

It's How You End That Counts

Feast of Tabernacles

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How many of you have been keeping the Feast for at least ten years? Oh, that's everybody almost. Twenty? Thirty? Forty? Fifty? How about sixty? My first Feast was in Pocono, Pennsylvania under a tent back in the '60s. It's been a long road hasn't it? A long journey indeed. It's great to say that none of us thought we would be here in 2017. I don't think anybody thought that, and, yet, here we are.

Let's begin with a scripture that is generally not used to refer to this spiritual journey but it has hints about this. Let's go to Matthew 13. If you have a marker, you are probably going to want to put marker here because we'll be coming back to it from time to time. At least this scripture has hints of our spiritual journey. That's not the main subject, but we'll get to that too. Matthew 13, verse 1:

Matthew 13:1. *The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the [seaside].*

2) *And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so ... (KJV)*

In order to speak to them, Jesus had to go into a ship, and He sat on this boat. So, *the whole multitude stood on the shore*. And, the water between Him and the shore acted as an amplifier. His voice would bounce off the water. He would get the direct sound from his voice plus the bounce from the water so they could hear him. Since He designed audio and acoustics, He knew exactly what He was doing. Verse 3:

3) *And he [spoke] many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower ... (KJV)*

The Greek word means a *scatterer*. That's how they sowed seeds in those days. They would scatter them over the land. It says:

3b) *... a sower went forth to sow;*

4) *And when he sowed, (Number one) some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and [ate] them (all) up:*

5) *(Number two) Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and [then] they sprung up, (but) because they had no deepness of earth:*

6) *... when the sun was up, they were scorched; and ... they had no root, (and) they withered away.*

7) *(Number three) And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:*

8) *But (Number four) [others] fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.*

9) (And Christ said,) *[If you have] ears to hear, [you had better] hear.*
10) *And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why [do you speak] in parables?*
(KJV)

"Why are You telling stories instead of telling us plainly?"

11) *He answered and said unto them, ... it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.* (KJV)

Then in verse 12, Jesus summarizes the parable.

12) *For whosoever [has], to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever [has] not, from him shall be taken away even [what] he [has].* (KJV)

Then, Christ went on to say:

13) *Therefore [I speak] to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.*
14) *And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of [Isaiah], which [says], By hearing [you] shall hear, and ... not understand; and seeing [you] shall see, and shall not perceive:*

This verse quotes Isaiah 6:9. It is also repeated in Ezekiel 12:2.¹ Christ goes on in verse 15.

15) *For this people's heart is waxed gross, ...* (KJV)

When you check the Greek on that word, it means *rendered callous*. If you have had calluses, the skin is rough and hard. Jesus is saying, "Your hearts have been rendered callous." Jesus continues:

15b) *... and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.*
(KJV)

Even today, some people in the church close the Bible and say, "I don't want to hear anymore. We don't want to hear it." We should take heed to what Christ says. God

¹ **Isaiah 6:9.** And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear [you] indeed, but understand not; and see [you] indeed, but perceive not.(KJV)

Ezekiel 12:2. Son of man, [you dwell] in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house. (KJV)

could not work with these people because of their attitude. They were not humble (1 Corinthians 1:26², we know that) and He could not work with them. Verse 16, He said:

16) But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

17) For verily [truly] I say unto you, That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which [you] see, and (they) have not seen them; and to hear those things which [you] hear, and (they) have not heard them. (KJV)

What a blessing that we—a bunch of nobodies—can sit here today, hear God's word, understand God's word, and have the opportunity to apply God's word through the holy spirit as we're going to see shortly.

From this parable, we can pick up some hints about our spiritual journey to conversion. We're going to see throughout God's word—and this leads to the point of the message—as we go through today that it's not how you begin the journey. It's how you end the journey that counts. We're going to walk through that whole journey and see at the end of the day, it's how we end up, not how we begin, that's important. The title of the sermon is: It's How You End Up That Counts

As I am kidded for from time to time, I'm going to have five points. I usually have points and some people jab me about that, but that's just the way my mind works. We're going to begin to look first at three stages of our spiritual journey. We're all familiar with them, but we want to trace this and build up to the conclusion.

Point 1: The Start of Our Spiritual Journey

Let's turn over to Revelation 2 to understand the concept of "first love". When we all came into God's Church, all of us had first love. Revelation 2:4, this is to the Ephesian era, but it reveals a concept that applies to all eras and all people as they become converted, as God begins to call them. This happens more so with those who are not second or third generation Christians because you're coming out of the world into something totally new. Revelation 2:4, Christ is speaking.

***Revelation 2:4.** Nevertheless I have somewhat against [you], because [you have] left [your] first love. (KJV)*

Now the New Living Translation, I think, just nails it. It says:

***Revelation 2:4b.** ... You don't love me or each other as you did at first! (NLT)*

This is a very important concept. Verse 5:

² **1 Corinthians 1:26.** For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: (KJV)

5) *Remember therefore from [where you are] fallen, ... (KJV)*

"Remember the days when you loved Me and each other as you did when you were first converted."

5b) *... and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto [you] quickly, and will remove [your] candlestick out of his place, except [you] repent. (KJV)*

The Greek word for "love" is agape and speakers have talked about agape several times this Feast.

The Greek word for "first" is protos (p-r-o-t-o-s). It means *beginning, or first of all*. We get our English word "prototype", the first of something. For example, an airplane manufacturer will build a prototype airplane—that's the very first one. That's where we get that word.

We see here that *the first works* are the works related to first love. Christ says, "Do the first works. Go back and do the first works. They were associated with your love for Me and your love for the brethren."

We all start with joy and first love. We talk to everybody about our new understanding and I can remember doing that. I was in the air force at the time and I hadn't been baptized yet, but I was reading, studying, and getting close to baptism when my parents came up to visit. I was on the Canadian border in Sioux Ste. Marie. We were out walking and I was talking to my dad. I looked at him and I said, "Do you realize the Bible says that there's no immortal soul." And, my dad's an old cowboy from the mountains of New Mexico, a gruff guy. He looked at me and said, "Huh?" That's about as far as that conversation went.

We've all made those mistakes where we vomit out all the things we're excited about and it falls on deaf ears. We've all been there and done that.

Let's go to Matthew 13 and we'll begin in verse 18. We're going back to where we were. I'll read this out of the New King James. Christ is explaining the parable.

Matthew 13:18. *"Therefore hear the parable of the sower: (NKJV)*

Christ is going to explain the first seeds that fell by the wayside.

19) *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.... (NKJV)*

In other words, there is no response. Obviously, that doesn't apply to us because we had a response.

19b) ... *This is he who received seed by the wayside.*

20) (Number two) *But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; (NKJV)*

These individuals have the first love, the excitement, the enthusiasm, the zeal.

21) *yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word (because of this new belief), immediately he stumbles. (NKJV)*

The King James says, "He is offended."

All of us have received the truth with joy. We've all been through that, but when trouble comes after that or during that joy when trials and tribulations occur, some people can't endure and they just fall by the wayside.

When I came into the church in the mid-1960s, there was a general attitude—at least in the church area where I was—that bad things don't happen to God's people. The thinking was, "We're called. We're protected. We have angels." Bad things just don't happen to God's people."

Yet, when sickness or an auto accident or some other problem occurs, it's because the member sinned. When somebody got in a car wreck, people would say, "I wonder what their sin was," as though they brought it on themselves. This, obviously, wasn't true. We learn that as we mature.

We forgot Acts 14, verse 21. Let's go there.

It was common—at least when I came into the church—that once you were baptized, God had this giant slide. At the end of the slide was the Kingdom of God and God personally greased that slide so you just slipped right into the Kingdom without trials, without tribulations. All would be well. The Bible doesn't say that and I think we all know that. Acts 14:21.

Acts 14:21. *And when they [Paul and his disciples] had preached the gospel to that city [Derby, verse 20], and made many disciples, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 22) strengthening the souls [the lives] of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." (NKJV)*

We found out through experience that we face trials and tribulations continually as God's people. We learn over time that God uses these trials. To do what? To build character in us and to see what's in us. He watches us to see how we react to the trial. Do we start wringing our hands? We could react negatively having thoughts like: Woe is me. How can God do this? He doesn't love me anymore. Or, we might think more

positively: God brought this on, but I know He does everything for our good. Therefore, there is something to learn here. And, God's watching me to see how I react to it. So, I had better react in a godly way. We learn that.

We also learn what we find in James 1, verse 12. Let's go there. We are told to count our trials and troubles as blessings. When we look back in hindsight, they always are, but we don't see it at the time. James 1:12.

James 1:12. *Blessed is the man that [endures] temptation: ... (KJV)*

The Greek means *adversity*.

12b) [enduring adversity] for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord [has] promised to them that love him. (KJV)

We learn that if we can endure, that means we're one step farther on the walk that leads to a crown of life. So, we learn to hang in there even though we don't know why necessarily, even though we don't know how long it's going to last necessarily, but we hang in there because we know at the end of the day, we come to a crown of life.

Now, all of us have been through this stage of first love. We have first love of the brethren and, certainly, first love of God. When we look back—I certainly do—we all look back at the stupid things, the stupid mistakes we did out of misguided zeal, misguided enthusiasm. And, frankly, some do stumble along the way and leave, but for those who remain, God is merciful. We're all His children, but these are the infants. These are the babies in this first stage and God understands that we fall flat on our fannies from time to time. And, we'll bump our heads and cry from time to time. God understands that.

Point 2: The Long Middle Part of Our Spiritual Journey

We come out of that first stage a little more mature, but God says, "You had better not forget the first love that you had." Then, we start this long middle stage of our spiritual journey, of our conversion.

Here is where many begin to slip; many begin to become lukewarm; and some eventually fall away—sometimes after decades in the church. The flip side of that is the middle part of the journey can lead to a deeper conversion, much deeper conversion. Let's go to Matthew 13, back again to verse 22 to look at the third instance of sowing seeds. Let's see what we can learn.

Matthew 13:22. *Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the [care] of this world ... (NKJV)*

Let me stop here because another speaker also mentioned this earlier. If you look at the Greek "care" used in this context—*the care of this world*—it means *through the idea*

of distraction. In other words, you could easily translate it, "and the distraction of this world."

We've heard already about all of the distractions that this generation has that no other generation has had. I sometimes wish all the smart phones and iPads could be ground up in something and shot out into space. But, in today's world, this is the way it is.

22b) ... [through the distractions] of this world, ... the deceitfulness of riches ... (NKJV)

Guess what they do?

22 continued) ... (they) choke the word, ... (NKJV)

The Greek means *to strangle completely.*

22 continued) ... (they) choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful. (NKJV)

So, the thorns symbolize the negative aspects of the world, the society in which we all live. To "become unfruitful" means *you had fruits prior to becoming unfruitful.* These individuals developed fruits in the beginning, but, over time, those fruits began to wane and wane and wane. People began to slip and people began to cool down to be lukewarm. They didn't study with the same zeal or hardly studied at all. Studying becomes like taking out the garbage. "I have to do it so God won't strike me with lightning." Yet, you do the minimum, get in five or ten minutes of study and then you go on with rest of your day. It can be the same with prayer. So, those fruits wane over time. This is something to watch carefully.

Now, let's look at the era we live in. Let's go to Revelation 3; you know where we're going. I think speakers mentioned this in just about every message this Feast. And, you'll get tired of it, but we'll go over it again. I hope that we'll approach it from a different angle. Revelation 3:14, we live in this era and we need to think of ourselves in the context of living in this era. We need to understand that this is what is around us, both in the church and out of the church. Verse 14, Christ says:

Revelation 3:14. *And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things [say] the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God;*
15) I know [your] works, that [you are] neither cold nor hot: (and He said,) I [wish you were] cold or hot. (KJV)

Let's just stop there. If you understand the geography of Laodicea at the time John wrote this, you know that around Laodicea, there were hot springs and there were cold springs. Obviously, on a hot day, you could go to a cold spring and there is nothing better than a cold drink of water on a hot day. It was refreshing and it was useful. Then the hot springs were there, and, after a long day of work, you could sit in a pool of hot

water, relax your muscles, and relax your body and mind. That, too, was useful and refreshing. So, those sources of water existed around Laodicea.

God says here, "I know your works. You're neither one. Both are useful—hot and cold—but you are neither one." Verse 16:

16) So then because [you are] lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will [spew you] out of my mouth. (KJV)

What God is saying is, "I'm concerned about your fruits. You don't have fruits that could be analogous to the refreshing cold water. You don't have the fruits that could be analogous to the hot relaxing and energizing water that when you get out, you feel better. The point is that Laodicea's fruits are not useful to God. This is a serious point Christ makes here. Verse 17, now it's even worse.

17) Because [you say], I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and [know] not that [you are] ... (KJV)

Christ is talking spiritually here.

17b) ... (spiritually) wretched, ... (spiritually) miserable, ... (spiritually) poor, and (especially spiritually) blind, and (you are spiritually) naked: (KJV)

There are no good fruits, none at all. Verse 18, because of that:

18) I counsel [you] to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that [you may] be rich; and white raiment, that [you may] be clothed, and that the shame of [your] nakedness [does] not appear; and anoint [your] eyes with [eye salve], that [you may] see.

See all these things—your blindness, your nakedness, and the fact that you are very poor spiritually. The Laodiceans were spiritually blind to their lack of fruit. They thought they had it all. Christ says, "You don't and the sad thing is you don't know that you don't have these things." That's a bad place to be in. Verse 19:

19) As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. (KJV)

This stems from the problem of first love, where we think that no bad things happen to God's people. God says, "If I love you, I'm going to rebuke you and chasten you."

This reminds me of my high school football coach. His name was Blunt, and he was. He was a former guard for the Philadelphia Eagles in the very early stages of the NFL. He was a giant of a man and he was our football coach. One day, he was riding me. I was in the end and he was just on me. It seemed like every play I was doing something wrong or I didn't do it this way. "You have to do it that way. You have to be tougher. You have to" I guess that at the end of the practice I was showing him by my body

language that I was feeling down. So, he got me aside. There was still practice left. He pulled me over to the side, took me out of the game. And he says, "Look...." I'm this scrawny high school kid looking up at this huge man. He says, "If I'm not on you, it means I have given up on you. The fact that I'm riding you means that you have some potential. So, listen to what I'm saying and get your fanny back out there and get to work."

I never forgot that because you can apply this principle to God. God says, "Those that I love, I rebuke. I chasten." And, He does so because He hasn't given up on us. And, He wants us to change, to work, to grow, to be like Him and His Son, Jesus Christ. Verse 20, Christ says:

20) Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: ... (KJV)

Now, time is running out. He's knocking at the door.

20b) ... if any man hear my voice, ... (KJV)

Remember earlier in Matthew 13:22. We talked about *choking the word*. When we choke the word, guess what? We don't hear God's voice. We don't hear it at all. And, Christ says, *if any man hear my voice*, (and we had better not be choking the word):

20 continued) and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. (KJV)

That will be at the marriage supper. We know that. We've heard about that.

21) To him that [overcomes] will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne (on the right hand of God the Father).

22) He that (has) an ear, let him hear what the Spirit (says) unto the churches. (KJV)

So, God says, "The key is you have to bring forth fruits that show you are converted. You have to bring forth fruits to show me that you want to be like Jesus Christ and Me." That's why we're here. That's why God calls us—it's called a conversion.

Now, let's stop here and talk about two types of conversion.

The first type is an intellectual "conversion". And, I say "conversion" in quotes because it is not a conversion to salvation. You could say that it's an intellectual attraction. There are people that came into the church focused primarily on prophecy, conspiracy theories, etc. They studied that. Then all of sudden they found this church talked about it in earlier days—Mr. Armstrong, Garner Ted Armstrong, and others. So, those people were intellectually attracted to prophecy, world events, conspiracy theories, etc.

Then there were others that came in that were attracted to the church's teaching that the man was the lord and master of the wife. "I like this. This is cool. I can come into a church and now I can rule with a rod of iron and the church approves it. This is great." Certain people were attracted to that.

Others came into the church and saw there was a hierarchy of increasing titles, power, etc. Some people said, "I want a part of this. I can be somebody. I can have a title." Some people went to Ambassador College, said all the right things, were ordained as ministers or deacons, and then were able to exercise authority.

Then, others just wanted to belong. They wanted to be part of a group and to have fellowship.

So, all these people were attracted to the church, but none of them had godly conversions. God was not calling these individuals to salvation. They left over time. When the Worldwide Church of God blew up in the '90s, fifty percent simply disappeared because many of those were not called to salvation. They became disillusioned, offended, saw greener pastures somewhere else, and off they went.

So, we let's not confuse an intellectual attraction or conversion with a spiritual conversion to salvation. A spiritual conversion to salvation is a godly conversion of the heart—a change of what's inside us. It's a conversion of one's innermost being—who we are. Let's go to Ephesians 4:22. This is the crux of conversion. (³ Colossians 3 mentions this also.) Ephesians 4:22, this is what we're called to do. God wants this conversion.

Ephesians 4:22. *That [you] put off concerning the former [conduct] the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; (KJV)*

And, if we're honest with ourselves, when we came into the church, we were pretty awful. We were corrupt. And, notice:

23) And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24) And that [you] put on the new man, which after God ... (KJV)

"After" in the Greek means *after the manner of*. So, you put on the new man, which is after the manner of God. In other words, to be like God. That is our goal. That is what conversion should be all about—going from the old person to the new person and the new person is the image of God. Colossians³ talks about in the image of Jesus Christ.

Even those with a godly conversion can slide backward over time, if we're not careful. We've all been there and all done that. We can take our calling for granted and not

³ **Colossians 3:10.** And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: (KJV)

realize what a precious calling we, of all the billions that have lived on the earth—some estimate a 100 billion have lived on the earth—and here we are just a few thousands. We can take our calling for granted. We can take the church for granted because the church is the body of Christ, after all. I guarantee you the scattered brethren don't, but those of us who have multiple choices of where to go to church.... Certain towns have all the different groups and brethren can just bop around from one to the other. Then, it's easy to take church for granted. However, when you live out in the boonies, or if, in the past, you were neglected or abused, then you don't take church for granted. You just don't. So, not appreciating the church, not appreciating our calling can happen.

Also, marriages can grow apart over time. The demands of raising children, not exercising God's spirit on a daily basis in a marriage, and, then, health trials, job trials—all of these can take their time during this long middle part of our journey. And, we always have to be on guard.

But, hey, there is good news. With God, there is always good news. In the middle stage of our conversion, many have found a second conversion, a third conversion, or a fourth conversion over a period of years. Let me give you an example. My second conversion, I'm embarrassed to say occurred about thirty years after baptism.

I've mentioned this before, but in the early days when I came in the church right out of the military, the church stressed obedience. Crack the whip. Rule with a rod of iron. Hop to, and you'll be pleasing to God, and we do have to obey God. The church did not stress or speak about love hardly at all because it was so "Protestant-y". The Protestants just dripped syrup all over love. The church at that time ran as far away from that as one could.

Then, about thirty years after my baptism, I was sitting one morning studying. I read this verse as though I had never read it before. I had read it, but I blew right past it. All of a sudden, I read this verse and it jumped off the page as though I had never seen it before. Let's go to 1 John 3 verse 14. It was ... it's the two by four between the eyes of a dumb guy and that was me. You would think I would have gotten it after thirty years, but I didn't. 1 John 3:14 tells us that we can know.... How would you like to know if you've passed from death to life? How would you like to know that? I mean really know it.

1 John 3:14. *We know that we have passed from death unto life, ... (KJV)*

How, how can we know?

14b) ... because we love the brethren. He that [loves] not his brother [abides] in death. (KJV)

I had been a deacon, been an elder and it was mostly a matter of making sure everything was shipshape. Everything's in order. People are hopping to and all those kinds of things. Finally, I read this and I said to myself, "I've got it all wrong because if

you want to know whether you've passed from death to life, it's whether or not you love the brethren." Then, with my eyes finally opened like this, let's go to Philippians 2:1 to see another verse that ties into this. I finally started putting scriptures together and realized I had to make some changes in my behavior and in my attitude and in my approach. I'll read this out of the New King James. Notice what Paul says.

Philippians 2:1. *Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if (there is) any comfort of love, ... (NKJV)*

We all want comfort of love. We all want consolation in Jesus Christ.

1b) ... if (there is) any fellowship of the Spirit, ... (NKJV)

We want that.

1 continued) if (there is) any affection and mercy, (NKJV)

And, all of us want affection and mercy. Paul says:

2) fulfill my joy by being like-minded, ... (NKJV)

And, how can we be like-minded? What is the goal of being like-minded?

2b) ... having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. (NKJV)

How do demonstrate that? Verse 3:

3) Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, ... (NKJV)

And, guess what? Power, title, and authority breed selfish ambition and conceit. People who have selfish ambition and conceit aspire to title and authority. Here we're told just the opposite—*don't let anything be done through selfish ambition or conceit*, but here is the way we should behave ourselves, especially ministers.

3b) ... but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. (NKJV)

That applies to ministers. It also applies to mates. Husbands need to esteem their wives better than themselves rather than having a whip and chair and barking orders.

3 continued) ... let each esteem others better than himself.

4) Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (NKJV)

Then, Paul, in verse 5, summarizes how we do this.

5) *Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, (NKJV)*

That's the solution. So, whether we're in a second or a third conversion or still working on our first one, the point is if we don't have the mind of Christ, if we don't have His approach and His attitude willing to die, willing to sacrifice as He did, we're not going very far. And, we will slip and slide, into oblivion eventually.

So, as an elder when these verses jumped off the page, I learned I had better focus on loving and serving the brethren and being a better husband. I had to do a 180° turn in my behavior, in my approach.

Then, I'll just mention my third conversion very briefly. I have a long way to go. It happened starting about seven or eight years ago. I had to learn how God wants us to face opposition. Do we fight back and return evil for evil? And, I had done this before.

I went to military school, went into the air force, God called me, and I came right into the church. Growing up, my dad said—my dad was a rough, gruff cowboy—"If somebody punches you in the nose, you punch him back but harder." That's the way my dad brought me up and the military reinforced that attitude. Coming into the church, order, the rod of iron, etc. also reinforced that. It only took me about forty years to learn this lesson. That is, instead of returning evil for evil when somebody opposes you or gossips about you or says nasty things about you, you have to develop patience, kindness, longsuffering, and forbearing. Each of those is a sermon in and of itself. That's what I hope to be doing now. I work on it.

When God first calls us, sometimes during that first stage, we don't get a lot. In the second stage, we start learning and God gives us years. I'm sad to say that it took me decades. Look back, analyze yourself, look at the Bible, and apply it to the self. Then, all of a sudden, red flags appear, sirens go on, and you say, "I need to do this or that."

Regardless of where you are in your journey, in the beginning or in the middle, take hope. Let's go to Hebrews 12:1. All of us can take hope. If you're studying for baptism, if you've been baptized a few years ago, ten years ago, or if you've been in the church for decades, Hebrews 12:1, this is the hope we can take because we are not alone.

Hebrews 12:1. *Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, ... (KJV)*

We have a cloud of witnesses all around us. What that tells us is that many have successfully completed the journey long before us. God called them. They went through trials, most of them far greater than any we have gone through, particularly, as we heard in the Middle Ages or early Christianity when the Roman Empire persecuted Christians. We have this cloud of witnesses that have gone before us and they have succeeded. We can take hope in that. Going on verse 1:

1b) ... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which [does] so easily beset us, ... (KJV)

And, it does.

1 continued) ... And let us run with patience the race [journey] that is set before us, (KJV)

One of the Pacific elders has to remind me occasionally because my nature is put my nose to the grindstone and go and go and go. Then, when you drop from exhaustion, you just get up and go some more. And, I need reminding from time to time, a couple of times a years. He tells me, "Rick, remember, we're not in a sprint. We're in a marathon." And, we are. We look at the long view. Especially as we get older, we have to pace ourselves, as you all know.

The good news is that many have come through this journey and we can take hope. And, their memories are all around us. Their records are in history and in the Bible.

Point 3: The Latter Part of Our Journey

For those who have been in the church for decades and those who have gray heads and are getting older, this applies to us, but, frankly, it should apply to even those who have been baptized only a few years because this is the goal. At this stage in our lives, the latter part of our spiritual journey, we should be filled with producing godly fruit. We've studied the Bible for decades. We've had trials. We've been able to see ourselves. How many Passovers have we kept? How many trials have come our way?

Let's go back to Matthew 13, verse 23 this time, and look at the last one, the fourth one. This one:

Matthew 13 23. *But he who received seed into the good ground is he that [hears] the word, and [understands] it (That's us.); which also [bears] fruit, and [brings] forth, some an hundredfold, some [sixtyfold], some [thirtyfold]. (KJV)*

In the latter stage of our spiritual journey, we now have a lot of Bible study under our belts and we begin to understand God's Word better and better. None of us understands it completely—and we never will in this life—but the more we study, the more we investigate God's Word, the more God will reveal it to us. And, we finally begin truly to understand God's Word, which is what I did in my second conversion and third conversion. The words were there all the time. I just didn't get it, but over time, we do. We finally begin to understand God's Word.

The Greek word here for "understand" is Strong's number 4920. It means *to put together*. We've already heard *here a little, there a little ... precept upon precept*. "To understand" means *to put together, that is, mentally to comprehend, to be wise*. So, we

finally put together God's word—get all of the relevant scriptures on the subject, put it together, and come to an understanding.

We also learn to study God's word for what God's word plainly says. Not what somebody else says about God's word. Sadly, I know some folks in other groups that don't study the Bible directly. They study the church's booklet about a subject. Then, look at the Bible as the booklet refers to a scripture. They go to the Bible, read the scripture, and come back to the booklet. So, the booklet is the basis of the study. Yet, with any booklet written by a human being, that is what man says about a subject.

We need to learn to go into the Bible to see what it really tells us. Sometimes we might be surprised that what the Bible says is not what we thought. What the Bible says is not what somebody told us. Then, we truly comprehend God's word. Then, we can apply it to ourselves and begin to bear fruit. And, another fact in these latter days is old age teaches us things we don't learn, can't learn when we're younger. Experience gives us wisdom.

Will Rogers once said: "Good judgment comes from experience. Most experience comes from bad judgment." I'll say it again. "Good judgment comes from experience. Most experience comes from bad judgment." We learn by the college of hard knocks, but at this stage, we hope we've started learning from our mistakes.

When people come to me in counseling, I tell them that we all sin. We're all human. We all make mistakes. So, you sinned here. The key is whether you are going to do it again. And, again. And, again. And, again. And, are you going to come back to me five years later with the same problem you had in the beginning? God understands when we sin, we make mistakes, but He doesn't want us to repeat those mistakes. In this latter stage, we finally learn through overcoming these mistakes, weaknesses, faults that apart from God we can do nothing. Boy, have I learned that.

Let's go to John 15 and we'll begin in verse 1. This is very basic, very simple. The problem is sometimes our thick heads get in the way. And, sometimes we just don't get it. I am poster child for not getting it for decades. John 15:1, Christ says:

John 15:1. I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. (KJV)

He is the one that takes care of the vine. I'm the vine. He takes care of the vine. Verse 2:

2) Every branch in me that [bears] not fruit he [the Father] [takes] away: and every branch that [bears] fruit, he [the Father] [purges] it, ... (KJV)

The Greek means *to prune* it.

2b) ... that it may bring forth more fruit.

3) Now [you] are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you.

- 4) *Abide in me, and I [will abide] in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can [you], except [you] abide in me.*
5) *I am the vine, [you] are the branches: He that [abides] in me, and I in him, the same [brings] forth much fruit: (KJV)*

And, Christ tells us why.

- 5b) *... for without me [you] can do nothing. (KJV)*

I have learned that so many times over the years. I blast out and do something, didn't pray about it, didn't think about it, and didn't ask for God's guidance on it. You go out to do something that just blows up.

Several years ago, we had a man join us in the Pacific Church of God. He came with a resume, a pedigree. He had done this in one group, done that in another group, had had this title or that position. When he first started attending and met people, he would mention this pedigree and this resume. This went on for a Feast and several Holy Days.

Finally, he approached one of the elders, and he said—you could tell he had an agenda behind all this. He said, "Is Rick up for the job?" Now, when you ask that question, there is an agenda behind that. This wise elder looked at him and said, "I hope not." The man said, "What? You don't hope he is?" Then this elder explained, "If he's not up for the job, then that means God will do it through him."

None of us can rely on ourselves. And, we learn that because when we do rely on ourselves, it blows up. The point being that God needs to do the work through us. Not because we're so great or we have all this ability or all this talent and can blast through on our own. No. God needs to do the work through us. When we rely on ourselves and God is not involved, it will not last. It will fail. We learn in this last stage that we are nothing; we can accomplish nothing apart from God and Christ.

We learn that and as we get older, it's more evident because endurance wanes as you age; your strength wanes as you get older. Your mind isn't as sharp as it was when you were in your twenties. So, God has to do it. He has to take up the slack. More importantly, we rely on Him and not on ourselves. That's true for a church. That's true for a local congregation. That's true for a family, and that's true for individuals.

Let's go back to John 15, now verse 6. Christ said:

- 6) *If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.*
7) *If [you] abide in me, and my words ... (KJV)*

We can't understand Christ's words if we don't study the Bible.

7b) ... and my words abide in you, [you] shall ask what [you] will, and it shall be done unto you.

8) Herein is my Father glorified, ... (KJV)

We glorify God when we *bear much fruit*. We glorify God.

8b) Herein is my Father glorified, that [you] bear much fruit; so shall [you] be my disciples. (KJV)

So, in this latter part of our spiritual journey, we bear fruit by doing the only thing we can do. And, that is yield to God. That's our job. If we will yield to God, let God work through us, speak through us, act through us, that is the entirety of our job. We have to be humbly yielding to God, wanting His will and not our will, using His strength and not our strength. That is the key to this latter stage of our spiritual journey. And, for those of you in the beginning part, you can learn it now. And, bless you, if you learn it now.

Point 4: This is the point of the sermon, the lesson is: It's How We End our Spiritual Journey Not How We Begin It.

God and Christ are concerned how we have developed godly character. As we get closer to the end of our spiritual journey, God wants to see His character, Christ's character in us. Let's go to Matthew 12 and verse 33. This is the admonition that we have. Christ says:

Matthew 12:33. *Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit. (KJV)*

It's the same for us.

34) *O generation of vipers, ... (KJV)*

He's talking to those spiritual hypocrites.

34b) *... how can [you], being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth [speaks].*

35) *A good man out of the good treasure of the heart [brings] forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure [brings] forth evil things.*

36) *But I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.*

37) *For by [your] words [you shall] be justified, and by [your] words [you shall] be condemned. (KJV)*

As, we get closer to the end, we realize that we'll have to account for not only our words, but our deeds, and most importantly the motives behind the words and the deeds, which comes from our hearts. What were our intentions? What were our motives in doing or saying what we did?

Let's notice another parable illustrating the end of our spiritual journey. This is a parable right after The Parable of The Ten Virgins. Let's go to Matthew 25. This has been covered I don't know how many times, but we skim right over this. The point is, it applies to our spiritual journey. It's important not how we begin, where we begin, it's how we end. Matthew 25, verse 14, I'm going to read this out of the NLT.

Matthew 25:14. *Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a trip. He called together his servants and [gave them] money to [invest for him] while he was gone.*

15) He gave five bags of [gold] to one, two bags of [gold] to another, and one bag of [gold] to the last—dividing it in proportion to their ability. Then, he then left on his trip. (NLT)

Here Christ acknowledges that we are not born equal in ability, in skill, in intelligence. Some people have a skill that they're born with. They come out of the womb being able to fix things. They come out of the womb being able to sing and play instruments, etc. So, Christ acknowledges that everyone is different this way. Verse 16.

16) "The servant who received the five bags of [gold] began (immediately) to invest the money and [soon doubled it].

17) The servant with two bags ... [he doubled it].

18) But the servant who received the one bag ... dug a hole ... hid the master's money (for safekeeping).

19) After a long time ... (NLT)

Here we are and it has been long time. Nobody thought we would be here this year.

19) After a long time their master returned from his trip and (they were) called ... to give account.... (NLT)

We know that the two servants who doubled their master's money, the master said, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Here is your reward." Then, in verse 24:

24) "Then the servant with the one bag of [gold] came and said, 'Master, I knew you were a [hard] man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you didn't cultivate.

25) I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here [it] is ...'

26) "But the master replied, ... (NLT)

Notice what he says. He says two things about this last servant. He says:

26b) 'You wicked and (you) lazy servant! You think I'm a hard man, do you? ... [harvesting] crops I didn't plant and [gathering] crops I didn't cultivate, (NLT)

The point is, He says, "You have to work. You have to exercise My spirit." Not only does God give us talents. When we're baptized, we're given the gift of the holy spirit. God wants to know if we're working with the holy spirit, are we exercising it, and are we using it. Verse 27, He says:

27) ... [you] [at least put] my money in the bank [so] I could have ... some interest....'

28) ... 'Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of [gold]. (NLT)

Here's the principle. It's interesting how this translation reads. I like it.

29) To those who use well what they are given (talents, the holy spirit), even more will be given (talents, the holy spirit), and they will have an abundance. But from those who [are unfaithful, not trusting God], even what little they have will be taken away.

30) Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (NLT)

Christ acknowledges that we don't start our journey on the same level with the same talents and with the same abilities. We are all different. We have to use well what we are given, not only talents, but also what we are given when we are baptized and we receive the holy spirit.

It's as if we're on a journey to the penthouse. Some of us walk in on the ground floor and then start climbing the stairs. But there are some people who start five levels down in the basement.

Let me give you an example. A young man grew up, and starting when he was age eleven, he was molested by his two older brothers every morning for five years. Can you imagine before school that going on in the house? And, his dad was mean and gruff. The young man told me of an incident—I don't know what he did wrong. He was in his early teens, and his dad picked him up, threw him across the living room. The boy hit the wall on the far side about the middle of the wall, slammed down to the floor, and his father came up and kicked him in the head.

Now, he's in his twenties and he wants to be baptized. This young man is starting five or ten levels down in the basement. Most of us have had reasonable parents and, in some cases, loving, delightful parents. The key is: At the end of the day, it is what we do with what we have been given. We have to be useful to God. We have to bear fruit to God. Let's go to 1 Peter 1, verse 17. This is the beauty of this because of God's nature and God's character. Thankfully, God is like this. God doesn't give preferential treatment to people—the wealthy, the intelligent, those who have an abundance of skills.

1 Peter 1:17. *And if [you] call on the Father, who without respect of persons [judges] according to every man's work [what he does with what he has], pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: (KJV)*

We are judged every moment based on what we've been given. And, God wants to see progress. God wants to see fruit. We're being judged not by where we started, but where we end up. And, God understands where we started. If we double, triple, or quadruple what we have been given—maybe that's not as much as somebody who started four floors up, but God doesn't care. He's not a respecter of persons. The emphasis here is how we end out journey.

Point 5: What does all this have to do with the Last Great Day?

We're here on my favorite holy day. It's been mentioned before that for several people this is their favorite holy day. On this day, all who have ever lived will be given the same opportunity that we have now. Everybody will be given the same opportunity for salvation. That was the final piece of the puzzle when I was becoming converted: What does God do with all the people who don't even know He exists? Once I understood the meaning of the Last Great Day, it fit. That was the last puzzle piece. It was clear and I knew this was the truth.

Look at the majority of people on the earth today. Most people live and have lived, looking backing into recorded history, with no hope. They were born in poverty. They died in poverty suffering misery in between. They lived lives of misery. They died early from many things including disease, birth defects, and war. For most of these people, there was no joy in their lives nor was there hope in their lives.

Many individuals will need healing before they can go forward. Those who are mentally ill will need healing before they can go forward. Examples of others that will need healing are those who have destroyed their minds with drugs or alcohol, those with perverted minds (pedophiles, serial killers, mass murderers), those who have lived having been demon possessed that when they died, the demon left them, all those who practiced evil—not just ones made a mistake now and then, but all of those who made a life of practicing evil like the Stalin's, the Hitler's, Mao Tse-Tung, and people like that. They all will have an opportunity to be in God's Kingdom.

Let's go to 1 Timothy 2:4. This is God's desire. This is what God wants. We're told:

1 Timothy 2:4. *Who [God] will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. (KJV)*

The knowledge of the truth is the knowledge of God, the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and the knowledge of their law. God say that He wants everybody to come to that knowledge and to be saved.

Turn over to 2 Peter 3:9. It tells us that God doesn't forget His promises.

2 Peter 3:9. *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. (KJV)*

The point is: We have to have the same desire as God. All these people, whether they are Muslims, Chinese, wherever they originate, whatever their religion may be, they are God's children and some day, they will have the same opportunity as we do. Who are we to condemn them because they don't know? We can condemn their sinful actions, but we don't condemn them because they are going to be our brothers and sisters some day.

God is going to give them a new heart because they can't repent of a sin they don't see. So, this new heart will allow them to see their past, what they did during their lives. They will have to have a healed mind in order to do that. So, this day, the Last Great Day, marks the time when all these people begin to see and begin to repent. The prophet Ezekiel talks about this healing. Let's go to Ezekiel 36 and read verse 26 because this gets right to the point. God is speaking and He says:

Ezekiel 36:26. *A new heart also will I give you, ... (KJV)*

The Hebrew word for "heart" means *mind, the will*, and it also means *the center of anything*. Referring to us, it's our center. Baker and Carpenter's Complete Word Study Dictionary of the Old Testament says, "*It usually refers to the seat of one's inner nature.*" That's a good definition.

God will give those people resurrected on the Last Great Day *a new inner nature*, not like the one they had before. Going on in verse 26, in addition to a new heart:

26b) *... a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you [a] heart of flesh. (KJV)*

Not a stony heart that can't be molded or shaped, but a soft heart of flesh that can be molded and shaped. So, God will give them a new nature and a new mind. Let's look at Ezekiel 37, verse 5. In context, the setting of this verse is at the valley of the dry bones. Let's read verse 5.

Ezekiel 37:5. *Thus [says] the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and [you] shall live: (KJV)*

Verse 14:

Ezekiel 37:14. *And shall put my spirit [the holy spirit] in you, and [you] shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall [you] know that I the Lord have spoken it, and performed it, [says] the Lord. (KJV)*

This is a promise. Take it to the bank. Count on it.

So, those with perverted minds, sick minds, and polluted minds will have a healing. They will see themselves, and then, they will see their actions for the very first time. They will repent and then, they can start the journey we're on now. This Last Great Day symbolizes that. If those in this resurrection grasp the future opportunity they will have, if they use well what God does for them and gives them, guess what? All will end well for them.

Let's conclude. We look forward to this time. It's my favorite holy day. Let's go to John 4 and verse 34. This the time we look forward to in the future. John 4:34, Christ is speaking:

John 4:34. *Jesus [says] unto them, My meat [my food, my sustenance, my desire] is to do the will of him [God the Father] that sent me, and to finish his [God the Father's] work.*

35) Say [you] not, [Yet, there] are ... four months, and then [comes the] harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest. (KJV)

That's the world we live in today. It's getting close, close for us anyway. Verse 36:

36) And he that [reaps receives] wages, and [gathers] fruit unto life eternal: that both he that [sows (God and Christ)] and he that [reaps (the elect)] may rejoice.... (KJV)

What a time of rejoicing with God and Christ when we can serve them and help them serve the billions that will be resurrected on this day and they can start the same process, the same journey, the same walk that we're on right now.

Here's the key. All of us have made horrible sins and mistakes in our lives. And, all those who will be resurrected on this day have made horrible sins and horrible mistakes in their lives. Many have never had a chance. So, we can all take hope on this day. For us, it's not where you begin, it's how you end. For them, it's not what they've done in the past; it's not what they did before the resurrection it's what they do from this point on, and, then, how they end.

If both groups, those called today (us) and those resurrected at the Last Great Day (them) follow God, use God's spirit, bring forth fruit, guess what? It will end well for all of us. That's what the joy is of this day. No matter what has happened in our lives, no matter what our parents have done to us, no matter what our culture or what our background is, it makes no difference. No matter what our handicaps are, it makes no difference because if we yield to God and Christ, it will end well for all of us.