

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

"For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, And His truth endures to all generations."—Psalm 100:5

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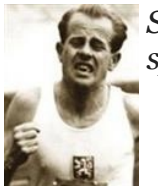


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Is God's Grace an Unconditional Guarantee of Salvation?

By Gary Petty

How can God love us unconditionally and then require conditions we must meet to have a relationship with Him?



WHENEVER MOST OF US PURCHASE an expensive item such as a car or an appliance we want to look at the manufacturer's guarantee. We do not want to be unpleasantly surprised by the fine print or find out later that a certain part is not covered. We really like the unconditional lifetime guarantee. This is the guarantee saying we can return the item anytime for any reason for the lifetime of the product.

We do not have to earn God's love. He gives it to us freely. All of us also want to experience guaranteed unconditional love. We want to be loved by someone who has our best interest at heart, who wants us in spite of our imperfections, and who loves us without our having to always earn his or her love.

Christians claim that God's love is unconditional, yet the Bible requires a person to have faith and to repent in order to have a relationship with Him. How can God love us unconditionally and then require conditions we must meet to have a relationship with Him?

God's unconditional love

The apostle Paul writes to the church at Ephesus, "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and

that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:4-9).

We do not have to earn God’s love. He gives it to us freely. This is what Paul means by grace, or God’s favor.

In Romans 5:8, the apostle Paul writes, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God loves us even when we are totally unlovable. Before we were born, before we committed our first sin, Christ died for us as an expression of God’s love.



God actually desires a personal relationship with every human being no matter how despicable the person may be, but don’t be fooled into thinking that God’s unconditional love is an unconditional guarantee for us to have a relationship with Him. Relationships, the capability to relate to one another, have requirements for both parties involved.

God is doing His part to have a relationship with us by extending grace and mercy to human beings through Jesus Christ. Because of God’s grace we have the privilege as flawed human beings to enter into a relationship with the eternal, perfect Creator. What does God expect from us in this relationship?

What God expects from human beings

Jesus says that the greatest commandment, the foundation of all commandments, is to “love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:36-37). Once God, through His mercy and love, opens the door to a relationship with Him, He then requires us to learn how to love Him.

God actually desires a personal relationship with every human being no matter how despicable the person may be...

The apostle John writes, “We love Him because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Our introduction to God is initiated by His love, but to have a real relationship with Him we must learn to respond to Him. This isn’t a relationship of equals. All human beings must come to the Creator aware of our own weaknesses and unworthiness before a righteous God. None of us deserve God’s love because all of us have a rebellious nature towards Him.

On the night of His betrayal Jesus told His disciples, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:23-24). Jesus said if we love Him we would obey Him. Jesus teaches us to express our love towards God by desiring to obey His commandments and instructions.

Some will say, “Wait a minute, now you’re trying to tell me I have to earn salvation. Salvation is a free gift from God.” It is true salvation is a gift from God generated by His unconditional love, but we must trust and obey Him if we are to enter into a relationship with Him.

Eternity has conditions

It is possible for people to want God's love and offer of salvation and then deny the relationship He has offered to them.

While John 3:16 is the most quoted verse in the Bible the rest of the passage is often ignored. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God" (John 3:16-21).



John gives a bold declaration of God's love in action towards an unworthy humanity. Yet the apostle also reminds us there are those who are condemned because they refuse to step into the light and have their evil actions exposed.

It is easy for human beings to lazily accept God's love and stay in the darkness, but He will give eternal salvation only to those who are willing to live in the light. When a person accepts God's offer of salvation he or she must now accept the work of God in preparing that person for eternity.

We must trust and obey Him if we are to enter into a relationship with Him.

We read earlier Paul's instructions in Ephesians 2:4-9. In verse 10 he writes, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." God isn't just offering forgiveness from sins; He wants to prepare us for eternity by developing His works in us.

A great opportunity is being offered by the Creator to His unworthy creation. This offer is based on His grace, His mercy and His unconditional love. It has been revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are conditions to this relationship—we must be willing to walk in the light.

How can anyone neglect so great an opportunity? You may have already accepted God's love in offering you salvation, but have you loved Him in return by desiring to obey Him? You may have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior, but are you willing to imitate Him as your Master? You may have accepted certain biblical doctrines, but are you willing to search the Bible and follow the way of life it teaches? Are you prepared to walk from the darkness into the light?

Gary Petty is a host of the Beyond Today television program seen on cable-access stations across the country. For an Internet listing of stations and times or to download programs go to www.beyondtoday.tv. For further reading on this subject, see the booklet [Jesus Christ: The Real Story](#).

In Contact With God: Answered Prayer on the Coeur d'Alene River

By Allen Hirst

We may find ourselves in a situation in our life when we ask for divine help. But does God care about and give answers to help with the little things in our lives?



WE OFTEN ASK GOD FOR HIS ASSISTANCE in prayer. After we get what we want, many of us forget that we asked. When everything works out, we assume it was the result of our efforts and good fortune. I ran into a problem last August with a group from the United Church of God, Spokane/Coeur d'Alene congregation, while we floated down a section of the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River in Northern Idaho.

My wife and I were floating in our canoe. Everyone else was using tire inner tubes or inflatable rafts. One of the young adults stowed an ice chest containing his lunch, a pocketknife and wristwatch in the canoe. One of our teens also decided to stow her watch in the chest. We lashed the chest to a forward thwart, thinking the stowed items were safe and we headed downstream.

Even though it is easy to be cynical, I know God does answer prayer.

Because the river was unusually low, for most of the trip we had to pick our course carefully so as not to run aground. Near the end of our journey, before the last bend, the river narrowed and deepened. The current there was a little swifter and in the channel were several boulders, providing an extra challenge. Hoping to make this last portion a little more exciting I decided to practice maneuvering around the rocks by crossing the eddy line and backing up stream. In the process we swamped and rolled the canoe, dumping us into the river. The lid came off the chest and all the items fell out.

The canoe wedged against a boulder as my wife was swept past it with much of our gear strewn around her. She managed to rescue herself, but was unable to retrieve our equipment as it floated downstream, so I swam downstream to retrieve the floating gear.

By the time I retrieved everything, I was cold and unsteady on my feet. The slippery rocks and current made it difficult to stand in the hip-deep water. With everything in hand, I climbed out of the river, and headed back up stream to try to recover the lost pocketknife and wristwatches.

As I hiked back, I was very disappointed with myself for having lost what was entrusted to me. I was embarrassed and ashamed. I thought finding anything on the river bottom would be nearly impossible. I asked God to help me so that the owners would not suffer distress over the loss of what they had left in my care.

When I got to the point on the river where we had swamped, I left the gear I had retrieved on shore and waded out into the current to find the items from the chest. Another man from our group waded in from across the river to assist. I thought we might be able to see the items on the river bottom. The water was crystal clear. However, I quickly discovered that standing in the current made the water murky. The water rippling over the rocks, boulders and around my legs distorted my view. I could not clearly see the bottom. I continued to pray and search.

I saw a spot seemingly brighter in contrast to the rocks, similar to a grease smudge on a glass. It was there, but barely discernable. I reached down, hoping and praying it was more than a silvery colored rock. As I felt along the bottom with my hand, I was afraid I might merely brush against it and the current would sweep it away. I prayed that I could grab it securely. After a couple of attempts, I got it in my hand. It was the young adult's wristwatch.

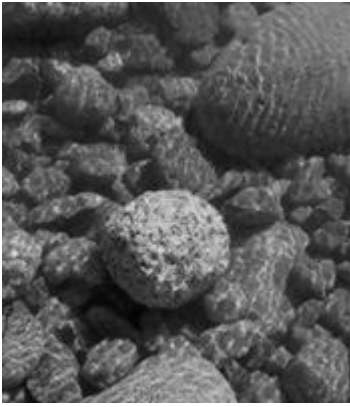


About the same time my wife called out from the far shore and informed us that she had lost her glasses. Encouraged by the discovery of the watch, I moved downstream and saw another less distinct smudge on the bottom. I reached down and retrieved the teen's wristwatch. We continued to search for a while, but could not find anything else.

I was concerned one of us might get a foot or leg wedged between boulders, fall and end up with a broken bone or worse. We decided to abandon the search. I gathered our stuff from the shore and we waded across the river.

Answered prayer

Moments after we reached the other side, two teenagers approached us from downstream. The young fellow came up to me and said they had noticed me looking in the river and wondered if I had lost something. I told him how I had found the wristwatches, but that I could not find the pocketknife or glasses. He asked for my permission to look for the items we had lost. I thanked them for their offer and pointed to where we had dumped into the river. I described where my wife had been swept downstream and where she was when she was able to gain her footing.



They waded to where we had swamped. The young girl put on her goggles and swam downstream with her face in the water along the path I had described. She stood up at about the same spot as my wife had and adjusted her goggles. I thought she could not have found anything so quickly. Disappointed, I hollered a “thank you” and was about to leave. The teen boy hollered back that she had found the items. He brought them over to me and they headed back downstream. I thanked them and put the knife in my pocket and my wife received her glasses.

I last saw the two teens as they were about to round the bend and head out of sight. He was wading and she was swimming with her face in the water searching along the bottom. I did not see them again. I do not know who they were. My natural inclination is to forget I fervently prayed to God for His help. *I can easily rationalize they were there by chance.* They were just good people and wanted to help.

She had her snorkel and goggles. She was already prepared for looking along the bottom of the river. Perhaps they were just looking for a challenge. It is easy for me to be cynical and reason away God’s intervention even though I asked for it. I wonder, will they read this some day and get a good chuckle at my expense? Will they laugh at the absurdity of my thinking they helped because of my prayer?

Does God answer prayer?

The Scriptures tell us God responds to our fervent prayers (James 5:16). Our desires and needs are important to Him. Jesus Christ said, “Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:22). By faith we trust God. In other places we are called believers (Acts 5:14; 1 Timothy 4:12). We are called believers because we expect God to help us. My natural cynicism comes down to a question of faith. Do I believe the little things in my life are important to God? Are my concerns and worries so insignificant in the scheme of things that I am presumptuous to think that God cares?

My natural inclination is to forget I fervently prayed to God for His help. I can easily rationalize they were there by chance.

Part of the reason we are cynical when it comes to prayer is we perceive our prayers often go unanswered. Why does God answer some of our prayers, while at other times we must take care of things ourselves? As we seek the answer, we need to remember that God also reveals Himself through the physical creation (Romans 1:20). Jesus tells us that God is our Father (Matthew 6:9). God established the family and human fathers at creation. Good fathers love their children and want what’s best for them.

I am a father. I have children that I love very much. Sometimes when they want help, I help; at other times they don’t get the help they want from me. I want them to learn to rely on themselves. I want them to be strong and competent. I wish I could honestly say all my decisions are made with their best interests in mind, but of course that would not be true. I’m human and subject to the weaknesses of a human father, but God, our spiritual Father, is not subject to weakness. He is perfect.

By faith we trust God. We are called believers because we expect God to help us.

Our Father in heaven is better than our human fathers. Jesus said, "How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:11). As a Father, God is looking out for our best interests. When God steps back and does not answer our prayers, (or tells us "no"), He does so for our benefit, to strengthen us (Proverbs 17:3; 1 Peter 1:7). God gives us room to grow and become strong.

Even though it is easy to be cynical, I know God does answer prayer. I prayed to God for His help. He answered my prayer. I believe He answered because He cares for the owners of the lost items and sympathized with my concern for their distress. God had compassion on each of us and sent the two teens to help.

You can learn more about belief and faith in God by requesting the free booklet [You Can Have Living Faith](#).

Why Is God So Silent?

By Robert Berendt

We are instructed in the Bible to pray to God in all circumstances, but do we pray with the attitude "Your will be done"? God desires our trust and faith in Him to guide our lives along the path He has chosen.



ALMOST ALL PEOPLE PRAY in some fashion or another. Sometimes real or imagined things happen that leave an indelible imprint on our minds. For me, an incident at about age 17 is one I never forgot. I was roused by the siren of a fire truck about a block away from the hotel room in which I was living. As I tried to look out of the window, I could not see anything except the twirling light of the fire engine.

As I looked out into the night sky and saw the stars, I felt the urge to pray. I knelt down by the open window (not in view of the street) and began to talk to God. Suddenly, a fairly intense light

blue light began to stream into the room; and the sudden change caught me totally by surprise. I could see no reason for this strange light and since it was right in the middle of my prayer, my mind went to the supernatural. I did what any man would do—I leaped into bed, covered my head and promised myself never to pray like that again! I can readily understand how strong grown men literally pass out when they see an angel or something strange along that line (Daniel 8:27).

Now, I am not Daniel and all I saw was a strange and unsettling light, but there are stories of people who have encountered God or an angel and were left with a lasting memory. I certainly do not feel worthy of any special attention from God or an angel.

There is a question, though, that I have asked at times of great stress in my life. I have prayed long and fervently for relief from a great trial, and no “blue light” came. I did not see anything strange, and I heard nothing. God was silent. We have learned to pray, “Your will be done,” but we really want our will to be done. When our requests are not met by God, we resort to thinking His answer was “no.” Our minds can come up with many reasons for a rejection, and we usually have many friends who try to alleviate our pain by giving possible explanations. The bottom line is God indeed has remained silent.



You and I are not the first ones to have this thought. Nor are we the first to express our anguish, only to be met with silence.

Your will be done

The understanding of “Your will be done” was given to us by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Mathew 26:39 reveals the resignation Jesus expressed when His suffering and death loomed before Him. Psalm 22 is one of the most profound Psalms ever written in its description of the precise suffering Jesus would endure. He knew this was to be the path God had laid out for Him. Jesus expressed the thoughts we may have at the greatest time of anguish we may ever know. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” He cried (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). In the second verse of Psalm 22 it is obvious that no answer came—God was silent.

We have learned to pray, “Your will be done,” but we really want our will to be done.

In Psalm 35 David expresses his anguish and begs God not to remain silent (verse 22). The great men of the Bible like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Job all experienced periods of time when prayers were not answered. Abraham and Sarah waited and must have prayed often for the promised child and after years passed, they acted out of an incomplete understanding. No doubt Isaac spent many years in anguish over Esau and Jacob, and God allowed Jacob to suffer with the belief that Joseph was dead until Jacob’s old age. The story of Job is filled with the expressed anguish of a man under terrible strain and stress—but without a reply from God. “Why is God so silent?” they could all ask.

David expresses himself so very well we can almost feel his need. Psalm 6:6 is one part of his ongoing plea to God. He indicates he is weary with groaning and his couch is drenched with his tears. David also expresses his confidence in God. Verses 8 and 9 show he believed God heard and would answer. Ultimately, this is the place we must all come to. Although God loves His children

with a strong, everlasting and fierce love, He is also developing something in us that can only be developed His way. When we say, “Your will be done,” we need to realize that there is nothing too hard for God to do and nothing He would not do—providing it would be good for us and it would fulfill His plan for each of us. His will is for all people to be saved in the ultimate understanding of this concept, and He works hard toward that end (1 Timothy 2:4).

God’s perfect response

I have thought about my prayers for God’s intervention. I realize God sees the complete picture of my life in a way I cannot fathom. He sees my family, friends and the people I serve as a pastor. He knows what lies in my past, and He is preparing a place in the future. When He hears a prayer, He is in a position to make the perfect response.

The response may mean allowing a person to die. Peter was told he would die in a manner that would glorify God (John 21:18-19). Peter did not know the details of what God had planned for him for all eternity. Peter’s name would be forever inscribed on the foundation of the New Jerusalem—the city of God (Revelation 21:14). Since all of the saints will receive a new name (Revelation 2:17), we may not see “Peter” written on that foundation. The language will, in all likelihood, not be English (Zephaniah 3:9).



I have to marvel at the story of Elijah. He, too, came to a time in his life when he was afraid and did not feel the presence of God during a time of stress. Jezebel had sentenced him to death (I Kings 19:1-3). Elijah ran for his life—he seemed to think that her power was greater than the power of God at that moment. Verse 11 tells of the great power God displayed, but He did not come to Elijah in that power. Verses 12 and 13 are very touching. God spoke in a “still small voice” and asked: “What are you doing here?” We must not think that God had just now “found” Elijah who was hidden. God was with him every step of his journey. God heard all of his prayers and noted his great fear.

We cannot be sure of all the reasons for the next event. God must have known Elijah would soon need a replacement and, in time, would give the responsibility over to Elisha (verse 16), God had used Elijah in a very powerful way in His work. It seems Elijah was not able to continue. His work for God was very strenuous. Perhaps he had grown old and perhaps other things had developed in his life interfering with him serving God in this particular manner. He had to confront a whole nation and hostile leaders.

God would have scanned the whole picture and then made His decision for what was best for Elijah then and forever, as well as what was best for His work then and forever. Elijah is mentioned with great respect in Malachi 4:5 and Matthew 11:14. He had run his course, and God understood the point at which he had arrived at in his life.

His will is for all people to be saved in the ultimate understanding of this concept, and He works hard toward that end.

God is the Almighty Creator and He is all wise. He can do anything, but He also has reasons for doing exactly what He knows is the best for all of His creation. His silence can only be something we need in order to further develop the character points of patience, trust, faith and perseverance.

All of these traits are very good and necessary for us. God considers each person carefully and knows every hair on your head (Matthew 10:30; Luke 21:18). His silence is an answer we need to understand.

To understand more about what God expects of us as we follow His way, please read the free booklet [Who Is God?](#)

To Whom It May Concern

By Janet Treadway

Depression runs rampant in our modern age, but ours is not the first generation to experience it. Turn to God and ask for His help. He is the greatest encourager of all time.



“To Whom It May Concern,

“The hate that rages within me rages not for those I love so dearly or those who have crossed my path. This hate rages full force towards me and only me. I have long forgiven those who’ve hurt me, but I have not and cannot come to terms to forgive myself for the things I have done to myself and the things I have done to others. Please forgive me for taking my own life so early. I tried so hard to fight against this strong battle. I know that being who I am has only brought myself and others pain. I love you all and will forever live within the memories we created. Forgive me. Forever, Tania.”

“I just need it to be over. I’ve tried to be good and go on, but I’m tired. I’m sorry for my children. You will be better off without a crazy, mixed-up mother. You are great kids, this is something in me. You deserve better. I can’t live without you, and I know you will just get mixed-up with me. Sorry, Mom.”

"I am depressed. A lot of people knew that already. It is a chemical imbalance. I have a nervous tick that many people may not notice. I have been raped three times. My wonderful boyfriend is in jail for murder. My mom has colon cancer. I quit school at 14. I have no job. I have no future to give my son. Mom and Dad, please do not blame yourselves. It was nothing that you did or did not do. You were always the greatest parents. I could not have asked for a better mom or dad. Please do not mourn my death too much. Shed a tear, maybe two. Then, go on about your lives. Take care of my baby boy. Never let him forget me. I love you all. May God be with you. To the other people that loved me and cared about me, thank you. You were all wonderful. I love you all. I will never forget you. Keep me in your hearts. With all my love, Jaley."

Above are three actual heartrending suicide letters from people who felt there was no hope to continue. They committed suicide for different reasons, but it all boiled down to one major factor—they lost hope! They could not see a better tomorrow. They convinced themselves they were worthless and no one could love them or they could not rise above the circumstances they were in. They were simply overwhelmed, lonely, exhausted and felt they did not have the strength to fight anymore.



Each person's suicide note reflects what one in five of us will feel sometime in our life. The depression rate is especially high in single parents. Anger, guilt, stress and financial difficulties help contribute to the high depression rate. Depressed parents usually have a hard time functioning in life and as parents. Unemployment, relationship breakdown, loss of health and grief are often followed by a period of depression. (Source on depression: <http://www.fastrac.net.au/~kbird/emotions/depress.htm>.)

So why do some end up killing themselves while others rise above the depression?

Homeless to Harvard

I watched an inspiring story recently on Lifetime titled *From Homeless to Harvard: The Liz Murray Story*. Liz's parents were both drug addicts and she spent most of her young life growing up in shelters. Liz's mother died of AIDS, which changed Liz's whole way of looking at things. She knew she had to do something, or else she would end up on the same path as her parents.



When Liz was 17, while still homeless, she decided to not let life defeat her but, rather, to make decisions to bring her out of the lowest of circumstances. While still sleeping wherever she could, sometimes in shelters or on subways, and eating out of the dumpsters, she enrolled in an alternative school. While most teens her age were graduating, she was just beginning. She studied hard and graduated in two years.

She was determined to go to college. She looked for scholarships and found one *The New York Times* was offering. Liz wrote an essay and won a four-year scholarship to Harvard. Liz now travels and talks to groups about her life. She has also written a book called *Breaking Night*, which will be published this year. Liz's main goal is to reach out and

help others to understand they can rise above the obstacles in their life. (Source: <http://www.washingtonspeakers.com/speakers/Speaker.cfm?SpeakerID=3821>.)

Many of us have been dealt some pretty bad blows in our life. But it is how we take them and deal with them that will either make us or break us. We have access to the greatest hope restorer—our Creator, who knows us, understands us and loves us more than anyone else does. Consider the example of how God encouraged Elijah.

When Elijah feared for his life, he fled (1 Kings 19). He was exhausted; he felt alone, afraid for his life and forgotten. He had a sense of futility, which we all feel sometimes. So he went and hid in a cave. God listened to Elijah; He fed him and gave him the opportunity to rest. He stayed with Elijah and then encouraged him to get up and going again. “For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ‘I dwell in the high and holy place and also with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones’ (Isaiah 57:15). *God is the greatest encourager of all.*



Ask God for help

If you get down and depressed, ask God for help. Ask others for help. Liz had a great mentor who encouraged her all the way when she started school at 17. She did not get to the place she is today without people around to encourage her. But she had to take the first step—she had to seek help.

When we get down, we also have to seek help, especially if we have thoughts of suicide. Get help from a minister, parents, trusted friends or call a support hotline. You can rise above any situation! Nothing is impossible with God!

“To Whom it May Concern” concerns all of us and we must reach out and help one another. It *must* concern us all!

Please request the booklet [*Making Life Work*](#).

Religion With and Without Mercy

By Laurie Nyhus and Don Hooser

Should religion make one more merciful or less merciful? By looking at the attitudes and actions of many religious people around the world, one would conclude less merciful!



YOU WOULD THINK religion would make people more merciful. But do we see this today?

The worst extreme we hear about is people who use their religion as an excuse for torturing, terrorizing and killing others. Then we hear of harsh and cruel punishments for infractions of religious rules. And it is common to hear of overly severe penalties exacted for people's sins and mistakes, including attitudes of scorn and condemnation.

Furthermore, a tendency exists for treating all sins and mistakes alike—major and minor, impulsive and premeditated, those done in ignorance and those done with full knowledge. And cold-hearted “judges” often do not look at the attitude of the person's heart and do not show mercy even when the person is sorry and repentant.

As well, judgmental people are often hypocritical, being guilty of the very things of which they are castigating others. In fact, some people seem to have a compulsion to correct sins in others that they themselves continue to commit. “The guilty dog barks,” goes the saying. Because they cannot or do not want to overcome the weakness in themselves, they psychologically project their weaknesses onto others, making themselves feel more righteous by condemning the failings in others.

Exalting mercy

But God's true religion exalts mercy! Over and over throughout the Bible, we see mercy as one of God's paramount teachings—a character trait He emphasizes as essential in His followers!

But it's not just non-Christians who are unmerciful—no one is perfect in mercy, even the people sincerely seeking to live by the Bible. We must all examine ourselves, study God's Word to better understand mercy and continually seek the transforming power of God to be merciful as He is merciful.

Our Creator is a God of justice as well as mercy. God's laws are eternal and very much in effect, so God commands obedience.

But it is interesting to note that in the King James Version of the Bible, the word *mercy* occurs 261 times, while the word *justice* occurs only 28 times. The word *judgment*, which includes justice and mercy, occurs 285 times. (To motivate people to repent and obey Him, God uses the carrot and the stick—He promises abundant blessings for obedience and eventual punishment for disobedience when one does not repent.)



God is “rich in mercy” (Ephesians 2:4). “The Lord is very compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). “The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy” (Psalm 145:8). The Bible repeatedly says “His mercy endures forever.”

Examples of mercy

By far the greatest example of mercy is God the Father and Jesus Christ being willing for Jesus to be incarnated, suffer terribly and die so that we sinful humans could be forgiven and saved. “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

God's grace includes *unmerited pardon* for repentant sinners. “He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10).

Jesus set a perfect example of humility, mercy and love to the very end.

When Jesus Christ dwelt among men, He continually set a wonderful example of mercy. And this was quite a contrast to the prevailing religious attitudes of His day—attitudes of arrogance, hypocrisy, self-righteousness,

condemnation and a cold-hearted lack of mercy.

Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37 illustrated how the religiosity of His day did not equate with mercy and love. Both the priest and the Levite showed no compassion on the injured man but a Samaritan who was self-sacrificing aided the man. Judaism had degenerated to the point that it influenced its followers to be less merciful than the nonreligious people. It is still common to see examples of nonreligious people being more merciful than many religious people are.



Unintended effects of religion

Religion can have unintended effects. When people learn God's commandments or other rules for living, their standards of character are appropriately raised. But they can easily start feeling superior and self-righteous and become more critical and unmerciful toward others. However, the

followers of Jesus Christ must focus on how they are being saved by God's grace and mercy, not by any merit of their own.

Jesus set a perfect example of humility, mercy and love to the very end. Even when He was dying on the cross, Jesus prayed for His executioners, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Likewise, Stephen prayed for those stoning him, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60).

Mercy encompasses several related things—forgiveness, kindness, compassion, gentleness and relief or alleviation of suffering. Jesus exemplified all aspects of mercy.

In Jesus' recommended outline of prayer, He said, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

The way Jesus dealt with a woman caught in adultery is a typical example (John 8:3-11). The story concludes with Jesus telling the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (verse 11). This is a great principle to understand in our daily lives when working with people. Showing mercy to someone makes it much easier to work with him or her, and he or she is much more likely to repent. Being merciful rather than critical usually gets better results. Someone once wrote: "Show a man you have faith in him, and he will do everything he can to show himself worthy."

The Pharisees had the Scriptures, but knew little about mercy and practiced it less. In Luke 7:36-50 is the story of a Pharisee who asked Jesus to come to his house and have a meal. While Jesus was eating, a woman begins to wash His feet with her tears and to anoint them with fragrant oil. This was a woman with a reputation as a sinner—not someone most people then would allow to touch them.

What was Jesus' surprising conclusion? He knew her heart and knew she was repentant and worshipful. She loved Christ and would love Him even more because of His mercy and forgiveness. But, the self-righteous Pharisee was in denial about having any sins and, therefore, was unrepentant and unloving.

God's merciful character

To have the merciful character of God, Christ admonished us to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Luke 6:27-28).

Later He said, "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (verses 36-37).

Note that last very sobering statement. *If we don't forgive others, we will not be forgiven.* In Jesus' recommended outline of prayer, He said, "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). He elaborated on this in verses 14 and 15. God is eager to be merciful and forgiving, but He will only treat us this way if we are merciful and forgiving to others.

God forgives even the worst of sins when there is true repentance. Consider the story of Jonah. Jonah was angry with God because He spared the city of Nineveh. (Nineveh was considered an enemy of Israel.) Jonah complained, "I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm" (Jonah 4:2). This is a good lesson for all of us, because sometimes we tend to be like Jonah.



When we read the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32, we should examine ourselves. Would my attitude be like that of the father (merciful) or like that of the elder brother (unmerciful)?

Concern for every person

The following account shows how deeply concerned God and Jesus Christ are for every single person:

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'

"I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:4-7).

There are many more excellent scriptures that speak of mercy. Daniel 9:18; Micah 6:8; Micah 7:18; and Zechariah 7:9 are some of them.

Being "religious" generally implies acts of worship and service toward God. This is pleasing to God if two things are true: 1) The actions are in harmony with God's teachings in the Bible. And even more important, 2) there is love and obedience toward God and love and mercy toward our fellow human beings.

*God forgives even
the worst of sins
when there is true
repentance.*

"For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). "Sacrifice and burnt offerings" are being religious. But there are things that God desires more than being religious.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

"Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on *tender mercies*, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering" (Colossians 3:12).

For additional reading, request the free booklet [*Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*](#).

The Olympic Ideal

By Graemme Marshall

Sports seem to bring out the highest aspirations and the worst attitudes. Here's to sports, the Olympics and life.



THE OLYMPIC GAMES ARE THE GREATEST sporting event in the world. No matter how many championship titles an athlete racks up, to win at the Olympics is often considered to be the ultimate athletic achievement. In the intense pursuit of sporting excellence, stories of true sportsmanship shine.

The good side of the Olympics

One of the greatest examples is Emil Zatopek, the great Czech distance runner who gave away one of his prized gold medals.

Zatopek won gold at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics on the same day his wife won in the javelin competition. Husband and wife became the first and only married couple ever to win Olympic gold medals on the same day in separate events. He was already the hero of the '52 games, with victories in the 10,000- and 5,000-meter events, when he decided to run the marathon, a race he had never run. During the marathon he asked another runner if the pace was too fast. The reply? It was too slow. So Zatopek upped his speed and won another gold!



Olympic gold had consistently eluded athlete Ron Clarke. Though he had set 18 world records, in his trips to the Olympics he had collected only a single bronze medal. One day while visiting with the Zatopeks, they gave Clarke a small box and told him not to open it until he was on his way home.

When Clarke finally opened the package, he found one of Zatopek's gold medals. Attached was a card that read: "Dear Ron, I have won four gold medals. It is only right that you should have one of them. Your friend, Emil." This exemplifies the spirit of sportsmanship—winning, with a willingness to share.

The dark side

Perhaps the shadowy, manipulative side of sports was worst reflected in the 1936 Olympics. Those summer games, the first-ever to be held in Germany, were used by the Nazi Party as a gigantic propaganda exercise. The attempt to prove the superiority of the "Aryan race" over athletes from other parts of the world was, however, undermined by the success of Jesse Owens, a black American who was the undisputed star of the Olympics.

At the 1972 Olympics Germany again became the focus of the dark side of sports. The expectant joy of those games was shattered when 11 athletes, five terrorists and a policeman were killed during the kidnapping of some Israeli athletes and the subsequent attempt to rescue them. The day after memorial services took place, competition continued, but with the Olympic flag at half-mast.

Olympic ideals are often in sharp contrast to reality. The Olympic motto, *Citius, altius, fortius*—swifter, higher, stronger—is all too often marred by nationalism's dark side and the drive for accumulation of team medals. Commercialism has all but overwhelmed the intent of the modern Olympics as expressed by its founder, Frenchman Baron Pierre de Coubertin. He said something in 1908 that has become the modern Olympic Creed, displayed on the scoreboard at opening ceremonies:

"The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph, but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well."

Tragically, the Olympics have become too much a reflection of man's society and the evils that dog his good intentions.

Is sportsmanship losing ground?

How long has it been since you have seen a golfer fling his club after a bad stroke? Or witnessed a highly paid tennis player throw his racket to the ground, angrily hit a ball into the stands or challenge the referee? Or heard of an athlete accused of using performance-enhancing drugs or players fighting on the field? Sadly, we see these things all too often. Have we lost sight of de Coubertin's ideals?

Positive examples give us heart. One of the great Golden Milers had an attitude toward athletics that made him a symbol of all that was good in sports. John Landy dominated Australian middle-distance running from 1952 to 1956 and was a central figure in the much-publicized quest to

break the four-minute mile, along with Englishman Roger Bannister and American Wes Santee. Landy broke the world mile record in 1954.



In a race leading up to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, distance runner Ron Clarke fell. Landy, considering himself to be at fault, immediately stopped running to check on Clarke's condition and to apologize. He resumed running to chase the field, regained the lead and went on to win. The delay probably cost him another world record.

This is what makes for excellence in sports: great athletes who are also great in character and humanity.

We still see these traits exhibited occasionally, but all too rarely.

Is winning everything?

Sports fans love a winner. We feel exhilarated when our team plays in the Super Bowl, World Series or Stanley Cup. Winning teams are in the media's spotlight. Champagne and backslapping are the victor's spoils.

Yet winning is often only the difference of a stroke, point, second or goal. Many believe winning is everything. Winning often takes precedence over a player's health and injuries. Seeking to intimidate the opposition or deliberately trying to injure an opponent is becoming an accepted part of the game.

Defeat is often quiet and depressing. Heads are lowered. Feet dejectedly kick the turf. Some losers are not too graceful in defeat. Clubs and rackets are thrown in disgust. Knowing they can't win, some resort to rough play to injure opponents.

Why do so many athletes exhibit such bad manners?

Well, the media does not help by describing teams in terms of the battlefield: crushed, blitzed, demoralized, flattened and devastated. Add to this a growing disrespect for rules and authority. Players argue with umpires and referees. Melees involving whole teams are commonplace. It's little wonder children emulate adult stars and violence plagues youth sporting events as well.

Thankfully, some do take a stand against obnoxious players. Administrators, officials and the majority of athletes are concerned about violence but don't know how to stop the mayhem. The motivation to win at any cost is too strong for most sports to change.

Many players lose more often than they win. Defeat is a frequent visitor in life, and we must come to terms with it. Humble in victory, gracious in defeat is a nice ideal, but one we rarely see in sports—or in life, for that matter.

The intertwined character traits involved in sports and life have not altered since the apostle Paul reflected on athletic training more than 1,900 years ago. He drew analogies from running and boxing, probably referring to the Isthmian Games of the city of Corinth.



Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27, New International Version).

Paul considered the runner’s strict training, self-denial and focus on the finish line as requirements for spiritual endeavor as well. He saw that, although a runner’s discipline gained him only a wreath of wild celery that soon withered, the dedicated Christian strives for an imperishable crown.

Paul taught we should strive to win the race of life. But he knew there would be setbacks and short-term defeats along the way. He was a disciplinarian who could gracefully accept defeat or humbly savor the euphoria of a win. “I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound,” he said (Philippians 4:12). Defeat highlights the character of the players. Some give of their best, even shine in a losing battle.

We face defeat more often than we enjoy the triumph of victory. In the voyage of life, humility is a struggle because virtue isn’t financially rewarded, nor does it receive public acclaim. People would far sooner have the trophy, take the money and drink the champagne. We prefer heady glory to consoling words about bearing up in defeat.

Sportsmanship in the game of life

Many of these principles apply to everyday life. Whether we’re a participant or spectator, we can apply them by refusing to give in to temper, anger and the human desire to punch or strike back at another.

Develop greater skills to keep out of conflict and win by talent and ability. Some athletes are known for their fair play and self-control. Like them, be a good sport. Winning is a goal to strive for. But winning is laudable only if you can hold your head up in defeat.

Can we expect the trends toward more obnoxious behavior and increased disrespect for authority to continue? Biblical prophecy doesn’t suggest otherwise. Until man’s heart, mind and attitude change, his actions will not. Keeping a tight rein on your emotions takes character when you are provoked. It takes character to hold your head high when you’ve tasted setbacks and defeat.

Winning is fun, and being challenged by other skilled players helps bring out our best. The desire to win motivates us to work, run, row, bike or swim faster and longer than we have done before. Winning is also competing with yourself against the elements, the mountain or the sea.

Striving to win doesn’t have to mean animosity between opponents. The pregame psych-out too often leads to grudges settled on the playing field. If winning requires you to cheat, lose your temper, aggravate an injury, abuse the umpire or intimidate your opponent, what is the quality of your victory?

A better way

Although Olympic teams enter the stadium at the opening ceremony carrying their national flags, the closing ceremony is designed to highlight unity as if all the athletes belonged to one unified world. This concept came about because of 17-year-old John Ian Wing during the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. During the days just before those games, the world was in turmoil. As teams made their way to Australia, Soviet tanks and troops entered Budapest to put down the Hungarian uprising.

A few days after the opening ceremony John Wing wrote a letter to the organizing committee; He suggested a different kind of march for the closing ceremony: “During the march there will be only one nation... What more could anybody want if the whole world could be made as one nation?”

So it was done, and this march with a different attitude has become a tradition that has lasted for all Olympic Games—athletes from many nations saying farewell as one body, instead of marching separately under their own national flags. What an inspiring thought about how sports could be in the prophesied world of tomorrow!

Most sporting careers are brief, but the game of life is both longer and far more important. We need to learn humility in victory and grace in defeat. If you can play fairly and in a good spirit, then you’ll have a good start in playing the more important game of life.

A Good Sport

Jesse Owens’ record of four track-and-field gold medals in the same Olympics held for 48 years until Carl Lewis duplicated the feat in 1984. But Owens almost didn’t get his fourth medal. His story highlights the sharing spirit of sportsmanship.

In the 1936 Berlin games, Owens had won three gold medals and was competing in the long jump. He had fouled twice with only three attempts allowed. The German champion came over to him and in broken English said: “Jesse, let me make a suggestion. I will place my towel a foot in front of the foul line and you can use this for your takeoff. You should then qualify easily.”

Owens took his advice, qualified and went on to win another gold. He recalled: “It was so gracious of him. After my victory he was the first one to greet me, and we walked arm in arm right in front of Hitler’s box.”

The Last Man in the Marathon

The 1968 Mexico City Olympics produced the story about the “Last Man in the Marathon.”

A little more than an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line, with only a few thousand spectators left in the stadium, the last runner finally arrived. With a leg

bandaged and bloody, he made his painful way around the last lap.

In the press box a columnist wrote: “Today we have seen a young African runner who symbolizes the finest in the human spirit...[in a] a performance that gives true meaning to sport...a performance that lifts sport out of the category of grown men playing games...a performance that gives meaning to the word courage... All honor to John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania.”

Afterward Akhwari was asked why he had endured the pain since there was no chance of winning. He simply said: “My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race. They sent me to finish.”

Letters to the Editor

[Learning to Accept What Is](#)



Hi, I read this story as I am trying to accept things in my life. Your story was very interesting. I have to continually thank the Lord for what He has blessed me with.

Some feedback messages are edited for space and/or clarity