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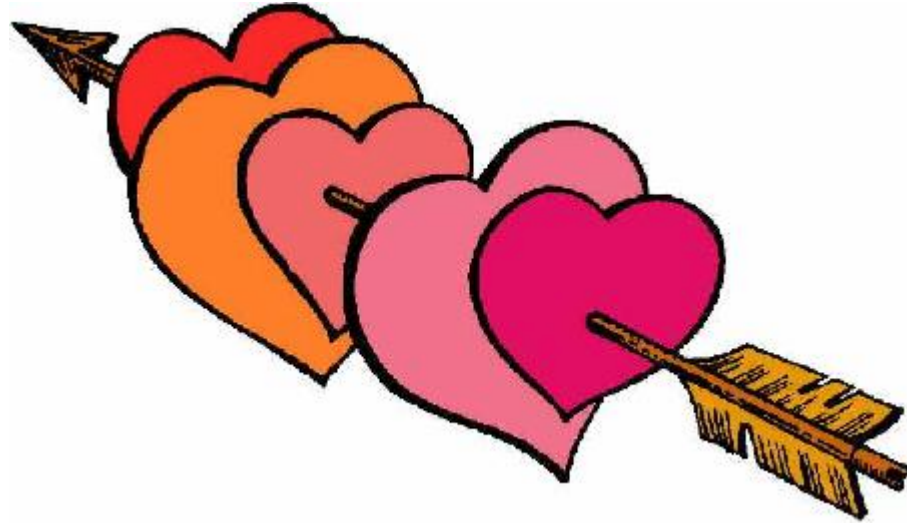
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St. Valentine, Cupid and Jesus Christ

By Gary Petty

On February 14 millions of people exchange tokens and messages of love and affection. Where and how did the curious customs of Valentine's Day begin? Does God have anything to say about such practices?



EVERY YEAR IN MID-FEBRUARY millions of people express romantic desire for each other by exchanging heart-shaped boxes of chocolate, flowers and "valentines." Children reveal hidden infatuations by sending a card as a "secret admirer." Retailers stock their shelves with merchandise covered in stylized hearts and Cupids preparing for the popular observance of Valentine's Day. But where and how did these curious customs originate?

Valentine's Day acquired its name from a Catholic saint, although exactly who he was is a matter of debate. The two most famous Valentines were a Roman priest and a bishop who both suffered martyrdom in the last half of the third century.

Celebrations, The Complete Book of American Holidays, records the story this way: "Everyone knows that St. Valentine's Day is that day of the year when friends and lovers express affection for one another, through cards, candy and flowers, whatever means the imagination can find. But no one is quite certain who this St. Valentine was--or, more appropriately, who these Valentines were. The early lists of church martyrs reveal at least three Valentines, and one source boosted this number to an unwieldy eight, each of whom had his feast day on February 14.

"The various Valentines eventually evolved into one. Lover's quarrels come under his jurisdiction and, naturally, he is the patron saint of engaged couples and of anyone wishing to marry" (Robert J. Myers and the Editors of Hallmark Cards, 1972, pp. 48-49).

During the Middle Ages, Valentine's Day became increasingly popular in Europe. February 14 was significant not only for its religious meaning, but because it was widely believed that birds begin

to mate on this date. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) mentions the mating of birds on Valentine's Day in his poem *Parliament of Fowles*.

"English literature, following Chaucer, contains frequent references to February 14 as sacred to lovers. Shakespeare, Drayton, and Gay are among those who mention it in this connection, and the diarist Samuel Pepys several times discusses the day and its related customs. The *Paston Letters*, covering the period from 1422 to 1509, contain a letter by Dame Elizabeth Brews to John Paston, with whom she hoped to arrange a match for her daughter, which runs this way:

"And cousin mine, upon Monday is St. Valentine's day and every bird chooseth himself a mate..." (Jane M. Hatch, *The American Book of Days*, 1978, p. 178).

For centuries St. Valentine's Day flourished as a day of romantic superstition. A common belief was that a girl would marry the first bachelor she saw or conjure her future mate's image by visiting a graveyard on St. Valentine's Eve.

The custom of sending valentine cards grew popular in the 1700s. In the early 1800s commercial valentines appeared and soon there was no end to how entrepreneurs could make money from this holiday. Valentine's Day became so popular in the United States that one 1863 periodical claimed that it was second in celebration only to Christmas.

Today, Valentine's Day is as popular as ever with children and couples. It's definitely one of the biggest moneymaking days for florists, candy makers and gift shops.

Pre-Christian Origins of Valentine's Day

But do the roots of Valentine's Day run deeper and further back into history?



In reality, the origins of Valentine's Day predate Christianity. "The most plausible theory for St. Valentine's Day traces its customs back to the Roman Lupercalia, a feast celebrated in February in honor of the pastoral god Lupercus, a Roman version of the Greek god Pan. The festival was an important one for the Romans, occurring when it did, naturally had some aspects of a rebirth rite to it" (Myers, pp. 50-51).

The original festival, celebrated on February 15, is founded in the ancient legend of the infants Romulus and Remus. The two brothers were abandoned but discovered and nursed by a wolf, or *lupus* in Latin. The two boys are credited as the founders of Rome.

Lupercalia was celebrated in honor of a number of pastoral deities, and ceremonies included the sacrifice of goats and a dog. Young men dressed in the sacrificial animal skins would run from a cave, said to be where Romulus and Remus were cared for by the wolf, brandishing strips of goat skins. Any women struck by these thongs were assured fertility. "These thongs were called *Februa*, the festival *Februatio*, and the day *Dies Februetus*, hence arose the name of the month February, the last of the old Roman year" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. XV, ninth edition, 1907, article "Lupercalia").

Over the years many customs were added to the celebration. One custom was for the names of girls to be placed in a box to be drawn by boys. The two were then considered a pair for the coming year.

Lupercalia and Christianity

As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it was common for pagan converts to retain their earlier religious customs and practices. Edward Gibbons, in his classic work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, states: "After the conversion of the Imperial city, the Christians still continued, in the month of February, the annual celebration of the Lupercalia; to which they ascribed a secret and mysterious influence of the genial powers of the animal and vegetable world" (Vol. II, The Modern Library, p. 327).

Pope Gelasius is said to have eradicated Lupercalia from Christian observance in the last decade of the fifth century. But in reality, the intermingling of paganism and Christianity had become inseparable in much of the Western world. Saturnalia and Mithraism were incorporated into the church through claiming a December birth date for Jesus Christ. Various spring fertility rites merged to form the basis of Easter celebrations. Lupercalia evolved into the observance of St. Valentine's Day.

Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays, comments: "Everywhere that Christians came into power they immediately adapted the holidays and customs of the people to their own creed. Now it was a simple matter to call the day that this drawing took place St. Valentine's Day? To Christianize the heathen practice of picking lots for sweethearts, all that was needed was to replace the names of the girls with names of saints and to have the young people emulate the particular virtues of whatever saint they drew. Incidentally, this custom is not dead today and is still observed in some religious orders.

"It was always more fun, of course, to pick a girl's rather than a saint's name. Consequently, by at least the fourteenth century the custom had reverted to its original form" (pp. 50-51).

Roman Gods and Christian Saints

Why would a day honoring pagan gods become associated with Christian saints?

The ancient Romans worshiped gods and goddesses involved with every aspect of life. Jupiter, the chief of the gods, was the god of rain and storms, while his wife, Juno, was the goddess of womanhood. Minerva was the goddess of handicrafts and wisdom; Venus, of sexual love and birth; Vesta, of the hearth and sacred fires; Ceres, of farming and harvests.

The Greeks considered Mercury to be the messenger of the gods, but the Romans worshiped him as the god of trade and businesspeople celebrated his feast day to increase profits. Others included Mars, god of war; Castor and Pollux, gods of sea travelers; Cronos, the guardian of time; and Cupid, god of love, whose magic arrows caused both humans and immortals to fall in love. The list goes on and on.

Romans would generically call on "the gods," but each deity had its own cult and worshipers would pray and conduct religious ceremonies to a specific god or goddess to implore help. Christianity, with its emphasis on one God, was viewed by many Romans as a strange superstition or even a kind of atheism that denied the "gods."

Members of the early Christian Church considered themselves "saints," meaning holy or separated to God. Paul greets the church at Philippi as "all the saints in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:1). However, it wasn't long before "saints" in the Roman tradition began to take on the meaning of a special class of martyrs or performers of heroic virtue.

In the second and third centuries it became common for local congregations to honor the death of a martyr by celebrating the anniversary of his or her demise. The local cult would then offer prayers to the dead for intercession with God. A "saint" could eventually receive universal recognition by declaration of the bishop of Rome.

The Catholic Encyclopedia explains: "As was taught by St. Augustine... Catholics, while giving to God alone adoration strictly so-called, honor the saints because of the Divine supernatural gifts which have earned them eternal life, and through which they reign with God in the heavenly fatherland as His chosen friends and faithful servants.

"In other words, Catholics honor God in His saints as the loving distributor of supernatural gifts. The worship of *latria*... or strict adoration is given to God alone; the worship, or *dulia*... or honor and humble reverence, is paid the saints; the worship of *hyperdulia*... on account of her greater excellence, to the Blessed Virgin Mary" (Vol. II, article "Saints," 1907, Online Edition, 1999, Kevin Knight).

The evolution from the early church's recognition of all members being "saints" to the veneration and worship of the dead is rooted in the early mixture of paganism with Christianity. The populace throughout the Roman Empire was not only accustomed to the worship of the Greek and Roman pantheon, but to cultic worship of local deities. It was an easy step for Christian congregations whose roots were in paganism to replace the customs of local cults with the worship of dead martyrs.

Over the centuries the Catholic church canonized saints for any number of events, problems, illnesses and occupations, each celebrated with his or her own feast day. St. Stephen is the patron saint of stonemasons; doctors are to pray to St. Luke; fishermen to St. Andrew and carpenters to St. Joseph. There are patron saints for farmers, hunters, shoemakers and even comedians. The primary saint in Catholic theology is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

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The Danger in a "Harmless" Holiday

What harm can there be in the celebration of lovers in the name of St. Valentine? Besides, what does it matter that some of the day's customs stem back to pagan rites?

Nowhere does the Bible approve of praying to dead saints. In fact, Jesus declared that no one except Him has ascended into heaven (John 3:13). The saints wait in their graves for the resurrection to occur at the return of Jesus Christ. Venerating dead saints propagates an ancient heathen custom that has no basis in reality.

Most people couldn't care less if its origins are in the Roman Lupercalia or early church doctrines that had nothing to do with the Bible.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about the resurrection: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16).

One of the roles Jesus Christ fulfills as our resurrected High Priest is Intercessor--one who pleads on behalf of another. The Bible declares, "Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25).

The Bible encourages Christians to pray for each other, but heavenly intercession is reserved for Jesus Christ. At Jesus' death the veil in the temple, a heavy curtain that separated the "holy of holies," representing God's throne, from the rest of the temple, was supernaturally torn from top to bottom. This action revealed a new access to God made available by the sacrifice of Jesus as the Messiah. A Christian's relationship to God is with a personal and intimate Father. The need for another heavenly intercessor would denigrate this primary role of Christ.

Does it Matter to God?

God warned ancient Israel, the people He chose to represent true religion, not to mix pagan customs with worshiping Him as the one true God. "When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods" (Deuteronomy 12:29-31).

In the New Testament, Paul compares mixing paganism with Christianity to worshiping demons: "What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cups of

demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons" (1 Corinthians 10:19-21).

Holidays like St. Valentine's Day continually secularize into icons of Western culture, creating a caricature of religion. Most people couldn't care less if its origins are in the Roman Lupercalia or early church doctrines that had nothing to do with the Bible. It's this very apathy about how to worship God, and the corresponding moral decay, that is the result of mixing Christianity with paganism.

Jesus said that His followers would "worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Observance of this holiday is just one of many traditions that must be questioned if Christianity is to return to its foundation laid by Jesus Christ.

Recommended Reading

Does it matter which days we keep? Does God care one way or another which days and customs we celebrate or use to honor Him? Why do so many of today's holidays--including many religious observances--have strange and unusual customs found nowhere in the Bible?

Many people are shocked to discover the true origins of today's most popular holidays. They're also surprised to find that the Holy Days God commands in the Bible--the same days kept by Jesus Christ and the apostles--are almost universally ignored.

Does it matter to God? Check out the booklet [Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?](#) You can download it or request a free copy to be mailed to you.

Tomorrow Never Comes

By Robert Berendt

How often have you said, "I'll do it tomorrow," or "I'll think about it tomorrow"?



WE HUMANS POSSESS A GREAT PROPENSITY for putting things off. Somehow we seem

to be oblivious to the stress we put upon ourselves and to the weakness of character that procrastination reveals. I'll be quick to state we can truly be swamped with tasks demanding our attention. Wisdom dictates we prioritize our tasks. But many are so disorganized that the time needed for a task is greatly elongated. Some take extended "coffee breaks" in another form of being slow off the mark.

Procrastination, or putting things off, puts us into a bind. We disappoint others and cause unnecessary turmoil. Our second great flaw then yawns its cavernous mouth--we find excuses. We'll make them up, we'll exaggerate and even lie a little, rather than accept the fault and blame and then go and do the right thing. It is agonizing to break a habit that we've grown accustomed to--and so we decide to "start tomorrow." As people have found out for generations--*tomorrow never comes*.

Putting things off puts us into a bind. We disappoint others and cause unnecessary turmoil.

Successful people know the value of the saying "never put off for tomorrow that which you can do today." I know many who scrape by, defying that saying and I have seen them struggle to finish projects that would have been done more readily and efficiently had they started on them right away. When I was a university student, I noticed about 80 percent of the students waited until the last day (or night) to complete an assignment due. "Cramming" for exams is common, and the worries inherent to it bring enormous stress on students. This syndrome can continue into adult life and into careers. Tasks that should be done and matters that cry for attention litter the path of one who has not learned how to work. Capable people can manage for a time, but the stress on themselves and their family is great. Eventually it will catch up with them.

Putting God first

Luke 12:16-21 carries a strong piece of advice for us all. It is the story of the man who worked hard and was successful, but who had his priorities wrong. He did not pay attention to the most important questions... "What is life all about? Why have I been born? What is my destiny?" (Our free booklet [What Is Your Destiny?](#) will guide you to the answers). God says the man was a fool because he was not rich towards God. He did not plan for eternal life. He put plans off until another day.

I always wondered why scientists, who strive to understand the laws governing physical things and who have discovered that a brilliant mind must be behind all that we see, are not 100 percent concerned about the most obvious question. *If God does exist, what does He require of me?* It is amazing when mankind's greatest minds have been able to simply avoid the obvious conclusions and thus the most vital questions.

Plan for tomorrow

We are to plan for tomorrow. The Bible contains many scriptures alluding to this fact. First and foremost, though, we need to be sure we have a constant relationship with God. This one item is one we must not put off until tomorrow. Ecclesiastes 12:1 gives words of wisdom by telling the young to remember God *before* difficult times come. A "death-bed" repentance just will not do, states

None can grasp an opportunity if they are not prepared for what comes.

Ecclesiastes 12:6. We are advised to live joyfully and to do whatever lies before us with all of our might (Ecclesiastes 9:10), but always remember life does come to a close. Proverbs 27:1 cautions us not to boast about tomorrow, because we are never sure what tomorrow will bring. I remember our bedtime prayers as children always included "if I should die before I wake"--a good thought for guiding our actions and priorities.

Matthew 25:1-13 records Jesus' parable of the ten virgins. Five were foolish and put off the right preparations. When the time came, they were unprepared and thus lost a great deal. This lesson is written for our admonition. In the story, one can see the five foolish virgins frantically trying to correct their error--they were under stress. The five who had prepared were full of joy and pleasant anticipation. The Bible does tell us that Christ will return suddenly (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3). The clear message is to be ready at all times.

Samuel Johnson wrote, "To improve the golden moment of opportunity and catch the good that is within our reach, is the great art of life." And A. Dunning wrote: "Great opportunities come to all, but many do not know they have met them. The only preparation to take advantage of them, is simple fidelity to what each day brings." Francis Bacon wrote: "A man must make his opportunity as oft as find it." Within these and many wise words like them, we can see the common thread of being prepared. None can grasp an opportunity if they are not prepared for what comes. Even the recognition of an opportunity requires an understanding of what constitutes something desirable and some prior knowledge of how to go about obtaining that goal.



Setting priorities

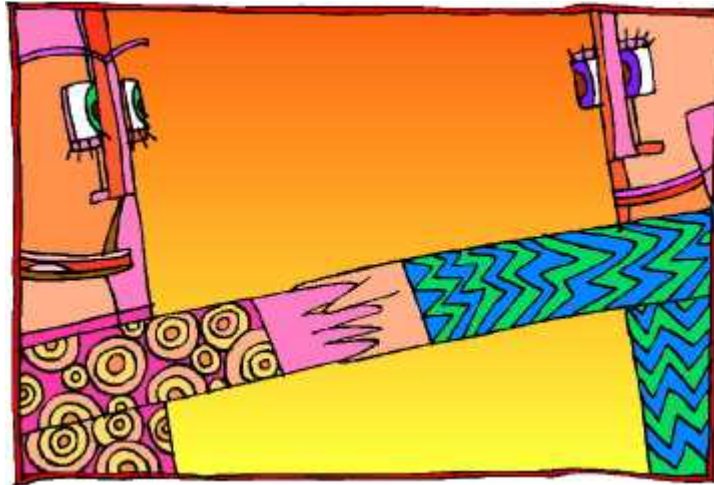
When Jesus said to "seek first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), He gave the first and foremost goal for all mankind. The search and goal includes the obligations we have to family, friends, careers and ourselves. It is one package. Some have made the mistake of thinking they can be hermits and only look out for themselves. I spoke to a man recently who said, "as long as I make it into heaven, that is all I care about." We talked a little and I was able to explain to him that with that attitude he would not make it at all. (Not that heaven is the right goal, as our free booklet [Heaven and Hell: What Does the Bible Really Teach?](#) explains.) We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Loving our fellow man means wanting all men to be saved - to have eternal life. That is why Jesus Christ's blood was given (John 3:16), and that is the aim and purpose God has ever before Him (1 Timothy 2:4). He agreed!

In our busy lives, we always seem to have too much to do. Sometimes people struggle so hard to complete everything that they break down mentally. We call it a nervous breakdown, and it is the mind and body telling us that we are far beyond overload. Wisdom should tell us to back off from overloading ourselves. The priorities should be God first, followed by family, career or work, involvement in church and with friends, and personal goals like hobbies, etc. How do we define *enough*? What is enough prayer? What is "quality time"? How do we balance our career with loving our mates? No one method suits everyone, but do yourself a favor and take the time to stand back and evaluate yourself before your health or other problems force you into an evaluation. Itemize your tasks and prioritize them. Not only will you find success, but you will also find peace of mind. *Don't put it off until tomorrow--do it today.*

That's What Friends Do

By Lorelei Nettles

Friendship is often shoved aside in our busy lives. We need to make special effort not to push out those we love.



MY SEVEN-YEAR-OLD SON AND I headed out one Wednesday afternoon to stop at the bank and run some errands. Tuesday was our usual day to go, but this week we had been sidetracked by other things. As we pulled into the parking lot, I commented to my son that Sharon must have missed seeing him on Tuesday.

Sharon is the bank's receptionist and she and my son have been sharing time every Tuesday for the past three years. They joke and tell tales from their lives. He brings her candies and cookies, and she saves Happy Meal toys for him and gives him candy suckers.

This day, though, Sharon's chair was empty. "She must be at the post office," my son said. But when we stepped up to the window, the teller immediately addressed my son and told him Sharon was in the hospital. She had been having chest pains the day before. I turned to my son to tell him we would call the hospital later and see how she was doing.

As we went about our errands, we drove past the hospital. "We should stop and see Sharon," said my son. I explained to him how it might not be a good idea to visit her now, as we wouldn't want to be a burden to her and her family. My answer was unacceptable to him, and he then told me, in no uncertain terms, that we should go because *"that's what friends do!"* I was surprised by his assertive response, so on our way back from our errand we stopped in at the hospital, bought a card and headed to Sharon's room.

When we arrived at her room, her bed was empty. We were about to leave when we met up with her husband, Jack. Jack urged us to wait, so we pulled up a chair in her room. It seemed Jack was happy to see us. He had only met us once during a chance encounter at a restaurant, but Sharon had spoken to him of my son often. Within minutes a nurse entered the room and told Jack that Sharon needed more tests and wanted to see him. I stood up and told him we would call later, but

he asked the nurse if we could see her too and was told we could. I wasn't sure this was a good idea, feeling more and more that we were invading on a woman whom we loved, but only spent minutes with each week.



We followed the nurse down the bright hallways to a large empty waiting room. Soon after, we were called to a room with two drawn curtains. My son led the way, and as they pulled the curtains back from around Sharon's bed, my son was the first person she saw. She let out a little gasp and repeated his name a couple of times. She wanted to hug him, but was caught up in wires, so just held his hand. As tears ran down her cheeks, she expressed her delight and surprise at

seeing him. My eyes filled with tears, as well, with this sincere burst of emotion. I realized how right my son had been. Taking this moment out of our day meant little to us, but a lot to her. In the few minutes we spent each visit, over those three years at the bank, we had developed a friendship. Those few moments in the hospital bonded our friendship and were special to us all.

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In this hurry-scurry world we so often brush those near to us aside. We get tied up in work, our children, their activities and ours. Years ago, people spent time in other people's homes, or on the front porch having tea. They set up game nights, had barbecues and gatherings often. Members of churches gathered before or after services to fellowship and play. They just could not get enough of being together.

Proverbs 18:24 states, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." How can we make and keep such friends if we never have time for them? I have discovered that as each year passes people draw farther and farther apart from each other, not even finding the time to pick up the phone for short conversations. This happens with friends and family alike. No one can find the time to stop for more than a quick hello. Many times they can't even find time when a friend is in need. Maybe people you know are ill or are having bad times and really need the comfort of a friend, but no one has the time.

Granted, many occasions exist when people need some space and privacy and deserve to be a little selfish with their time, but this should be short-lived. Proverbs 27:10 speaks of not forsaking friends and Proverbs 27:17 says a man sharpens the countenance of his friend. Again, how can we do this if we are too busy to even stop for a chat?

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life.*

I have been increasingly upset by this trend and made the decision I was not going to allow it to happen in my life if at all possible. I keep my son's activities to one or two things at a time. I try to respond to all phone calls, e-mail notes and letters I receive. I make an effort to take extra moments with people even when I'm in a rush. I never know if it will make a difference in someone's life, or my own. Finally, unless there is a very good reason, I always show up when I commit to someone. Of course, this takes conscious thought and prayers to achieve. It is all too easy to brush people aside

in our rush through life. We must stop and be aware of what we are doing or not doing in our actions towards others.

I've had many times in my life when I wished to reach out to a friend and found that they were just too busy. Their calendars did not allow any time for outside unscheduled events. It has become a burden for us to listen to other people's woes or to share a laugh or two. I believe we're not doing ourselves any favors. We are missing some of the joy in life. God knew Adam could not be alone and created Eve. We need people in our lives and especially those of like mind. People we can share our most joyous moments with, as well as our worst fears. Someone to back us up when needed or be there to hold our hand during bad times. Having someone with a pair of sturdy shoulders to cry on. Someone with whom you can fall on the floor in the thralls of laughter and hug hysterically when feeling overjoyed.

When we make the time we find we are happier and, (science says) healthier too, when we have good friends and acquaintances to share our days with. We feel less stressed, less depressed and less lonely. Maybe we would never be lonely. It's taking those extra moments to care for those around us that make the difference. It can be a small thing, such as a moment's visit to a friend in the hospital, making a phone call or returning a call, talking or, maybe even more important, listening.



You can tell when two people are close friends, can't you? They chatter on and on, maybe finishing one another's sentences or laughing over an event without any words being spoken. We know these people take time out for one another. Of course, this is a close relationship and there are usually few of these in one's life, but even these friendships need to be nurtured. They can easily slip away if neglected. It's the newly formed friendships, the new acquaintances, (future friends?) and those who we see on a daily, weekly or monthly basis that need extra care. These are the relationships we most often take for granted. The ones we let slide as unimportant or not worth breaking our stride over.

As we watch the world become ever more aggressive towards one another and we observe splits close to home--in our families and workplaces--it is difficult to stand back and see what is happening to ourselves. We should be drawing ever closer together and sharing our love for each other. Incidents happen that temporarily push us together, but we soon forget and get on with our usual lives. God has shown us and still shows us so much love. Jesus told us that we are to love one another. Being examples of the love God shows us should be a goal. We can be a friend or a foe. We can make time for others or brush them aside in our rush through life. But wouldn't you like to have someone insist on visiting you? Someone who would say, as my son did that day, *"That's what friends do!"*

Are You Pulling Your Own Hair?

By Steve and Jada Howell

Do we often overreact to situations without looking within? How can we better cope with offenses in life? Watching our newborn gave us food for thought about how adults react, and how we can better handle hurts and offense ourselves.



LAST SUMMER WHEN OUR YOUNGEST CHILD was only a few weeks old, I observed something that concerned, then tremendously amused, me.

He was sprawled on a blanket in the middle of our living room floor in the famous "fencer pose" newborns exhibit, and I was sitting beside him. I turned for a few seconds to find some new toys for him to look at, when he screamed. I thought at first his sister startled him. However, the screaming intensified and I began to panic. Several thoughts raced through my mind about feedings and diaper changes. But I knew he was freshly changed and full. Feeling helpless, I tried to figure out what was the matter.

Finally, I took a closer look at him and realized he had grabbed a fistful of his own hair and was pulling with all his might. The ridiculousness of the situation made it difficult for me to dislodge his fist. I was laughing so hard! As I separated his hand and hair, he became quite calm. The incident was so amusing to me I immediately called my husband to inform him of our son's latest escapade.

Upon further reflection, my husband remarked how this incident demonstrated what we potentially do to ourselves spiritually. Sometimes we wonder why we are being punished or why bad things are happening, when all along, we have grabbed hold of our own hair, and we are pulling with both fists. Then, we ask, "Why am I experiencing pain?"

We have all made mistakes. Every human being on earth has sinned

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we should see the things that offend us often come from inadequacies within our own character.

(Romans 3:23). We should realize this fact. But, who is the first person we blame for our shortcomings? We don't want to lay the blame on ourselves--we wish someone else to be the scapegoat. As our son had screamed when he thought someone else was pulling his hair, we scream at another person (and sometimes even at God), for causing a problem, when, all along, we are the ones tugging and causing the trouble. We look at others' behavior and find offense with what they are doing, not ourselves. Let's examine some of those behaviors which may most offend us and consider how we should deal with them.

Mad at the mirror

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we should see that the things that offend us often come from inadequacies within our own character. Traits that are most offensive to us often mirror our own shortcomings. We leap to point out faulty traits in others, for we can't admit we are wrong in our attitude.

Our human nature causes us to reject the idea we are flawed. This approach stems from the father of selfishness, self-righteousness and deceit--Satan the devil. God cast Satan down when Satan thought he was better than God and refused to see faults within himself (Isaiah 14:12-14). In Ezekiel 28:15, God said of Satan, "You were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you." So, Satan became self-righteous, thinking he should topple God due to the "fact" he knew more than God. His refusal to discern his own traits caused his downfall, literally, to earth.

Power and prejudice

Another potential cause of offense stems from jealousy and greed. We see others with a nicer car or home and use this as an opportunity to criticize and point out faults we think we observe. "They don't deserve what they have," we think.

Deep down inside we want to control others. We want to feel power over other people to make ourselves feel better. If we cut someone off in traffic, we feel we have made a conquest over the individual or bested them in some way. Once again, an attitude of superiority prevails.



Another cause of offense stems from prejudice. Prejudices enter our lives from our youth. We look at a person's skin color or weight or background. Through our own former experiences, we may see a person negatively, thinking we know who they are before we really know them. Sound familiar?

Handling offenses

Thankfully, God forgives and demonstrates how we should react in everyday situations. Our older sibling, Jesus Christ, revealed in the pages of the Bible examples of how to react to offense. In Luke 7:36-50, Christ allows a woman, a sinner many times over, to wash His feet with her tears and anoint His feet with oil, then wipe them with her hair. The Pharisee watching this spoke

within himself, saying, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner." While others reviled this woman, Christ forgave her offenses, which "were many."

As Jesus was hanging on the cross, His lifeblood slowly draining from Him, He didn't curse those who crucified Him. He'd been beaten, flogged and nailed, his flesh impaled to the cross. People spat upon Him, made fun of Him and screamed for His death. How did He respond? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34).

As our son had screamed when he thought someone else was pulling his hair, we scream at another person (and sometimes even at God), for causing a problem, when, all along, we are the ones tugging and causing the trouble.

Out of all who ever lived, Christ certainly possessed the right to be offended and unforgiving. People persecuted Him up until His last moments, finally ending His life wrongfully in the most undignified manner. Christ knew He would die a terrible, painful death. Yet, what did He tell His disciples? Peter asked Christ how many times he should forgive his brother. Up to seven times? "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven'" (Matthew 18:22). He didn't say, "OK, forgive a few times, then no more." Christ said, "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:15).
Period, *end of discussion.*

God also told us that love does not keep a record of wrongs. In 1 Corinthians 13, the "love chapter" of the Bible, we are shown how love suffers long, is patient and kind (verse 4). That is the key. If others offend, *as they will*, instead of being offended, ask God to help you forget the wrongs and forgive the person. We have *all* offended in our lives. Don't we want forgiveness when we have behaved in a wrong manner? We should, and God demands we extend forgiveness to others as well.

In our own backyard

We have discussed others offending us. We have talked about forgiveness. But we have not discussed what to do if the person who offended us resides in our own backyard, so to speak. What if the offender is a close relative, friend or acquaintance?

In Matthew 18:15-17, we are told to go to our brother if something happens. Perhaps we have been offended when we did not see the situation clearly in the beginning. However, if a true problem exists, talk to the person. You will have gained a brother if he listens. If this does not work, contact a trusted friend to help mediate the problem. Don't give up on working the problem through. Reconciliation may take days, weeks or even years, but don't give up. With God, nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). We must pray for His help to receive the ability to consistently forgive others. Our own human nature hinders our forgiveness of others. Genuine forgiveness comes only with God's help. Without God, no forgiveness can occur. Without being forgiving, we will not receive God's forgiveness.

So, instead of pulling your own hair, go to God to discern the root of the problem. Ask Him to show more clearly what offense really exists and what is self-inflicted. Then, demonstrate the faith and will to do what is right, and in the process *save your own scalp.*

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Don't Let Familiarity Breed Contempt

By Mike Blackwell

Do we give the Bible the respect it deserves?



“FAMILIARITY BREEDS CONTEMPT” is a common expression in the United States. Could this expression be applicable to many of us in our attitude toward the Bible? Could we be guilty of having a lack of respect for the Bible simply because it is so readily available? You can find copies in rummage sales, in almost every hotel room, and generally several copies in any home. For just \$10 you can purchase a CD-ROM that holds six to 10 versions of the whole Bible, several Bible helps, a concordance and other items.

Does the availability of the Bible cause us to become lax in our approach to it and cause us to lose some respect for it as the Word of God? Do we fail to stand in awe of it as the very word and will of God that has been preserved 2,000+ years for us today? Do we appreciate what God did to preserve it, so we can hold it in our laps today? Think about it! The Bible was written within a span of 1,500 years in three different languages by over 40 writers. Yet it is perfectly united in approach, without contradictions, as it presents the plan of the Great God to His sons and daughters.

Let's stop and consider, for a moment, what was necessary in order that we could each hold the Word of God in our hands. Until the invention of the moveable-type printing press in about the year 1450, every copy of the Bible had to be hand-written with a quill-type pen and ink. It was written on either papyrus or parchment and eventually on paper. This was a slow, arduous task, as each copy had to be prepared from a previous copy.

What we call the "Old Testament" was written over a period of about 1,000 years. It appears that it basically was brought together during the time of Ezra and the scribes. To make a copy a scribe would read each word aloud, pronouncing it as he copied it down. When he finished with a section of

What was necessary in order that we could each hold the Word of God in our hands?

scripture it was checked verbally, and by counting each word and even each letter in the entire section. Any mistake had to be corrected and then the whole process of checking repeated. If three or more errors were found, the entire section was discarded and the process started over again. It is obvious that these scribes stood in awe of the Word of God and dedicated their lives to it.

The "New Testament" was preserved in much the same way, though it was written over a period of only about 50 years. Again, copyists dedicated their entire lives to accurately copying the Word of God in order to preserve it and make it available. Due to the cost of this process, almost no one owned a personal copy of the Scriptures. Rather a church would have a copy all its members could use. During much of the time the Bible was written only in Latin--the language of the church, but not the people. Only the priests had access to it, and they read and "explained" it to the people. Everyone had to go to them. When copies were made in the languages of the people, these copies were confiscated and burned.

During the Middle Ages some congregations even resorted to what we might consider extremes in order to maintain God's Word. They would divide the Bible into sections and assign each member of the congregation a section of Scripture to commit verbatim to memory. Then, if their copy of the Bible was confiscated, they could produce a new copy from memory by the collective congregation.

*The Word of God
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Down through the ages many have sacrificed their lives in order to preserve the Word of God and make it available. Others dedicated their entire lives to producing accurate copies of the Bible. Men like John Wycliffe, William Tyndale and many others gave their lives because they felt that it was vital that everyone have access to the Word of God. Some were strangled, as was William Tyndale, while others were burnt with their copy of the Bible hanging around their neck. They did this so that God's Word would be available for us today.

The Word of God has been marvelously inspired, written and preserved for us today! Do we stand in awe of it? How much time do we spend drinking in of the Words of Life? It is so readily available and so accessible in so many forms, I again ask, "Has familiarity led to a lack of respect and even contempt for God's Words of Life--the Bible?" The next time you pick up the Bible think about what went into making and preserving it for us today. It will help you to stand in awe of God's Word.

Write for our free publication [Is the Bible True?](#) for more information on this subject. The Bible Reading Program, available on-line from the United Church of God is an excellent aid for becoming more familiar with the Bible.

Letters to the Editor

Too Many Treasures?



I am Director of Shepherdess International at the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Shepherdess International is a support system for our pastoral and administrative wives around the world.

Each quarter, our office produces a 24-page journal consisting of material we write ourselves as well as articles we glean from authors who allows us to reprint their work.

We would like to request permission to reprint an article entitled "Too Many Treasures?" by Becky Bennett. It was in the December 2000 issue of Virtual Christian Magazine. I know it would be a great benefit to our pastoral wives.

-- Sharon Cress, Director

Taking Responsibility



Tell Fred Crow--nice article. Thanks!

-- Frank F.

A Little Encouragement



I have chronic pain and I couldn't sleep. I think that I was meant to read this article now. I will start reading Psalms for hope, but I wanted you to know that this gave me a little encouragement as to why I am physically ill. Thanks, God bless you!

-- Linda Smith

Fathers Are Important!



I enjoyed the article on fathers very much. Do you have anything for those of us who are the product of divorce and have never had a relationship with a father? I had a stepfather who was a provider, but I never had a relationship with him. He was a very introverted person who was distant emotionally and just wasn't "there." I have two beautiful grandchildren who are also the

product of divorce. They have contact with their father when it's "his" weekend. He has no active involvement in their lives other than that. My youngest grandchild has no memory of having lived with his dad, and because of that lack of effort on his father's part, usually has no desire to go to his dad's house.

-- Paula Wood

[What Cancer Cannot Do](#)



Excellent topic; well-written; helpful ideas; inspirational poem. What more can I say? Thanks to Mrs. Treadway!

-- Dale Osborne

[What I Learned in Jail](#)



Please pass on to Mavis Stucci my appreciation of her article in VCM. It provided food for thought that I'll chew on all day and therefore will remember.

-- D.O.

Letters may be edited for length and clarity.