

Christianity is Not A Safe Place

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If you've kept up with the news over the last several years, probably one of the things you've noticed is the phenomenon that's sweeping a lot of U.S. college campuses of students demanding that their experience on campus be what they refer to as a safe space. When using this term, they're not referring to being in an environment where they're safe from any physical danger or abuse; that's not what they mean by that phrase. They're describing an environment in which they're protected from anything that might make them feel uncomfortable or in any way hurt their feelings or offend them, such as opinions or points of view with which they don't agree or that might in any way emotionally rub them wrong. They feel they should be insulated from this. It's a phenomenon that's sweeping across U.S. college campuses with students and even faculty oftentimes supporting this idea and encouraging it.

By way of introduction, I would like to share an article from the website huffingtonpost.com that speaks to this phenomenon and the negative effects it can have. Let me give a disclaimer before I go any further; if you're familiar at all with The Huffington Post, they're kind of a left-leaning publication I typically wouldn't quote from, but I think this particular article does have a lot of value. It was posted on their website, on March 30, 2017; it's titled "Safe Spaces On College Campuses Are Creating Intolerant Students" and it's authored by Flemming Rose [senior fellow, Cato Institute]. To quote the article (I'm just going to read the first portion, not its entirety):

Van Jones, an American political and civil rights activist and former advisor to former President Barack Obama, recently spoke at the University of Chicago. The host asked Jones about the increasing demand from students to be protected from ideas and speakers they don't like. Van Jones's response deserves to be quoted at length. It was a compelling argument for political and ideological diversity on college campuses and for young people's need to be challenged in order to grow and mature as human beings and maybe at some point make a difference in society. Jones castigated ideological self-segregation.

"There are two ideas about safe spaces," he explained, referring to some college students' request for "safe spaces," where they can get together without being exposed to ideas or speech that might make them feel uncomfortable. "One is a very good idea, and one is a terrible idea." The good idea, he said, is "being physically safe on campus, not being subjected to sexual harassment and physical abuse." Jones continued, "but there is another view that is now ascendant ... it's a horrible view which is that 'I need to be safe ideologically. I need to be safe emotionally. I need to feel good all the time and if someone

else says something I don't like that is a problem for everyone else including administration.” Jones suggested that safe spaces—insulating students from certain ideas—contradicts the purpose of a university. “I think that it's a terrible idea for the following reason: I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe emotionally. I want you to be strong. That's different. I'm not going to pave the jungle for you. Put on some boots, and learn how to deal with adversity. I'm not going to take the weights out of the gym. That's the whole point of the gym. You can't live on a campus where people say stuff you don't like? [...] You are creating a kind of liberalism that the minute it crosses the street into the real world, is not just useless but obnoxious and dangerous.”

What he's referring to is an environment that's not preparing them to deal with the real world because in the real world you're not in a safe space where you're isolated from hearing opinions that might hurt your feelings or be disagreeable in some way. This has resulted in students oftentimes not only becoming very narrow-minded but ill-prepared for the real world, and if you've seen stories of what has happened at U.C. Berkeley or other universities, where students just violently riot at the very idea of a speaker coming on campus who might present a point of view with which they disagree, it's getting to the point that if they disagree with something they just react out of anger—violently riot and act out—which doesn't prepare them to deal with the real world.

In the real world you have to deal with difficult people, you have to deal with points of view that you don't agree with. It also doesn't teach them how to defend their point of view or to defend an argument; in other words, to be able to articulate and to prove from facts and evidence, and not just from an emotional outburst, why your point of view might be better or more valid than another point of view. Being able to analyze and debate that—they don't learn those skills if everything is insulated and they never face any kind of pain or anything that's difficult.

You might be asking why I'm introducing a sermon with this subject. What's the relevance of this particular topic to Christianity? I bring this up because not only is this extant in our culture, but oftentimes the ideas in our culture can kind of bleed into the Church of God, into our viewpoint of Christianity. If you are familiar with the idea of what's oftentimes referred to as the health, wealth and prosperity gospel—the idea that if you're following God He's always going to pave the path in front you and protect you from everything and everything is always going to be comfortable—it's kind of similar to this idea. Oftentimes people can fall into this idea, and even in the Church of God, even when we might know intellectually that that's not accurate, sometimes that still affects people's expectations of how their Christian life is going to play out.

It can be just as harmful to us as Christians to swallow this idea as it is for college students in thinking that this “safe space” environment is preparing them for the real world. Today we're going to look at this from the perspective of our Christian life, not

from a college campus perspective. If you want a title for the sermon, it's Christianity Is Not a Safe Space.

There is a popular idea, particularly in professing Christianity—and if you're familiar with a popular preacher in the U.S. in the Protestant circles named Joel Osteen, he's gotten very wealthy preaching a health, wealth and prosperity gospel—that if you obey God and follow Him, He's always going to rain down blessings on you, everything is always going to feel good, and you're always going to be protected from challenges—a nice-sounding notion. It feels good to us and reassuring to think that. It creates an absolutely delusional view of Christianity because that's just not how it works.

There's an important distinction we first have to understand when examining this subject, because if you look at the promises in the Old Covenant, particularly Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 (the blessings and cursings chapters), you will see God promising Israel, if you obey Me consistently I'm going to rain down blessings constantly on you. The latter part of those chapters follow with, if you disobey and you rebel against what I tell you, here's all the trouble you're going to face. A very important thing to understand is these were the terms of a *physical* covenant—He wasn't offering them salvation. The Holy Spirit and salvation were not on the table in that covenant. This was a situation where God was offering, if you follow Me and you be My people, I'll be your God, I'll make you a model nation and I will make your physical life very comfortable and very enjoyable.

If you think about it they weren't being offered the Holy Spirit and salvation—all they had was that physical life. If that's the situation, what's the definition of the best deal you could possibly get? It's living out your physical life with as much pleasure and enjoyment as possible, with as little pain and suffering as possible because once you're dead, that's it. Salvation wasn't offered at that point. Realize, in the New Covenant, when the Holy Spirit and salvation are put on the table, that's what I like to call a game changer. Now the reward is not enjoying this physical life, it's eternal life in the Kingdom of God, it's becoming a God being. It's dwelling together with God the Father and Jesus Christ for all eternity.

As Christ tells us, to whom much is given much is required. When you're offered this fantastic reward the rules change of what's required to get there. This is a very fundamental thing for us to understand about New Covenant Christianity, because if we approach New Covenant Christianity from the point of view that as long as I obey God, everything is going to go good for me, you are setting yourself up for disillusionment because that is not reality. To quote from Van Jones's statement from the article, he says it's not just obnoxious, it's downright dangerous. That's a downright dangerous view for us to have of Christianity because it simply does not work that way. Turn over to 2 Timothy 3:12. As we read this I want you to notice what an all-encompassing, dogmatic statement this is:

2 Timothy 3:12 ... *all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.* (NKJV)

Please notice there's not an asterisk next to it that says, I'm really just referring to a small percentage of people and everybody else gets a pain-free, easy pass. That's not what it says. It says, *all* who want to follow Christ Jesus are going to suffer persecution. There's only one name under heaven in which you can be saved so pursuing salvation requires that you're following Jesus Christ, and He's telling you it's an absolute promise this is going to be a bumpy road, this is going to be difficult. You are going to have to suffer to get the great reward, you've got to pay the cost required for that great reward. That's what He's telling us.

You can see this is something stated numerous times throughout the New Testament—we're only going to scratch the surface but you can get a big stack of scriptures that all say the same thing, that tell us that this is a normal expectation. As I like to put it, it's not an if, it's a when. It's not a negotiable thing that might happen, no, you're told it's going to happen; it's just a question of *when* it happens. Turn over to Romans 8; let's notice just a few scriptures to see that this is a common theme throughout the Bible. It's not just an exception that happens to a select few. As I like to put it, this is part of the terms of the contract. The covenant that we enter into at baptism—this is part of the terms that we agreed to when we went in the water.

Romans 8:16 *The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,*
17) *and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,*

Notice the condition stated here to be a joint heir with Christ. What is the requirement that comes with that?

17 continued) *if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.*
(NKJV)

To whom much is given, much is required. To be a joint heir with Christ, you have to suffer like Christ suffered. We're going to see in a minute the Bible very clearly defines for us what suffering as Christ suffered means—we don't have to guess, it very clearly tells us. Sometimes when we go through trials and difficulties in life, or particularly if we're going through a difficult time and life is beating us up, it's easy for us as carnal human beings to think, is God against me, is He up there looking for ways to make life difficult for me and make it hurt? We have to understand this is for our ultimate good. If we read the next verse Paul puts it in perspective.

18) *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.* (NKJV)

He's telling us that this is going to be a hard, bumpy road and you're going to have to endure to the end; it's not going to be easy, this is not a safe space environment where you're protected from everything—you're going to face pain. God is going to be with you to deliver you through it, if you endure, but I want you to understand that the reward at the end is so wonderful, it is so fantastic that when you receive that and you look back at this, you'll go, this was *nothing*, and if this is what I had to go through to receive this fantastic reward, it was worth it. He wants us to understand that so we have that encouragement when we're facing difficult trials, that it's all worth it because the reward at the end is going to be so fantastic, we won't care what we had to suffer to get there.

We have to understand that in the Christian life, this is not a safe space, it's not a situation where, yes, God is there to protect us, and He's there to help us and deliver us through whatever we face—He doesn't set anybody up to fail. But He promises us it's going to be painful and it's going to be difficult because that's to make us grow. It says we have to suffer with Christ—suffer as He suffered, to receive the reward. Let's notice the biblical definition of that because we don't have to guess, the Bible very clearly defines it for us. Turn over to 1 Peter 2 and we'll see here the Bible very clearly defines what suffering as Christ suffered means.

1 Peter 2:19 *For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.* (NKJV)

When it says suffering wrongfully, what it's referring to, as we're going to see in the next couple of verses, is suffering even when you've been righteous. That's what it means by suffering wrongfully. In other words, you didn't sin; this isn't as a result of your sins or your bad decisions and you're reaping the consequences, this is you've been righteous and you're getting this anyway.

20) *For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently?* (NKJV)

In other words, you're getting bad results because you've sinned and you're just reaping the consequences.

20 continued) ... *But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God.*

21) *For to this you were called* [notice this is again a normal expectation for New Covenant Christianity], *because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:*

22) *“Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;*

23) *who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously;*

24) *who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.*

25) *For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.* (NKJV)

It very clearly defines for us here what suffering as Christ suffered means. Think about that, just the very term, *suffering as Christ suffered*. How did Christ suffer? It wasn't because of His sins—He lived a perfect life. He never once messed up His entire existence as a human being, so it wasn't a matter of, well, He sinned and now He's paying the consequences, or He made these bad decisions and now He's just reaping the consequences of that—no, He lived a totally righteous life and in spite of all that, He suffered anyway. That's the very definition, when it says we have to take part in His suffering—that's what it means.

Even when we're living righteously, we're going to face adversity, we're going to face trials, we're going to face pain in our life and we have to endure it as a condition of a Christian life to receiving salvation—that's how it works. It's important for us to understand that there's a purpose in all this. This isn't a mean God sitting up there looking at how He can stick it to us and make life painful because He likes watching His children squirm—that's not the case at all. This is a loving, caring God who's trying to develop us and wants us to succeed but He's warning us, I'm giving you a fantastic reward so I'm going to make you work for it. You've got to put all into this because this is all done with a purpose in mind for what's going to be accomplished. This is a normal expectation for a Christian and it's a requirement to be in the Kingdom of God, and the Bible directly tells us that. Turn over to Acts 14:21.

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

He's saying, this is part of entering the Kingdom of God. What I've just read is out of the New King James translation. I'd like to read that last phrase of verse 22 out of the New Living Translation because I think it makes the point just a little bit clearer. It reads, "They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God." In other words if you want the great reward, you have to put the work in, you have to go through this and it requires suffering. It requires difficulty and hard challenges. We're going to be tested, we're going to be tried and put through situations that make us grow, and it can be difficult and painful for us. That's a normal expectation and it's done with a purpose.

As a general rule, we physical human beings don't like pain. We don't like things that are difficult. If it were up to us, we'd have what I like to call cherry-picking the Old Covenant and the New Covenant together. We want a life that's all Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28: As long as I'm faithful to God, everything will be comfortable, I'll just

get blessings nonstop and when it's over, I'll get salvation too. We want to have our cake and eat it too; we want all of the benefits and none of the downside. Life does not work like that. It's always about a package deal. To get the great reward in the Kingdom of God we have to go through the suffering and the trials and the tests that are required to get there. We have to understand that this is done by a loving God who does this for a purpose. This isn't just to hurt us or to make life difficult for us. Turn over to James 1:2.

James 1:2 *My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, (NKJV)*

I'm sure we would all agree that is easy to say and hard to do. That's an easy-sounding, academic idea. When we're feeling the pain and going through it, we aren't thinking, oh boy, this is a great joy. We're praying, could you please take this trial away from me, I'm not enjoying this. That's generally our response. Notice the purpose in all of this.

3) *knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.*

4) *But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. (NKJV)*

This is about building character. He puts us through this because it enables us to grow. It's like in the article I was quoting in the introduction, where Van Jones said, I'm not going to take the weights out of the gym for you, that's the purpose of the gym. You strive against the weight because that builds muscle. When we work hard and have to sweat, that develops us. It can be tiring and difficult while you're doing it but it's an opportunity for growth.

I'm going to steal a phrase from my sister. We were talking last night about this particular subject, and she made a comment and I looked at her and said, I'm going to steal that from you tomorrow. We were talking about trials and she said, "I like to refer to them as OTG's—opportunities to grow." That's really the way we should look at them as Christians.

We generally tend to look at trials from the pain point of view: This is painful, I don't like this, I want it to go away. God tends to look at it as an opportunity to grow—that's why He gives it to us because these challenges—things that stretch us that are painful, that are difficult for us—cause us to grow and to develop, as we strive, as with weights in a gym, pulling against them. We need to understand there are two things going on when we're being tried. One is the opportunity to grow, the other is a test. Tests you can pass and you can fail, and we need to take that very seriously.

If we just look at an opportunity to grow, and think, I'm going to skip this opportunity to grow and just take the easy route, sometimes we can make that decision with devastating consequences because we have to realize that when God puts us in the hot seat, it's not just an opportunity to grow, it's a test. Yes, He's merciful, He's kind, and He

knows we're going to mess up at times and we have to be forgiven, but if we make a track record of pulling back and failing tests, that can have devastating consequences. We have to realize we're proved through these, how we face these trials as to whether we make it in the Kingdom of God. Turn over to James 1:12.

James 1:12 *Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. (NKJV)*

Notice we receive the crown of life after we're *proved*. Let's dig in deeper to understand this verse and what it's telling us. It starts off, *Blessed is the man who endures temptation*. First of all, to understand that, I want to share with you the meaning of the Greek word as translated into the English word "temptation" in the New King James. The Greek word is transliterated as *peirasmos* (Strong's #3986), and according to the Complete Word Study of the New Testament, by Spiros Zodhiates, here's how it is defined: *trial, temptation, a putting to the test, spoken of persons only; when God is the agent, peirasmos is for the purpose of proving someone, never for the purpose of causing him to fall; a state of trial in which God brings His people through adversity and affliction in order to encourage and prove their faith and confidence in Him.*

You can see that the definition tells us that this is an OTG—an opportunity to grow. That's the objective He's trying to accomplish. We can't forget it's not just weights in a gym to help us develop and get stronger, it's a test that we can pass or fail and we've got to take it seriously. If you notice later in the verse it says, *for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life*. What does "proved" mean? Again, I'm reading from the New King James translation. The word "proved" in English comes from the Greek word *dokimos* (Strong's #1384), and again quoting from Zodhiates, he defines it as *to accept, receive, prove; receivable, tried as metals by fire and thus purified, hence to be approved as acceptable men in the furnace of adversity*. It isn't just an opportunity to grow and develop, it's a test to prove where we stand. In other words, what decisions we're going to make, how diligently we're going to strive to obey God, and whether we're going to put Him first in our lives.

We have to understand that as part of the commitment we made at baptism when we made the covenant, we absolutely staked our lives that we're going to follow what I love to call rule number one: you shall have no other gods before Me. We're going to put God first, regardless. That doesn't mean we'll put God first as long as it doesn't get too uncomfortable, as long as we don't suffer any loss, as long as we don't hurt anybody's feelings, as long as it doesn't get uncomfortable for me and I suffer and I lose any friends, or my job is ever threatened, or it just gets too uncomfortable for me—no, it's, you're going to put God first and you're willing to sacrifice everything else in your life. It's the pearl of great price, it's the buried treasure for which a man is willing to sell everything he's got to go buy that field because he's willing to sacrifice everything to get

it, because it's rule number one—we're willing to put God first even when that is very painful and very difficult for us.

We have to take very seriously the fact that God does not consider rule number one negotiable. He makes it very, very clear from the onset that we're making a commitment that we will put Him first regardless of how difficult that might become. If you think about it, I'm sure most of you, if you were properly counseled for baptism before you made the covenant, one of the concepts you reviewed was counting the costs. I'm willing to bet if you had that conversation you went over the section of scripture that we're about to turn to in Luke 14:25.

Luke 14:25 *Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,*

26) "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. (NKJV)

As a side note, if you look into the meanings of the words here, He's not saying that you need to hate your family. He's saying that you are willing to put God above your family and everything else in your life.

27) And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. (NKJV)

Notice rule number one is not negotiable.

28) For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—

29) lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him,

30) saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'

31) Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?

32) Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (NKJV)

It's not negotiable. It's not as long as it doesn't get too difficult for you or too painful because we want you to be in your safe space and be comfortable, no, He's saying even if it's really painful for you, you have to be willing to place your life.

One of the things I'm personally very grateful for is the minister who baptized me was very clear to me when he covered this section. It's a conversation I've flashed back to

numerous times in my mind over the almost 30 years since I was baptized, because I'm sure if you've been baptized for any length of time you can look back over your Christian life and realize there were a number of times where the thought crossed your mind, I didn't know it was going to be this hard. When I signed that contract, I didn't know it was going to hurt this bad, I didn't know it was going to be this tough.

The minister who baptized me, he said to me as we discussed this, I know these are just words for you right now but I want you to understand that you're making a commitment, and you're saying that you are willing to lose your own life over this. You're willing to lose your job, you're willing to lose your family, you're willing to sacrifice everything else in your life to make it into the Kingdom of God. I want you to understand because that may be asked of you. When that happens, I want you to think back to this conversation and remember that you were warned.

I can't tell you how many times I fought back in my life when life got brutally painful, and I'm sitting here going, why me, why am I going through this, and I didn't know it was going to be this hard; that flashes back in my mind and I'm sitting in the library in Big Sandy, and I'm looking across the table and he's reading this scripture, and in my mind, when I'm remembering this, I have to stop and go, you know, I was warned. I had informed consent, he told me right up front it was going to be like this. And sure enough it has. We have to realize that that is exactly how God looks at this and He will put us to the test. This isn't negotiable for Him. He's merciful, yes, He's loving and caring and will help us, and He realizes we're human and we're going to mess up but He insists that we strive with all of our might to put Him first. It's a very, very big deal and He has a very well-documented track record in that regard.

Let's look at an example of this; turn over to Genesis 22. We're dealing with a very familiar story. This is where God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. At this point, Abraham has had a long-term relationship with God; the Bible even refers to him as the friend of God. Obviously God thought very well of him. God promises him he's going to have a son and through him all these great promises are going to be fulfilled and will be given to his descendants as they grow into great nations. He waits twenty-five years to have a son and he finally has Isaac, and Isaac is growing up and he finally has what he's waited for so long, and then God comes and gives him the ultimate test, and tells him, you know that son you waited twenty-five years for? I want you to go kill him for Me. Can you imagine a more gut-wrenching trial than that? Notice how it starts off in Genesis 22:1.

Genesis 22:1 *Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."* (NKJV)

Notice this was a test. It was something he could pass or he could fail.

- 2) *Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."*
- 3) *So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.*
- 4) *Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off.*
- 5) *And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."*
- 6) *So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together.*
- 7) *But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*
- 8) *And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together.*
- 9) *Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.*
- 10) *And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*
- 11) *But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am."*
- 12) *And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (NKJV)*

Notice His response is *now I know*—in other words, He put him to the test, He wanted to see what he was going to do. They obviously had a long-term relationship, Abraham had been obeying God for years, God refers to him as His friend but still He tests him—are you going to put Me first? Are you willing to sacrifice everything else in your life and put this first even when it's gut-wrenchingly painful? He does not consider rule number one negotiable.

That's going to mean we're going to face pain in our lives and we have to have a realistic expectation that will be required of us—at some point in our lives God is going to punch those buttons to make sure we're willing to put Him above everything else in our lives. It's a delusional expectation to think we're following God so we're always going to be comfortable. He's never going to ask me to do anything too painful, or that might hurt, or that I might lose some friends or family over—He wouldn't want me to do that, He wants me to be comfortable—no, He's saying I want you to put Me above everything else even if that's gut-wrenchingly painful and I want you to prove that. In this same way that we can pass this test, we can fail this test as well. Let's look at some other examples of that; turn over to Matthew 19:16.

Matthew 19:16 *Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” (NKJV)*

He’s talking about salvation here.

17) *So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.”*

18) *He said to Him, “Which ones?” Jesus said, “‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’*

19) *‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

20) *The young man said to Him, “All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?” (NKJV)*

Just to take the account as it’s written, Christ doesn’t come back and say, you’ve been frequently violating those, He takes his word for the fact that the guy has been diligently trying to obey this. Notice where He goes next.

21) *Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” (NKJV)*

He knew what was going to punch the button of this guy. His possessions were what were important to him. Show Me that you’re willing to give that up, that this is the pearl of great price and you’re willing to sacrifice everything for salvation. Notice the guy’s reaction.

22) *But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (NKJV)*

In other words, Christ pushed the button that he wasn’t willing to bend on. Yeah, I’m willing to do all these other things but now you want me to give up my stuff—I’ve got nice things, I like my stuff, I don’t want to give that up, that’s a little too painful now, I like my nice things. He punched that button of what might be more important to him than God. The guy failed because he’s like, I can’t do this—that’s too painful, and he walks away. We all get tried on that one—the details are different, because we all have different buttons that may be pushed, but at some time in your life God is going to punch those buttons to see if you’re going to put Him first, even when it’s painful. We have to understand, it’s non-negotiable—He does not negotiate this one, it’s not just as long as it feels good. Turn over to Luke 9:57.

Luke 9:57 *Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, “Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.”*

58) *And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.”*

59) *Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."*

60) *Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God."*

61) *And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house."*

62) *But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." (NKJV)*

Notice the dogmatic language He's using. In other words, He's saying, this has got to be first in your life above everything else. That's why it's rule number one. That's why the commandments started off, you shall have no other gods before Me. God has to be first above everything else. We can't say, every other part of my life but not over here—that would hurt too much to give this up. That will be the very thing that God comes back and says, I'm going to test you, I want to see if you're willing to give up everything and willing to come and follow Me, even when it hurts. Even when we're challenged with things that can be gut wrenching, that can be painful for us to deal with, we signed a covenant that we were willing to do that for God. We have to keep in mind, this is not a safe space.

I always love to say, if you want the feel-good happy ending, that's Revelation 21:4, when we make it to New Jerusalem and it's all spiritual, and you're a God being and then there's no more pain, no more death, no more crying or sorrow—there's your feel-good happy ending. If you're expecting that in this physical life, you're setting yourself up for disillusionment. He promises us that this life is going to be difficult. It's going to be challenging and you're constantly going to be stretched to grow because these are growth opportunities as well as tests for us that we can pass and we can fail.

What can happen sometimes in the Church of God, if we swallow in the culture around us, we can fall into this idea of a health, wealth and prosperity gospel; we can sometimes even look at Church and God's word, that it should be a safe space—you should never challenge me too hard or hurt my feelings or cause pain in any way. Ancient Israel sometimes even looked at it that way and tried to handle the prophets like this, that they wanted to be protected from anything that might make them feel uncomfortable. To put it in modern terminology, they wanted Church to be a safe space. Turn over to Isaiah 30 and we'll see this very thing.

Isaiah 30:8 *Now go, write it before them on a tablet, And note it on a scroll, That it may be for time to come, Forever and ever:*

9) *That this is a rebellious people, Lying children, Children who will not hear the law of the LORD;*

10) *Who say to the seers, "Do not see," And to the prophets, "Do not prophesy to us right things; Speak to us smooth things, prophesy deceits.*

11) *Get out of the way, Turn aside from the path, Cause the Holy One of Israel To cease from before us.*" (NKJV)

They were saying, prophesy to us deceits, tell us smooth things. Let's put it in modern-day terminology—make us feel good. Just tell us positive, complimentary things that make us feel good and give us warm and fuzzy, make this a safe space for us. Don't tell us things that might hurt our feelings or ruffle our feathers; you might offend somebody, they might be triggered if you do that. Just tell us positive, warm fuzzy, happy things. Think about it, what did prophets typically come and do—warn them of their sins and say you've got to repent of your sins and here's all the things you're doing wrong and you're going to have to change and take a hard look at yourself. That's painful to hear; who likes to hear their sins being pointed out? That's generally a painful, negative experience to go through, but again, for our good. So that we'll take a look at ourselves, that we'll grow and want to change and become better people. But what Israel is doing is basically saying no, just make us feel comfortable, let us be in our safe space, don't challenge us with new things or make us look at ourselves, or make us grow and challenge our assumptions. We don't want that. Just make us feel good. God is chastising them for that and saying that's not how this works.

You've got to be willing to grow. It's not just an issue of looking at our sins, maybe, it's challenging our understanding, challenging us with our assumptions and making us grow. Let's look at an example of that—turn over to John 6. As I mentioned before, our whole culture (particularly as it's affecting college campuses and even bleeding into our culture today), it's kind of the idea of political correctness that anything that might offend or rub somebody wrong or trigger them just shouldn't be talked about—we should police speech and nothing should ever be mentioned that might hurt people's feelings or rub them wrong. Let's look at an example in the Bible where just teaching foundational doctrine, the truth that Christ was coming to reveal, offended people and it rubbed them wrong. Notice how He dealt with this.

John 6:53 *Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.*

54) *Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*

55) *For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.*

56) *He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him.*

57) *As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.*

58) *This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever."*

59) *These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum.*

60) *Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, "This is a hard saying; who can understand it?"*

61) *When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples complained about this, He said to them, "Does this offend you?" (NKJV)*

People were being offended by Him teaching foundational doctrine.

62) *What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?*
63) *It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*

64) *But there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who would betray Him.*

65) *And He said, "Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father."*

66) *From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. (NKJV)*

They were offended and they left.

67) *Then Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you also want to go away?"*

68) *But Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

69) *Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*

70) *Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil?"*

71) *He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve. (NKJV)*

Notice the approach that Christ has here—He's introducing a concept that you can kind of understand was difficult for them to hear. For us today, we look at it and think, well, He's just talking about the symbols of Passover, nothing terribly controversial about that. Look at it from their perspective; He's saying you have to eat my flesh and drink my blood—what is this guy talking about? This is weird!

You can understand their reaction to it and why they're repelled by this. What I'm getting at here is how Christ handled this. He didn't look at this and say, I just won't ever talk about this foundational concept to salvation, I just won't mention this because somebody might be triggered, and it might offend them and hurt their feelings so I won't ever talk about this. He didn't do that because, again, how could He introduce New Covenant Christianity and not talk about foundational doctrine? (Because it hurt someone's feelings?—that's not going to work.) Understand there is a difference between this example and, you might say, Paul's example in how he deals, in his writings, with people who are vegetarians and come into the Church. They're not just vegetarians from a diet or health point of view, these were people who thought eating meat was inherently bad—that it was an evil thing for a person to do. Paul makes the

comment that if it offends my brother I will never eat meat again. If he doesn't eat meat in front of them, what is the harm? He's going out of his way to not hurt somebody. He's not saying I'm going to shelve foundational and salvational doctrine because it rubs somebody wrong. It's a totally different subject if you understand the issue they're dealing with.

Another important thing—the example we're dealing with is that of Jesus Christ. As we know, Jesus Christ is an eternal God Being who gives up being a God Being, and comes down to earth as a human being to live and be the sacrifice for all of mankind. When He's teaching this and He's introducing new ideas, He can speak with authority because of who He is. Let's look at an example of a new idea that was brought about just by fallible human beings—by the apostles. Turn over to Acts 17:1.

Acts 17:1 *Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews.*

2) *Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures,*

3) *explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ."*

4) *And some of them were persuaded; and a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women, joined Paul and Silas. (NKJV)*

Notice what he's doing. He's going into synagogues and he's teaching that Jesus Christ is the prophesied Messiah. As you know, the Jews in general rejected the idea that Jesus was the Messiah. So he's introducing quite a revolutionary new concept as far as they're concerned. He's demonstrating this from the scriptures. Logically it's very easy to figure out how you would do this. There are prophecies in Isaiah and the Psalms that describe in great detail the coming Messiah, what His life would be like and how He would be received. Obviously Paul would do something like that, he would go into the synagogues, he would demonstrate all these detailed prophecies and how the details of Jesus Christ's life have a striking correlation with them. It makes a very compelling argument that this Jesus Christ is the Messiah and that's who he is talking about. These are the facts and evidence that he's appealing to. I want you to notice those who respond very negatively to this and how they do so. Pick up here in verse 5.

5) *But the Jews who were not persuaded, becoming envious, took some of the evil men from the marketplace, and gathering a mob, set all the city in an uproar and attacked the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people.*

6) *But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some brethren to the rulers of the city, crying out, "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too."*

7) *Jason has harbored them, and these are all acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king—Jesus."*

8) *And they troubled the crowd and the rulers of the city when they heard these things. So when they had taken security from Jason and the rest, they let them go. (NKJV)*

Notice how those who disagreed with them responded. It's not recorded that they said, Paul, we've gone back and read these scriptures you're referring to, and we feel like there are holes in your argument and it doesn't match. They're not appealing to facts and evidence to try to prove this wrong; what are they doing?—they're stirring up emotion. They're quickly getting completely away from an argument based on facts and evidence and they're appealing to emotion—they have a very angry, visceral reaction that's immediately resulting in ridiculous and irrelevant allegations. The reason I mention that, notice what the allegation is—he is preaching against the decrees of Caesar. That had nothing to do with what he was preaching—he was arguing that Jesus Christ was the prophesied Messiah.

It's also absolutely preposterous because think about who we're talking about here. This is the Apostle Paul, this is the author of the book of Romans, who writes in Romans 13, be you subject to the governing authorities. Paul explains in great detail that God has placed civil governments in their roles and He has chosen them, and it's a Christian's responsibility to be obedient and cooperative with civil government unless of course they are directly trying to get you to disobey God, then it's we should obey God rather than men. Not only is this what Paul preached but if you look at the example of his life, this is a guy who was imprisoned because of what he preached, he was violently beaten numerous times—nowhere in this does he ever try to lead a revolt against the civil authorities. It's a ridiculous allegation. It's a distraction is what it is.

If you can stir up emotion and get people off the subject then you can say, you wouldn't want to listen to this Paul, would you? He's teaching against Caesar and you wouldn't want to listen to someone who's teaching against Caesar, would you? That's the whole objective because now the facts of the matter and the evidence become irrelevant—you've motivated people not to look at them. What they don't want is the Jews going through Isaiah and into Psalms and saying, wait a minute, I think this Paul is onto something! When you look at the details of these prophecies and you compare this guy Jesus Christ, they fit like a hand in a glove—I think he's on to something. This makes a compelling argument!

If you can't win an argument through facts and evidence, you distract through emotional arguments. You make allegations that are irrelevant, just like it's looking today in popular culture. If someone is arguing for a more conservative, political point of view—with ideas that are more in line with your Judeo-Christian values, they'll oftentimes argue their point by citing the evidence of history or studies or other things of that nature to back up with evidence why their ideas are more legitimate. What do you typically see on the other side? "That's racist! You're racist and sexist and a homophobe!"—turn it into an emotional argument, make allegations that have nothing to do with the subject in

the first place because oftentimes race and sex don't have anything to do with what is being debated to begin with—it's a distraction. The idea is, you wouldn't want to listen to a racist, would you? So now you won't even look at the facts. That's where the issue is. You want to distract people so they don't look at the facts. How should we respond in a situation like this? If we keep reading, we have the best example in the Bible that is famous for this. If I say the Bereans, everybody immediately knows who I'm talking about. That's the next verse—let's keep reading in verse 10.

10) Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews.

11) These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (NKJV)

These people were primarily concerned with facts and evidence and wanted to see for themselves, it either proves out that what Paul was saying is correct with the scriptures or it doesn't. They weren't concerned with all these irrelevant emotional arguments.

12) Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

13) But when the Jews from Thessalonica learned that the word of God was preached by Paul at Berea, they came there also and stirred up the crowds. (NKJV)

We have more of this visceral, angry reaction, of trying to stir up emotions from those who are opposing him. They're not even concerned with the facts and evidence. There's a great lesson here about how the Bereans responded. The Bereans didn't hear a new idea, and think, we like this Paul and he's a nice guy, so we'll take his word for it. No, that wasn't good enough. Their response was, we'll hear you out, Paul, but we're going to go to the Temple and check out the scrolls, and we're going to do some research and see if it matches.

Notice the effort put in here. It's easy for us to read over this and say they searched the scriptures daily and not think about what that really meant in their world. In our world today, searching the scriptures daily means you sit down on the couch with your laptop and your Bible program, or even if you don't have one of those you go onto biblegateway.com on the Internet and you can do word searches and find multiple translations, or you just reach over to your bookshelf and you have several hard copies and you just read from them—that is not what it meant for these people because that is long before any of that existed. These people were going to the Temple to get access to the scrolls to search through this. My point is they were willing to put work into this. They didn't look at this and think, you mean I've got to study? Their response wasn't I'm busy, I've got things to do, my favorite TV show is on, I've got hobbies I need to do, I don't have time to be doing lots of study.

They didn't look at it like that. They looked at salvation—this is the pearl of great price, I'm willing to put this above everything else. They were willing to get their face in the scriptures but that wasn't what we think of—I'll sit down on the couch with my multiple translations right here and my Bible search program—that was I'm going to go down to the Temple and get access to the scrolls and put some effort and work into this. That's what it meant to them to search the scriptures; it's an example we need to learn from. This isn't just a good idea, this is a command for us.

Turn over to 1 Thessalonians 5. While you're turning there, take note to remember that in the example we just read, the people who were responding so negatively, trying to stir up the crowds against Paul, were from Thessalonica—keep that in mind as we read here the letter that Paul writes to the Thessalonians.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 *Test all things; hold fast what is good.* (NKJV)

We have a responsibility to be constantly studying and proving things out. Not taking someone's word for it, not relying on "I've always been taught" or "Mr. so and so said"—no, what does the scripture say? Do we search the scriptures daily to see if these things are true? It either proves it or it doesn't. We need to rely on facts and evidence, not on emotional arguments, not on distractions. Go back to the evidence. If someone is trying to distract you with emotional arguments and allegations, that should be a red flag. That's the direct equivalent of, you're response is you're a racist and a sexist—what's that got to do with the subject? Go back to the facts and the evidence and prove whether it's correct or not. We have to understand that we're seriously held accountable for these things. Turn over to Hosea 7. We see an important lesson on how God judges us. We're put into trials not just as an opportunity to grow but also to be tested.

Hosea 7:12 *Wherever they go, I will spread My net on them; I will bring them down like birds of the air; I will chastise them According to what their congregation has heard.* (NKJV)

In other words, when we've been given understanding of what we've been exposed to, we are held accountable as a result of that. As Christ often said, to whom much is given, much is required. We have to look at that from both sides of the equation. We have to take very seriously what's been revealed to us, what we understand in our Christian lives and living what we know. It's also the other side of that and realizing that everyone does not have the same understanding, is not at the same point in their Christian life, and we shouldn't impose that on everybody else and how we might want to judge someone else. One of my favorite examples of this—if you're familiar with the Radio Church of God and the Worldwide Church of God and some of the history there, there's a very good example that clearly illustrates this whole point from both sides. From the 1930's to the early 1970's the Radio Church of God and later the Worldwide

Church of God kept Pentecost on Monday. For approximately forty years, it's on the wrong day but that's what they did for forty years during that time. With a length of time like that you can guarantee that there were a number of people who came into the Church of God, lived out their whole Christian experience and died, never once having kept Pentecost on Sunday because if you go to Leviticus 23, it gives you multiple criteria, and there's only one way to solve all that—you're going to start the count on a Sunday and end on a Sunday.

My point is, I don't believe for a moment that God judges those people and holds it against them that they lived out their entire Christian lives and never kept Pentecost on the right day. They were sincerely obeying God to the best of their understanding and that's how He would judge them. However, I'm sure there were other people along the way who came to understand that Sunday was the right day and then once you have that understanding, you're held accountable for that. It's not a matter of, well, everyone else is doing this other thing, so that's more comfortable and I won't lose any friends along the way. No, you won't do that because you're held accountable for the knowledge you have. That's true on any subject.

A minister I heard recently was talking about a particular subject and as he was ending the sermon he said, you know, the information I presented to you today is not salvational until you know it. Once you understand something and God has revealed something to you, then you're held accountable for what you know. Not everybody has the same understanding at the same time. It's not a matter of condemning other people, it's realizing that when we are placed into a trial, we have to take it very seriously. We have to do that with all of the trials in our lives. We can't just slink back from a trial and think, I'll sit in my safe space. Let's look at an example where this was made very, very clear.

Turn over to the book of Esther, to chapter 4. I'll just summarize some of the general story—it's a famous story you're probably relatively familiar with. Esther winds up married to the king and she's living in the king's palace. There's a guy named Haman who plots to exterminate the Jewish people and he's literally trying to get all of them killed. Mordecai is a relative of Esther's and he reaches out to her and sends a message to her to let her know there is this plot going on, and someone is literally planning to exterminate the Jewish people.

Mordecai says to Esther, you're in a position to do something about this—you're the king's wife. You can have access to him. He's telling her, you need to do something. The other part of the story was that in the palace environment they were in, if you went in and visited the king without an invitation, you were literally taking your life in your hands. You could wind up dead. This wasn't what we would think of today as a wife going in to talk to her husband, this was a more complicated situation because Esther could be taking her life into her hands in doing so. Notice the advice that Mordecai gives to Esther; this is in verse 13.

Esther 4:13 *And Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think in your heart that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews. 14) For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" 15) Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"* (NKJV)

She took his advice to heart and realized she was risking her life, but the thing for us to understand in this, as I mentioned, is the Christian life is one in which we get tested, we get tried. It is inherently a painful process meant to develop us, with a fantastic reward at the end, a reward so fantastic that when we look back, we won't care what we've been through. We've got to take that very seriously because when God tries us, He's not just doing it to develop us—yes, there are opportunities to grow, that's a very good way to put it—but they're also tests and He holds us accountable for what we understand and the positions that we've been put in.

As Mordecai was saying to Esther, don't delude yourself that you can sit back in your safe space and you can decide that you don't want to face this because that could be uncomfortable and that could be a little scary. I'll just sit back here where everything is comfortable and let this slide by and not deal with it. He looked at her said, don't delude yourself. You're in a position where you understand this and you have an opportunity to do something about it, and you will be held accountable as a result. He's basically telling her if you don't act, God will bring about deliverance by some other means. His plan will not be derailed because of your actions but you will be held accountable for your actions.

As we think about our Christian lives and the challenges that we face, we have to realize that numerous times we are going to be tried. We are going to be put into uncomfortable situations that stretch us, that challenge us, that can be downright painful for us and we have to step up to deal with them. God realizes that we're human, that we're fallible, we're going to mess up, and He's going to have to deliver us and help us through it but He will put us to the test. He will push us to see what we're going to do because rule number one is not negotiable, and we cannot delude ourselves that we can sit back in our safe space and avoid it all because God wants everybody to be comfortable. No, He wants everybody to prove that He is most important to us and we're willing to sacrifice everything else in our lives, and He will hold us accountable.

Let me just end with the words of Mordecai: Who knows whether you have come to the Kingdom for such a time as this.