is characterised as being an outgoing individual, based upon having God's Spirit in their lives. But even the outgoingness has a limit! Because the wise servants did not take of their oil and say, "Have some of mine!" That is an impossibility because having the oil is a very personal thing.

Yes, they are outgoing, but they taught the others to go to those who bought and sold, and to buy for themselves. They directed them to the appropriate source. Having done that, they had fulfilled their responsibilities to them.

I say that because at times, people think they need to experience life to understand what it is all about. One of the characteristics of the wise virgins, those with God's Holy Spirit, is that they don't compromise their relationship with the Father by lowering themselves to a lesser standard. They maintain the Godly standard. They are concerned about that.

The Holy Spirit is given so that we can serve others - not to give it away! This outgoing concern becomes a feature as we go through the parables. We will come back to it. Yet the outgoing concern is directing people to where they CAN get of the Holy Spirit. In this case it was too late. They missed out on the wedding supper because they had not made adequate preparation for themselves. The Bible describes them as being "foolish" servants. The "foolish" servant could be equated to the "evil" servant. They had not made preparation.

In Matthew 25, Jesus Christ then goes into a second parable which, in fact, builds on the first. Here, the people have what is necessary. They have been given talents. They are told to "occupy" until the Master comes. Jesus Christ says:

14 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.

15 "And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

Then it tells us what these people DID with their talents:

16 "Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents.

17 "And likewise he who had received two gained two more also.

18 "But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money.

So one produced an additional five. He doubled the number of talents he had. So did the person who had two talents. But the one who received the single talent buried it. He did absolutely nothing with it.

19 "After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

20 "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.'

A commendation is given:

21 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant ...

This ties us back to the wise and faithful servant in Matthew 24. If you and I want to be considered a faithful servant, we have got to DO something with what we have been given. We have got to be productive. We need to live our lives in a productive manner.

21 ... 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

The "joy of the Lord" is also talked about in Matthew chapter 24. That's the rulership that the faithful and wise servant is able to receive. What was he promised? "I will make you ruler over all My goods." There's going to be a very great reward given. This parable also ties back into Matthew 24.

22 "He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.'

23 "His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Then, sadly, we find the account of the man with one talent:

24 "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

25 'And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

26 "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.

27 'So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

"You could at least have done that. You could have taken it down the road to the bank and got a fixed deposit rate. A 5% rate of simple interest would double the money in 20 years. No bank pays simple interest. They all pay compound interest. As Rothschild said, "How to have your cake and eat it - lend it out at interest!" - especially if it is compound interest (other than at today's rates, of course).

But Jesus Christ said, "Look, you could have done something with this. You could have done something very simple, risk-free, and have produced something."

The second lesson that Christ is telling us is that if we are going to be faithful and wise servants we must not only HAVE God's Holy Spirit, it must also be USED in a productive manner in our lives. It has got to be producing something. It cannot be a life of stagnation. It has got to be a life that is productive, that is producing fruits.

In John 15 Jesus Christ talks about that productiveness that we are to have as a result of being attached to the vine. He is concerned about that. In fact, He is so concerned about it that He prunes us so that we can produce MORE fruit - because He is LOOKING for that fruit. He is looking for that change in our life, that change whereby we come to see this world from a Godly perspective - and we can start to see ourselves from a Godly perspective. We start to change what we see of ourselves to that that is of a Godly perspective. We start to produce the fruit that Paul talks about in Galatians 5, the fruit which is evidence of God's Spirit being present in our lives.

So the second lesson that Christ is teaching is that we must not only HAVE the Spirit, but it has got to be PRODUCTIVE in our lives. It has got to be DOING something! We have got to be producing fruit!

What happened to the unprofitable servant?

30 'And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

... once again tying us back to the evil servant in chapter 24. The unprofitable servant was cast into outer darkness. So we move from the unprofitable servant to the third parable, the parable of the sheep and the goats.

31 *"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.*

32 *"All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.*

The Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him. Then He will sit on the throne of His glory. We are talking about the second coming of Jesus Christ.

All of the nations of the earth will be gathered before Him and He is going to go through a separation process. Most of us would find it difficult to tell the difference between a sheep and a goat! We aren't very much in contact with the agrarian world, the pastoral world today. In the Middle East, the sheep and the goats run together. They are never separated. They are always in one flock.

It's only after a period of time of observing them that you note that sheep look a particular way and goats look a different way.

One interesting thing is that goats keep their tails in the air! The sheep don't. In the Middle East sheep have tails - unlike the de-tailed sheep of Australia, New Zealand and Africa etc. They don't de-tail their sheep.

But goats have little tails which are always flying: "Here I am! Look at me!!!" To the casual observer, it's not always obvious as to which is which.

But the Son of Man is going to come and make a difference between them. He is able to differentiate between them. I am sure that someone here may have more scientific knowledge than I do, and may "pooh-hooh" my differentiation method altogether. Maybe that's the case. Maybe there are sheep who can put their tails in the air, and goats who hold theirs down. I don't know. But at least the flocks of sheep and goats that I have seen in the Middle East seem to operate according to that demarcation. The problem is, most people see them as being all the same: all there together.

Jesus Christ says:

33 *"And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.*

34 *"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:*

35 *'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in;*

36 *'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'*

37 *"Then the righteous will answer Him (quite understandably), saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?*

38 *'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You?*

39 *'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'*

40 *"And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'*

"You've done it one of My other brethren, and it was as good as doing it to Me!" You don't have to do it to Jesus Christ personally. The fact that we do it to one another is adequate as far as Jesus Christ is concerned.

The others will say, "When did we have the opportunity to do it?"

And Christ will say, "You've had PLENTY of opportunity. You've been part of a congregation of people who were called to My way of life. You had all these people around you and you could have done it for them." But He said to the goats, "You aren't motivated by the care and concern of others. There's no motivation there to be caring and concerned for others."

So we find a sense of progression throughout these parables. First, we must have oil, and we must have a good supply of that "oil" of God's Holy Spirit. It's a starting point in being considered a faithful and wise servant.

Then we have to USE that oil to accomplish something that is of benefit to the Master. We might describe that as building the very character of God, understanding it, internalising it within our lives, changing our lives so that we become like our Master.

The method by which we do, how the oil is used, that is set out for us in the third parable: through the care for others. The care of others is paramount to the mind of God. If God is love, if God is best described as being love, what does that say about His concern? What does it say about outgoing concern for His creation? It says everything about it! If God is love, then we also are to do that. The care of others is of paramount importance in God's mind.

Take a test for yourself. Who do you spend time with outside of your family? Obviously if you have a spouse or children, you have a responsibility there. But with whom do you spend time outside of the family? Are they people you naturally gravitate towards? Are they "your type"? But if you simply gravitate towards people of "your type," even within God's Church, we could find ourselves failing in this area. Because the people Jesus Christ pointed out are the people who are marginalised. They don't have everything. They are NOT the type of people that you normally gravitate towards - unless you are a marginalised person in life. Most of us aren't necessarily that way.

Herein lies one of the greatest problems that people have. They agree that love is important. But how do you learn to love?

Over the years in the Church I have noticed that it's very easy for people to have personalities, and somehow for their personality to get in the way of actually being a Christian. Because they have this great personality and they get on very well with people, etc, etc, they think they are being a Christian!

But they are not really loving their neighbour. They are not really fulfilling this requirement. They are not extending themselves to think and to be concerned about the needs of others, how others have needs and how they can help meet the needs of others.

We can't necessarily meet ALL the needs of other people. We can't change the worlds of other people. Oftentimes people may have needs that are totally beyond our ability, but we can at least go to someone who can help and say, "This person needs your help. What can you do to help them? How can you help this individual?"

It is important that we learn what it means to take care of one another in this regard. It is not just a matter of someone having great personality. Their house is always a house full of people, entertaining, etc, etc. That's right, good and proper but oftentimes that may be just what we are accustomed to. That's the way we grew up.

I remember one lady lamenting to my wife that her husband had grown up in a house full of people, and he was never happy unless the house was full of people. "Take our bedroom over. Come and stay with us." It was part of the pattern in life that this man had learned. It was very easy to look upon the individual as being very hospitable.

But was it really the hospitality and the concern that Jesus Christ was talking about, or was it just a matter of the type of person he was? Did he go out of his way to find those who had needs, to take care of those needs, or to help with those needs in some way? I can't answer that question. That individual will have to answer that himself. I hope that it is the positive approach.

We have to be aware of that. We have to be alert to that.

Where do you learn what love and concern for others arise from?

Paul understood a fundamentally important concept for us in our Christian lives. If we are going to be faithful and wise servants, some of the instruction to Timothy well behoves us to be aware of:

***1 Timothy 1:3 (King James Version) As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine,
4 Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.***

In the next verse he makes a very important statement:

5 Now the end ...

The Greek word *telos* which has been translated "end," means "the goal" that is being worked towards.

***5 Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned:
6 From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling;
7 Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.***

He said that the end, the whole purpose, the goal of the commandment is charity (love) out of a pure heart and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned, from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling.

This charity, this concern out of a pure heart for others is what Jesus Christ is talking about in Matthew 25. That is the difference between the sheep and the goats.

I started by mentioning that Mr Bartholomew and I had been in Kenya with an elder from the Church of God 7th Day, Jerusalem. I think it is instructive the way in which Mr Bartholomew came to meet him. The part of Kenya that this man lives in was first missionised by the Seventh Day Adventists in the early part of the 20th century. In fact, this man's grandfather hosted the first Seventh Day Adventist ministry in that part of Kenya. This man never became an Seventh Day Adventist although other people in his family are very devout and well connected in the Seventh Day Adventist Church at this point.

This particular area, Kendu Bay, the village close to where he lives, is the headquarters of Seventh Day Adventist in the Western part of Kenya. In one of the nearby cities it is estimated that something like 75% of the population are Sabbatharians! That's a mind-boggling thought! They are principally Seventh Day Adventists.

This man was aware of certain widows in the area and he was in town on one occasion. He heard about a white man who was going to visit a widow. He thought, "This is unusual. This is an unusual man." He knew where that particular widow lived, and he knew what this white man had to go through to get to where this widow lived.

So he set off on foot to go to the widow's house to meet this white man. On the way he came upon a white man in the bush changing the tyre of his 4x4. It was simply "Dr Livingstone, I presume." There weren't going to be too many other white men in that part of the world. The man changing the wheel was obviously the white minister on the way to visit this little widow.

You might say, it was respect at first sight! This man met John Bartholomew doing a very mundane thing: changing a tyre. But he was on his way to visit a little widow. He said, "This man has to be different, because he is going THERE - to see this widow."

You could say that Mr Bartholomew was simply doing his job. Yes, but we could do the job in other ways. We could have the widow come to us. That makes it easy. We sit in our hotel, where we can be "more productive."

But this man was STRUCK by the fact that John Bartholomew was going to where he was going. I don't know what the road was like or anything of that nature. I know what the roads in that area are like. Once you get off the dirt track, it is very rough going.

But he saw John Bartholomew going out of his way to do something for this widow. He said, "I want to be part of what THIS man is part of because this IS the type of life that we should be living."

We can't all be like that. We can't all be found in the African bush changing a tyre on our way to visit a widow. Not at all. But we are talking about charity out of a pure heart - this care and concern for each other, irrespective of who the person is, irrespective of their status in life.

Paul clearly understood that the law was not an end in itself. Paul understood in many ways that the whole purpose of God's Law was to teach us how to live in an outgoing concern one towards another.

The book of Ephesians speaks of that to a large extent. Paul talks about how we have to change the type of people that we are.

***Ephesians 4:22 that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts,
23 and be renewed in the spirit of your mind,***

There's only one way in which we can be renewed. That is by having God's Holy Spirit, and by USING God's Holy Spirit to produce a change and evidencing that change in the way of life that we are living.

24 and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

In the next few verses he talks about a number of things that we have to put away.

25 Therefore, putting away lying, "Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.

We don't lie to our neighbour. If we lie to our neighbour, we devalue them and we devalue ourselves. There's no opportunity for trust any more. There's no opportunity for respect.

***26 "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath,
27 nor give place to the devil.
28 Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.***

I have used this example a number of times. Verse 28 is a perfect example of what Paul was trying to convey, of what Jesus Christ is looking for in terms of our lives. Today we incarcerate thieves. We put them in prison to stop them stealing. The end result is that we end up giving them a post-graduate degree in larceny, theft and burglary! They come out better thieves than they entered. We have to ask, "What's wrong? There's something wrong with society!"

A number of years ago I was in Kenya reading the local paper. I read of a Kenyan who had been sent home from Saudi Arabia. Kenya, like many of the countries in Africa is dependent upon migrant workers - sending people to wherever there are jobs to do. Saudi Arabia, at that time in the 1970s, was very much a place for migrant workers from Kenya.

This man had arrived home in Kenya in disgrace. He had stolen some gold. And as a means from

stopping him from stealing, the Saudis had removed the offending hand, so he arrived home without his right hand!

As you may gather, theft was not a major problem in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. According to the article in the newspaper, this man had seen a shipment of gold ingots sitting on the tarmac outside a customs shed at Riyadh Airport. It was not inside Fort Knox! It had been there for several weeks ... somewhat of a different society!

Eventually this man's desire overcame him. He thought he could "knock one off" and make a few shillings for the family back home. If he could, he would be very wealthy. He went home a cripple. He'll probably not steal any more because the hand he used to steal with is no longer attached to his body! It's an interesting story, an interesting contrast to the world in which we live.

But what had really changed? Is this a good form of penal reform? It certainly cut down on the need for jails and cells! Obviously, in Saudi Arabia it produced a great effect. It cut down on the crime rate drastically. It cut down on the security bills, but ultimately speaking, what change had occurred in that person's life? He is now no more than a one-handed thief! He is probably the same man he was when he was in Riyadh. Nothing has changed except that he has lost his right hand. The mindset is still there.

The apostle Paul, in talking to the Ephesians (4:28), is saying that something else has got to happen. It's not a matter of wandering around everywhere with your hands in your pockets so you can't pick up anything. It's a mindset towards things. That's not what is required of a follower of Jesus Christ. Paul says that the thief should learn to WORK with his hands, to be productive. Don't get rid of the hands. Learn to use them productively so that you can learn to give to those who have need!

Paul is talking about a form of penal reform that far surpasses anything that people ever think of in this world. Paul is showing that the command, "Thou shalt not steal," is not an end in itself. It's an instruction of what God requires of us in terms of our relationship with others.

Do we see one another as someone that we may be able to help - even if it is only in terms of encouragement? In other words, we are not to be takers from others. We are to be givers to others.

Our whole motivation in life is to be one of outgoing concern for the well being of other people.

In fact, you could take all of God's Law and extrapolate it in the same way.

When God says, "You shall not commit adultery," is that the only thing that a man is not to do? Can he become abusive to his wife and children and still stay within the law? Can he do all sorts of other things that can be equally as destructive to a marriage as adultery is? Of course not.

In telling a person not to commit adultery, God is saying, "There is something sacred about this relationship into which you have entered. You are to build that relationship, not destroy it." That's the spirit, the purpose, of God's Law. The whole purpose of God's Law is to be builders, to be concerned for the well being of others.

We live in an upside down world, a world in which people talk about "random acts of kindness." Random acts of kindness became the fad a few years ago. People thought they were being GOOD having "random acts of kindness." Maybe you have heard some of those expressions.

Is it just random acts of kindness that God is looking for? In reality, the answer to that, is no! God is looking for a mindset, a way of life, that is changed, that sees other people rather than oneself.

J B Priestley once said:

"The fundamental difficulties faced by human beings cannot be solved by merely tinkering with the superficial surface."

People get so concerned with doing things on the surface without looking at what motivates them as individuals. What motivates me? Is it God's Holy Spirit? Is it the desire to be fruitful, to have the mind of Christ?

If it's NOT that, it is futile! What motivates us as individuals, as a Church, SHOULD be God's Holy Spirit and not the society around us!

J B Priestley continues:

"Basic change is needed at the deepest level of the human heart."

That's what we had when we repented: a change.

As I told Mr Hulme, it was rather fascinating being with these people in Kenya. Since Mr Bartholomew first met this man in 1996, he has made NO requests - other than that Mr Hulme visit Kenya to perform the wedding of his son in 1997. That is the only request he has ever made. Mr Hulme was not able to do that. But he didn't get upset because Mr Hulme didn't come! Mr Hulme enabled somebody else to go in his place and provide for that event.

For ten years or so, this man has never asked for one penny from the Church of God! That is quite remarkable when we look back at some of the other people with whom we have dealt with over the years "who wanted to be with us." We quickly found out that in reality, all they wanted was our money! They didn't want anything else. In this case, there was not even a request for money for the food that they provided us with.

Each day all of the people who were there with us (about 12 -16 of us at any one time) were treated to a meal at mid-day or some time in the afternoon. There were normally three meats: goat, chicken and fish. There was ogali (which is corn that is pounded to a sort of paste), rice and sometimes potatoes, and vegetables and so forth. The table was "groaning" with food. The ladies had prepared it. We ate it. It seemed to get a little less as the days went on, but never once did they say, "We've fed you all these days - can we have some money to cover it?"

Ephraim Abok took an interest in my Bible. He liked the type. I was in the house on the last day and he apparently had been asking Mr Bartholomew how much it would be to BUY a Bible like this. He wanted to buy one himself. He has a little income. He is a retired veterinary officer. The Church tithes in the best way they can. Most of them are subsistence farmers. So he has a certain amount of income.

But rather than turning round and asking for my Bible, he wanted to buy one out of his money. Mr Bartholomew said to me, "You should have seen the look on his face when you walked out of the house, totally unaware of the conversation that we had been having, and gave it to him saying, 'You can have this.'"

It's sometimes easy to see when people are intrigued by what you have. I did not leave my computer behind - for a very simple reason: he doesn't have any electricity!

But they did get to see their first DVD ever - on the Sabbath day. I put my computer up onto the lectern and played the Feast presentation to them.

A few days later, over lunch, we played the "Paul" DVD. We had to have an intermission in the middle of it so that I could recharge the computer battery in the car. Batteries don't last forever, so I did bring my computer home with me. I still have "Beastie." There are some things you just CAN'T give away!

But in reality, what Jesus Christ is teaching us, is how to be thankful people, how to be the type of people who look FOR the return of Jesus Christ.

It's not the person who is constantly, endlessly, using their computer to try to work out the exact time of Christ's return. Mr Hulme and I know an individual who is given to that. From time to time we get Excel spreadsheets from him, "calculating the very time when Jesus Christ is going to return," (according to this man). That's not what it is about.

Being the elect, being a person who lives a life of thanks, is being one who seeks to be a faithful and wise servant, who seeks to have the very mind of God, who is able to "occupy" - occupy doing what? He is able to live a life that represents the life that God would have us live: nothing more, nothing less; a life that is focused, a life that is geared towards the very mind of God.

So we have a challenge. Christ said that a faithful and wise servant is going to be identified by a certain care for others, by seeing the spirit of God's Law and taking care of others.

The person is living the opposite to the way society lives. As Paul said in Ephesians 4, people today are "without feeling." They are past feeling! Followers of Christ are to HAVE feeling. They are to be motivated by feeling towards their neighbour. They are not given, as Paul said the Gentiles were, to "lasciviousness, uncleanness and greediness." It's a very different world.

God has allowed us to have contact with various people. It is really an eye opener to see these people who have so very little, and yet require very little.

This man has been contented to receive *Vision*, the *Church of God News* and sermon transcripts over the past few years. They keep the Feast of Tabernacles, as they have done for the past 20 years, and they have never had a penny from anyone else to keep the Feast. They pay their own way to the Feast site. They bring their own food. They put it in the kitty and they have some people to prepare the food for them. They keep the Feast and rejoice together and have great meals.

It reminds me of a situation in Zimbabwe. Stephen Chimusaru told me that the people in Gokwe had started to raise chickens for the Feast of Tabernacles. Unfortunately, the chickens fell prey to a disease known as "Newcastle Disease," and all died. So they had no meat for the Feast.

Somebody provided a means whereby they could buy a cattle beast, but the problem was, "How do you keep a dead cow for eight days and eat it?" We think of things in terms of the Western world. These people are living in the bush and keeping the Feast outside.

In fact, there had been a drought. What do you do in the middle of the Feast when you are keeping the Feast outside and it's threatening to rain? Rain is one thing you need but you want to keep the Feast! So the people prayed that God would spare them the rain and keep it for a few days until after the Feast. It didn't rain, so they continued to sit outside under the trees keeping the Feast! They were provided for.

But it is rather amazing that these people have not sought anything other than the spiritual well being and leadership that we can provide for them. They desperately need and want that. God has given us the opportunity to provide spiritual leadership for them in various ways.

God has called us to be faithful and wise servants. Being a faithful and wise servant is the ultimate way in which you and I can live a life of thanks! Because we are showing what really MATTERS in our lives: whether it is having the mindset of God, or whether it is just existing and pleasing oneself.

The end result of everything that Jesus Christ taught us in Matthew 24 and Matthew 25 is, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!" It is the opportunity of inheriting all things, of being given rulership over all that He has. Joining Him in rulership is part of the promise that is given! It is given to whom? It is given to those who want to live their lives as thankful servants.

We have celebrated "Thanksgiving" here in the United States. For the majority of people, I would guess that most of the thanks was focused on the physical well-being that this country has been greatly blessed with at an unbelievable level.

I would like to suggest to you that you and I have something even GREATER to be thankful for: the knowledge and the understanding that God has provided, a knowledge and an understanding that will eventually save this world, that will transform this world, that will remove the poverty and the deprivations that people live under in various parts of the world.

Kenya, like many other nations in Africa, is living under a time bomb of HIV. Already, one of the major social problems in Kenya is orphans because both parents have succumbed to HIV and AIDS. It's a major problem. You shake your head at times and wonder, "How are we going to be able to help these people?"

We look at some of the problems that come at the end of the age and the torments that people will go through, but it's not just then, it's even now - because there are, literally, a generation of children growing up without parents! Some of these people face incredible challenges. We are going to be able to have a part in being able to change all that.

The ultimate lesson lies in being a faithful and wise servant, in living a life of thanks for what we have been called to!

... *Peter Nathan*
26 Nov 05