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SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY: A MEASURE OF THE POWER AND FAVOR OF GOD IN OUR LIFE

There are sixteen old, run-down prisons scattered around St. Petersburg, Russia, and not one of them is a good place to live or work. The government's resources are spread thinly over many priorities and the lowest of them is the prisons. As one official told me, "When winter comes and you have to choose between heating a children's hospital or a prison, it's an easy decision." Inmates are also poorly fed and often depend upon relatives throwing food over the fences to them. Russian prisons are not encumbered by civil rights issues. If prisoners are miserable, so be it; they are there to be punished anyway. Even though tensions can run high, there are rarely protests or outbreaks of violence as we have in the west. Peace is kept by Special Weapons and Tactics (S.W.A.T.) teams that operate with impunity and shoot to kill when they find it necessary. This limits violence in the prisons to skirmishes between inmates, which prison officials routinely choose to ignore.

Diseases among inmates are at epidemic levels, with high rates of infection for tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV. Contaminated water supplies and limited sewage facilities create conditions that would not be tolerated elsewhere. A simple cut on the finger could become infected by invasive bacteria and result in death because

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inmates who do receive treatment are often greeted at prison clinics by doctors with no medicines or supplies.

I have volunteered and consulted in American prisons for about twenty years, and one of our board members was a prison warden who often traveled with me to Russia. David and I had prayed about the prisons and felt that the Lord wanted us to reach out to the wardens and physicians at each facility. We invited them to a luncheon at our headquarters and almost all of them attended, along with the head of the prison system, who had become a close friend to both David and me. After lunch we sent each of them home with small bags of non-prescription drugs for their families. Then David visited every prison to develop closer relationships with his colleagues.

The Lord began to provide us with medicines and supplies that were perfect for the prison hospital and clinics. Each delivery brought new hope to the prisons, and the staff and inmates were always thrilled to see us. But Mr. Kreshenko, a high government official who had heard about our visits to the prisons, had other ideas. He called me into his office and questioned me at length about my motives for giving medicine to prisoners. I answered all his questions as both a humanitarian and a follower of Christ, but he was not swayed in the least. He told me that I should stop taking medicines to the prisons and use them to help people who were more deserving.

His authority in the matter was unquestionable at the human level and I knew this could be the end of our outreach to the prisons. However, a special calm came over me. Before I realized what I was doing, I sat up in my chair and said firmly and respectfully, "Mr. Kreshenko, I am not sure you have the authority to stop the deliveries." He bristled and in classic Russian style said, "What? Are you questioning my authority?" I said, "Well, yes and no. May I explain my position?" He looked both angry and mystified but gave me permission to continue.

I quoted the parts of Matthew 25 which command us to visit the sick and those in prison. Then I said, "As you can see Sir, I have a very specific mandate from the Lord to do this work. But even more problematic is that I am sure He spoke to me during my prayer

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time and ordered me to use the medicines that He has provided in the prisons. As you can see, I am trapped between the two of you—I must obey Him and, of course, I must obey you. I would not presume to challenge your authority, but I am concerned that in ordering me to stop the deliveries that you will be opposing the Lord. This, I think, if I am correct, could be problematic for you, so I am only asking you to please reconsider your position.”

I think at that moment we were both terrified. He stared intensely into my eyes and said, “You are sincere aren’t you?” I said, “Yes, Sir, and I would appreciate your consideration of my predicament.” He looked down at his papers and thought for a few moments and then said, “Well, let’s just keep an eye on this situation and see how it proceeds. You may continue your deliveries for now, but I may have to reconsider the matter at a later date.” We never heard from him again.

Spiritual authority is a measure of the power and favor of God in our life. Its purpose is to influence individual behavior and to empower the work of His servants. God’s general agenda for men is outlined in the Scriptures. It emphasizes strategic issues such as developing moral character and spiritual awareness. As His power has its effect in us and we begin to grow in faith and practice, we discover that God has a plan for every part of our lives. God’s plan always fits us perfectly, and when we are occupied with activities that fulfill it, we can sense His power intervening on our behalf, giving us favor with men, and sometimes affecting the natural order of things. As King David said,

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

Psalm 84:10-11

“There is no authority except from God” (Romans 13:1 NAS), and in the world there is both natural and spiritual authority. Natural authority is a combination of God’s order for the world

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and its systems, along with the limited will of man. It is used to control assets and processes, and to command and restrain the actions of people. Natural authority is imposed through constitutions, laws, charters, corporations, contracts, and other instruments and can be granted by a person, or a legal or political entity. It is given so that the grantor can be served in specific ways. For example, the police receive authority from the government they serve to perform specific tasks of safety and law enforcement. A surgeon could receive authority from a hospital to direct medical personnel and use resources to perform specific medical tasks. Each person is given specific authority to take action and use the power and resources of the person or entity he serves within the boundaries of the specific tasks that are assigned to him. The policeman has no authority to direct the work in the operating room, while the surgeon has no authority to enforce laws.

In Luke 7:1-8, Jesus was asked by some Jewish leaders to visit the home of a Roman Centurion to heal his servant. He agreed to make the trip, but on the way they received word from the Centurion that he felt undeserving to have Jesus actually visit him. He explained that he believed there was no need for Jesus to come but that He only had to “say the word” (vs. 7) and the servant would be healed. The Centurion understood that Jesus could use His spiritual authority to heal his servant’s illness the same way that the Centurion used natural authority over his troops. He said,

For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, “I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.” Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

Luke 7:8-10

The Centurion obviously understood the concept of delegated authority. He knew he had authority from the government he served

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for a specific agenda, and that he could delegate that authority to others who served him in that agenda. But he also recognized the limits of his authority and that it did not extend into the realm of the spiritual. He could not heal his servant because he had no authority in the Kingdom of God. However, he rightly concluded that Jesus was operating as a servant of the Kingdom of God, and he had faith that Jesus would use His authority to heal his servant. Later, when Jesus “called his twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness” (Matthew 10:1), He was delegating spiritual authority to them. After following Him around and seeing Him heal so many people, it must have shocked them when He said, “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing” (John 14:12).

A man could easily find himself in a position where he might need both natural and spiritual authority to fulfill God’s agenda for his life. If the agenda requires the control of systems or assets, then he will probably need some measure of natural authority like the Roman Centurion. If so, God will give His servant favor with man so he can obtain the natural authority he will require. The stories of Joseph and Nehemiah both point to this principle. Joseph survived a murder conspiracy by his brothers, who then sold him into slavery into Egypt. There, he was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Eventually though, according to God’s plan, he was raised up in authority second only to Pharaoh. From this powerful position of natural authority, and with the wisdom and favor of God, he saved not only Egypt from a devastating famine, but ultimately the future of Israel (Genesis Chapters 37-50). Nehemiah served as the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia. From his trusted position, God gave him favor and he was able to obtain the authority and resources he needed to restore the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah Chapters 1-13).

Another interesting example is when Moses delegated the authority God had given him to judge the people of Israel. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, observed Moses as he sat all day judging disputes between the people and said,

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What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone. Listen now to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you. You must be the people's representative before God and bring their disputes to him. Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied.

Exodus 18:17-23

Moses organized and delegated authority through a structure that was typical of natural authority. There is nothing inherently good or evil about the processes of natural authority or the organizational structures that are created by it, they are merely the tools of organization and management. What turns them toward good or evil is the character of the men who fill the positions of responsibility, their vision, and whether or not they also have spiritual authority. Moses' plan was reliable because of the kind of men he chose to fulfill this great responsibility. He selected "capable men; men who fear God; trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain" (vs. 21). In Deuteronomy 1:13 they are described as "wise, understanding and respected" men. They were reliable men who would not misuse their authority.

God's authority moves with us from the general, to the specific, to the detail of His agenda for our lives, as we continue in obedience to His will. Jesus naturally fulfilled God's general agenda. He was first of all a Son to His Heavenly Father, just as we are expected to

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be. Jesus' specific agenda required Him to occupy Himself in practical activities which ultimately led to fulfilling the specific purposes of His Father; becoming the Word to us and offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins on the cross of Calvary. To accomplish this, He became a man and entered into family life, living and working as any human being until the time for the fulfillment of His specific agenda came into focus. Like Jesus, our specific agenda is to occupy ourselves in the activities of our home and work life as we wait for the unveiling of God's ultimate purposes. Deciding things like how we should be educated, which job to take, who to marry, etc., are all part of His detailed agenda that positions us for service and shapes His will into our life.

Jesus had a simple solution for fulfilling His responsibility to His Father's agenda and remaining under His authority. "I tell you the truth," He said, "the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19). It's almost as though He were saying to us, "No kidding guys. It is really this simple. I don't do anything I am not sure my Father wants Me doing. That's the secret to having His power and favor working in you." Jesus faithfully sought to know the will of His Father and then fully and completely obeyed Him. In return, Jesus was granted "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18).

Fulfill the Calling of a Vocation

Work is an essential element of every man's life. From the beginning, it has been God's intention for man to work and establish a home. In Genesis 1:28, He said to Adam "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." After Adam sinned, God intensified the agenda for man to one in which work was the priority. He told Adam, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19). All through the Scriptures a man's skills and talents, the work he does, and the outcome of his labors, are tied to God's plan for his life.

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Work is one of the fundamental stewardship's of God's servant. King Solomon wrote about the importance of a man diligently occupying himself in his work. In Proverbs 18:9 he says, "One who is slack in his work is brother to one who destroys." In Proverbs 12:14, we are reminded that "from the fruit of his lips a man is filled with good things as surely as the work of his hands rewards him." Then, in Proverbs 14:23 we are told that "all hard work brings a profit." These are only a few of the many Scriptures that link the need to work with the micro-economy which the Lord provides for each of us.

Some men have become so captivated by the relationship between work and profit that they spend too much of their time working only for profit. At the other extreme are men who have pursued social and intellectual fulfillment to the detriment of their ability to provide for themselves. It is on this continuum of extremes that a man must find the balance God requires of him. He must carefully divide his energies between working for his family and the common good while he develops his life socially and spiritually. The Apostle Paul demonstrated this principle in the way he spent time in the direct work of the ministry God had given him while he worked as "a tentmaker" (Acts 18:3). He said, "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions" (Acts 20:33-34).

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to make ourselves a model for you to follow. For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat."

2 Thessalonians 3:7-10

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Paul challenged men to follow the principles he modeled regarding work and left it to each man's conscience to "know how you ought to follow." There are a number of principles from God's general agenda for men that can guide us in making the right determinations about work. But we must also be aware of God's specific agenda for our life in order to properly apply the principles with wisdom. Work is essential. It must be balanced to meet our needs for living as we fulfill the plan of God. Our vocation provides us with the opportunity to identify and sharpen the talents that God has given us and then, in His time and purpose, to strategically apply them.

As a boy, I learned to enjoy hard work. I had my own lawn mowing business when I was twelve. I can still remember the deep satisfaction of going to the Western Auto store to purchase my own mower. I paid it off on the revolving credit plan in only a few weeks. Then, nearly everything I earned was mine to spend. I started working and never stopped. I worked all through high school, spending thirty hours per week at various jobs. I bought a car, paid my own way to a local community college and lived in a small rooming house until I was married. Then I began what I thought would be a career in aerospace, working in the Apollo program at Cape Kennedy, while I attended college part-time. But that idea was derailed by massive layoffs and I turned my attention to the business world.

From that time until I became a disciple of Christ, my work was all about supporting my wife and son. It never occurred to me there might be some higher purpose in what I had been learning at my various jobs and that God had a plan for my life. But I eventually realized the futility of constantly thinking about making and spending money. I became more aware of the needs of people around me and started volunteering at my church. When I volunteered I felt an especially clear presence of the Lord with me. I knew that God was with me at work, but when I ministered to people, His favor was even stronger. As I became less materialistic, I started to think of working full-time in some sort of ministry. I was sure that God was causing me to see and do things that were more important, so I wanted to completely immerse myself in what I hoped was His calling for me.

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I did not yet know enough about the Kingdom of God to understand that He was first of all calling me to maturity. There was a lot about my character and spiritual accountability that God wanted to improve. I completely missed the significance of 1 Corinthians 7:24, which says “Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.” I could only see two options. Working to make money or working for the Kingdom of God. Unfortunately, most of the counsel I received at that time was from people who were already in full-time ministry. They had a limited viewpoint and primarily interpreted what I was experiencing as a “call to the ministry.” In their opinion, it was simply a matter for me to decide how and when. I have seen a lot of men mistakenly leave their jobs and go off to seminary or some kind of ministry when God was only calling them to a more mature walk with Him. Like me, many of them later discovered that all He wanted to accomplish could have been done right where they had worked and lived.

“Each man has his own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that” (1 Corinthians 7:7). And, “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:10-11). These scriptural admonitions imply that we should develop our gifts and use them, wherever we are, in a way that pleases God.

The key issue is about discipline and whether or not we have worked hard to learn and implement the rules and practices of our profession. “If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed; but skill will bring success” (Ecclesiastes 10:10). When a man sets out to discipline his gifts and become credentialed in his work, he can do so with the assurance that God will be there to give him grace. Proverbs 22:29 says, “Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.” A man who is skilled in his work can become very influential and can expect doors of opportunity to be opened for him. In this regard, one career is no better or worse than any other as long as it

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provides the activity we need to apply our gifts and talents. The real importance of our work is that it conforms to God's agenda and gives us opportunities to reach people for His Kingdom, not evangelistically, but as a living testimony of His grace. No matter what we do or where we go, the skill with which we use our talents is visible to everyone. And so is the spirit in which we perform our work. As the Lord said in Exodus 20:24, "Wherever I cause my name to be honored, I will come to you and bless you."

With all the effort we put into improving our skills and working hard at what we do, it is important to remember that our faith must remain in God, not in work. It is easy for a man to become so focused on his work, even when it is God's agenda, that he can forget about the Lord's place in his life. When a man puts work ahead of fellowship with God, it harms the man. And it will eventually undermine the agenda. Psalm 67:5-7 says, "May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. Then the land will yield its harvest, and God, our God, will bless us. God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him."

Establish Order and Unity at Home

There is no place more essential for the Kingdom of God to be established than at home. While a man's work life is an important measure of how he is applying his natural gifts and talents to God's specific agenda, a man's home life is where the practice of the Word of God has critical long-term implications for his wife and children. "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). It is a man's responsibility to bring his family into proper alignment under the leadership of Christ and to provide them with a consistent example of obedience to His will. When men do not seriously make an effort to fulfill their role as a leader in the home, their marriage and family will suffer. In Mark 3:24-27 Jesus said, "If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. In fact, no one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can rob

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his house.” “But when a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe” (Luke 11:21).

When a man is “tied up” with sins, his life and home will become divided and will not stand. Satan can then enter his house and rob him. How? He will use whatever means is available to disrupt the unity in a household. He will bring strife, confusion, chaos, and disarray; trying to undermine a man’s credibility and ignite rebellion against his leadership. He will enter through whatever access sin gives him to injure a man and his family. Just as Jesus is the door to the Kingdom of God, a man, under Christ, guards the door to his family. He can help block the door by living out the values and strategies of the Bible, but when a man yields to the indulgences of sin and irresponsibility, he causes his family to be vulnerable to attack.

When I came to Christ, I saw how my failure to serve Him had left my family virtually unprotected. But making a decision to follow Christ represented a dramatic shift away from being someone who was serving Satan’s agenda unaware, to a man with the potential to break his grip on my family. Of course, I knew that I was not able to do the job alone, but I could rely on the fact that “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). I had become righteous through Christ Jesus. Now all I needed to do was honestly to begin working my way through my problems and fulfilling the duties of managing my family for the Lord.

Dorothy and I had to find a way to restore God’s order to our home. We lacked unity and were constantly experiencing the effects of our past conflicts. 1 Corinthians 11:3 provided us with a blueprint for how things should be organized. Paul said, “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” The right organizational structure for our home would bring God’s power and favor to bear on our problems. So we had to agree to His established order for operating as a family. First God the Father, then Christ, then the man, and then his wife. As Christ followed the lead of His Father, we would follow Him in an orderly and unified way. That seemed simple enough, but I knew it was not going to be easy.

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My family had adjusted to two extremes of bad leadership. I tended to ignore my responsibilities and let things reach crisis levels before I paid much attention. Then, I would attack the problem, belligerently forcing things to a resolution. Now I had to figure out how to get my wife to cooperate and follow my leadership again, but this time it had to be from her heart and not under duress.

Our biggest problems were about trust and respect. My wife, like most women who have not received the kind of love and leadership they deserved, had worked out a lot of things for herself just to survive. She had made excuses for some of my problems, condemned me in her heart for others, and generally made a judgment that I was not worthy of exercising any authority in the household. Actually she was right about most of it. Although I had given my heart to the Lord, there were still lots of behaviors in my life that were ungodly and not indicators of someone who could be trusted. All of these factors led her to conclude that she did not really have to respect me. Anyone who knew all the facts could not blame her, least of all me. But her lack of trust still hurt and caused me to feel weak and impotent as a leader. Sometimes it provoked me to angry outbursts, which only made the problem worse.

One day, while I was praying and meditating about the situation, the Lord showed me a four-step plan that would, over time, solve our dilemma. It required the simple application of spiritual authority in our family and a comprehensive commitment to His Lordship. I was overjoyed because I knew that He was giving us an opportunity to see our relationship restored, but at the same time, I had the distinct impression that this was a serious situation that required my complete obedience. I had gone far enough in my relationship with the Lord that I not only respected Him, I wanted to please Him. So I felt secure in the knowledge that He was intervening in my family.

1) I had to bring myself completely under the authority of Christ as His disciple. I had to be willing to improve as a person at every level and become a reliable man. My values and strategies had to be consistent with God's Word and I had to learn to operate day to day in a way that was trustworthy. I knew that I could not be perfect and succeed in all of this every day. But the Lord was only

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asking me to press toward these goals with sincerity. His grace and mercy would be sufficient to keep me going. Just to make sure, I prayed a comprehensive prayer of repentance and re-commitment to His plan. This is something I did quite often during the early days of my new leadership, and occasionally since then. I have also drawn a lot of encouragement from Scriptures like Philippians 4:13, which says, “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (NAS).

2) I had to pick up the scepter of His authority and rule my home. As sweet as my wife was about most things, I literally feared trying to explain that one to her. She had suffered a lot under my leadership and would not be eager to submit to me. But the Lord was persistent. He reminded me how His power and favor came over my life when I aligned myself under His authority. All He was asking me to do was extend the blessing of that authority to my wife and son. As they aligned themselves under the leadership of God, Christ, and me from their heart, they would also experience a new power and favor of God in their lives. He assured me that He would be faithful to confirm it. So in the fear of God, I prayed another prayer where I symbolically raised the scepter of authority in my right hand and pledged to Him to rule my home for His glory. I also asked for His wisdom to properly lead my family. Proverbs 8:33-36, says,

Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.

3) I had to practice my leadership openly. Ephesians 5:21 says, “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” This meant taking the time to describe to my wife what I thought God had shown me, listen to her viewpoint, answer any questions she had, confess my sins to her as they occurred, and fully explain what I was going to do to improve our situation. God was not asking me to do

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this only once, but anytime I made a major decision, sinned, noticed any fractures in our relationships, or saw that we needed to review the plan He had given us. I had to hold myself and my family accountable to God's Word. Psalms 45:6 says, "a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom." I was under God's authority to lead our home and He was expecting all of us to respect that stewardship. I had to make sure I earned the credibility to exercise authority by bringing just decisions to our family processes. They had to be careful to listen for the voice of the Lord in what I said and did. It was a challenge that was intended to cause each person to be humble before the Lord and more aware of the results of his or her actions.

4) I had to love my wife as Christ loved the church. Ephesians 5:21-33 provided an overview of God's plan for us. Verses 21-24 restates God's structural order for the home. But the key to success is having the right structure along with the right spirit for leadership. A woman must be able to sense a man's love and integrity in what he is trying to accomplish. Verses 25-27 provides the most critical instruction for men who want to lead effectively at home.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

This Scripture commands a man to become spiritually accountable for his wife. As scary as that sounds, if a man is prepared to become a priest to his family and apply the right strategies to his responsibilities, he can, by grace, fulfill this mandate.

Paul said in Romans 15:1, "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves." In a marriage each partner will have the opportunity to be strong when the other is weak. While it is good to be able to depend upon one another's strengths, we should be careful that in doing so, neither party does anything that changes their fundamental order under

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Christ. Galatians 3:28 says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” But when a person confuses equality in Christ, or the relative strengths and weaknesses in a marriage, with his or her responsibility to maintain the proper order under Christ, he or she will bring disorder into the relationship.

A man, who is able to model the love, humility, and cooperation of a servant, and maintain his proper place of authority, can become a great blessing to his family. Proverbs 31:10-21 describes what is called “The Wife of Noble Character.” It is the perfect description of a woman operating in her own gifts under the authority of her husband. This “Noble Woman” has been washed by the Word and encouraged by her husband to grow and prosper as a person. The result is that her husband “lacks nothing of value” (verse 11). A man whose home operates in God’s order can expect many blessings for his wife and children, and a full and fruitful life together.

Extend the Church into the World

1 Peter 2:4-5 reminds us that as we “come to Him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Each of us who follows Christ becomes one of those living stones. We are called the “church.” The Greek word which is translated as “church” (#1577) is more accurately translated as “the called out.” We are “called out” as individuals and as a community to serve and represent Christ here on the earth. Many people have come to think of the church only as the organized entity which meets in a building and has services at a certain time and place. They often expect that entity to say and do the things on their behalf that Christ has actually called each of us to do personally as His servants. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus said,

Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

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He was not speaking these words to an entity or an organization, but to His disciples. He was commissioning all who would return to their homes, communities, and work to live their lives for Him and reach out to others for Christ. There are many practical ways that we can make disciples. Christ gives every man skills or talents that, when properly applied, will support him in his own economy and provide food and shelter for life. In the same way, He also provides each of us with the ability to influence others to believe in and obey the Lord.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Romans 12:4-8

The mission of the church—living stones like you and me—is to fulfill the commission that Christ gave us. That can easily be done through the opportunities provided by our home and work life, or in helping to meet the needs of others. Everyone knows the story of the “Good Samaritan” whose acts of kindness saved a man who was beaten and left half dead after he fell into the hands of robbers along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30). This took place after a priest (verse 31) and a Levite (verse 32) passed by the man without helping him. In verse 36, Jesus asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” It is a painful truth that the organized entity we call the local church often does not see or respond to the needs of people right in their own community. Just like the priest and the

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Levite, they pass by opportunities to minister, often leaving the job for government agencies and secular groups.

There was a particular ministry to the poor that was regularly overlooked in a congregation I once attended. As I became more aware of how important it was and watched the need go unmet I became troubled about what I could do about it. I finally started to respond to the need myself, regularly taking time to directly engage in a ministry of mercy. Although the leaders at my church nodded approvingly when I told them what I was doing, they never spent a minute directly supporting my work or becoming involved themselves. During prayer one day, I began to complain to the Lord about their lack of interest and asked Him why our church did not respond to people's needs the way I thought He expected. His answer was immediate and startling as He spoke to my heart, "You are the church. I am blessing what you do. What do you want from them that I am not giving you?" The Lord had taken a personal interest in my ministry of mercy. He had provided what I needed, given me favor with everyone involved, and created a sense of satisfied obedience in me that was almost indescribable. I was ashamed when I realized that my complaining was the same as saying to God, "Your participation in this is not enough. I want these other people to take an interest." What the Lord was allowing me to do was precious in His sight and I was missing the significance of it.

Over the years I discovered that I had not been alone in my ignorance about how the Kingdom of God operates. I have met a lot of people who were ministering with full spiritual authority, yet felt that they were alone and unappreciated by their church. But as God led them, they could not have been more directly connected to His will than when they were doing the things Jesus described in Matthew 25:35-40. Jesus said,

For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came

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to visit me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

In Luke 7:36-47 we find that:

One of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.” Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.” “Tell me, teacher,” he said. “Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled.” “You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her

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hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”

The behaviors of this incredibly thankful woman show us that when someone gets his sins forgiven and comes to fully know Christ, he will naturally have a heart full of love and be ready to serve. In fact, when the Lord comes to live within us, it should be almost effortless to “let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven,” as Jesus exhorts us to do in Matthew 5:16. When I meet a man who professes to know Christ and is not burning inside to serve the Lord in some practical way, I can guess that one of three things applies to him. He, 1) was never really saved, 2) has forgotten the value of his redemption and become entangled in sin again, or 3) has been subdued into lifeless conformance by an organized entity calling itself the church.

Too often, we spend our time and money preserving the infrastructure and economics of our institutions instead of extending ourselves, “the church,” into the world around us. In a world of materialism and self-indulgence, it is possible for the church to forget who we are and what we are doing. This is not just a problem of our own time, but one that the church has struggled with for centuries. In Philippians 2:20-21, Paul says of Timothy, “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” This is a surprising perspective from a man who lived and worked with people who had observed first hand the events written about in the Gospels and the book of Acts.

When groups of believers come together in community, they very often try to conform to a single agenda. This is not unusual because it is a fundamental premise of management that a group or entity must have a common goal in order to fulfill its purposes effectively. But when the organized entity draws people away from

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their God-given agendas to bring unity to their corporate goals, it fails the purposes of the Kingdom, and takes on a life of its own. The church should be helping every man fulfill God's agenda for his life. It has no legitimate purpose other than supporting the mandates of Christ for each of us as individuals and reaching out to the lost. This is because *we* are the church. Every man must find and fulfill his own agenda in Christ for the body of Christ to function properly. As each of us fulfills the design and function God has given us, we can powerfully fulfill the commission of Christ at home, at work, and in our communities. When we fail to do so, we have "lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Colossians 2:19).

Resolve Conflicts Peacefully

A few years ago I was on a ski vacation with my family when I met a young man named Vernon. He was the maintenance man where we were staying and came to our condo to see why we were not getting any hot water. I noticed immediately that Vernon was a no-nonsense type of guy. He was clean-cut, polite, and quickly went about his business. As he was checking out the water heater he asked me, "Are you some kind of preacher?" A little surprised, I answered, "Yes, sort of, I do a lot of volunteer work in prisons. Why do you ask?" He said that he had noticed our Bibles and tapes lying around and some literature that was stacked on the counter. I asked him if he was a follower of Christ. His response sounded like a plea for help. "I thought I was," he said. "I got saved in prison. But now I guess I am a backslider." His cheery voice had turned cynical and depressed. I sat down next to him and listened as he shared a glorious testimony of how God had delivered him from a life of alcoholism and violence. He had a gentle, sincere spirit and talked about the Lord with such genuine affection that I began to question him about his life. I wanted to know how and why he could have turned away from Christ after all he had experienced.

After his parole from prison he had rejoined his family in a small rural area where the local church played a significant role in the community. Several members of the church had reached out to

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him and provided a safety net of security which had helped him grow emotionally and spiritually. Their kindness and the peace he experienced when he was with church people had made it easy for him to adopt their routines. Until just a few days before we met, he had regularly studied his Bible, prayed, tithed his income, attended church meetings, volunteered to repair the building, and generally immersed himself in church life. He had been diligently trying to “put the things he had read and heard about God into practice.”

Vernon told me how he had made Christ the first priority in his life, followed by his family and work. He had taken serious steps to heal and restore his marriage and was working hard to advance on his job and provide a good living for his family. Each time he had taken a practical step in this direction, he had felt the power and favor of God move on his behalf. God was blessing and prospering his path and he had felt sure that he was fulfilling Christ’s agenda for his life.

The problem had arisen when he had decided he was spending too much time at his church’s extracurricular activities such as the Saturday morning bake sales. He realized that he was not really needed at some of these events, and that his time could be better spent doing other things at home. But he had no idea that this simple decision to manage his time would bring his spirituality into question. After he had missed a few events, his pastor confronted him. He saw Vernon’s absence as an indicator of his failure to recognize the importance of the church in his life. Vernon explained to him how he was only following what he thought was the leading of the Lord to fulfill his responsibilities to his family and that he had continued to attend Bible studies and worship services as before.

His pastor was not satisfied. He insisted that Vernon’s failure to attend these events was evidence that he was moving away from his devotion to the church. Vernon protested. He told his pastor about how he had experienced the power and favor of God when he had made decisions to serve his family more consistently. He expected his pastor to understand that his devotion to his family was an expression of his devotion to Christ and that attending a bake sale was not as important as ministering to the needs of his family. But his pastor was adamant, insisting that Vernon should be at the church “every time the doors were open.”

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At this point Vernon realized that his pastor's attitude had changed from what had appeared to be loving concern about his well being, to boldly ordering him to do what he was told. He scolded Vernon for acting so independently and reminded him of his authority as a pastor to hold him accountable. But Vernon's heart would not let him easily concede. He had experienced God's miraculous protection too many times in prison to be intimidated by what might only be one man's misjudgments, but how could he be sure? His dilemma was heartbreaking because he had been so sure he was doing the right thing. Finally, his pastor told him that he was acting like a backslider and that he needed to obey the authority of the church (which, of course, was him) in the matter.

Vernon was stunned and disoriented. Only a few days later, with the issue still unresolved, he was sitting on the floor of my condominium spilling his heart. He turned to me and said, "Mr. Kennedy, I really love the Lord. I didn't think I was a backslider, but my pastor was so angry with me. Still, I just don't feel right about what he said. If serving the Lord means yielding the responsibility for my life to someone who orders me to go to bake sales, I guess I might be backsliding. I don't think I can do it."

I knew Vernon was no backslider and I spent some time reassuring him. But he felt hurt and betrayed by his pastor and was having trouble expressing himself and dealing with the anger that was growing in his heart. He had experienced a head-on collision with an "institutional man" whose actions had exceeded his spiritual authority. However, Vernon was not yet mature enough in Christ to know how to deal with his pastor's oppressive intrusion into his life. He wanted to preserve his relationship with the man and stay connected to the church. But at what cost? The problem of resolving conflicts in authority or agenda's is difficult for most men, not only at church but in all areas of their lives. Handling conflicts correctly strengthens a man and raises his confidence in Christ. When we fail to do so, it can be destructive to both ourselves and others.

There are generally four ways that a man will respond to conflicts. He will, 1) yield to the other person, 2) avoid and escape the conflict, 3) aggressively confront the issue, or 4) peacefully seek understanding and resolution.

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1) Yielding to the other person can be an act of wisdom and humility, especially if a man discovers that he is in error. There is certainly no better way to settle a dispute than to give up the hair-splitting agony of debating the details, confess our mistake, ask forgiveness, and go on with our life. It keeps the peace, preserves relationships, and avoids the risks of doing or saying something much worse. It also makes sense for a man to yield, at least temporarily, when he finds himself at a strategic disadvantage of power or timing. Waiting for a better time, place, or conditions to press an issue could help everyone involved. But when a man routinely yields to unrighteousness, he is not only encouraging more and greater sins on the part of his oppressor, he damages his own soul. Proverbs 25:26 says, “Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.”

2) Avoiding and escaping conflict can also be an act of wisdom and humility, but again, only as a short term solution until a better time or place can be found. When a man can reduce the tension between himself and an oppressor by avoiding certain situations or topics, he is probably wise to do so. He should pray for his oppressor and delay serious confrontation until a discussion can be reasonably expected to lead to resolution. But when avoidance becomes the primary method of dealing with conflict, it has the same effect as yielding to wickedness. A man cannot ignore oppression and expect it to just go away. Withdrawing from relationships or changing wives, jobs, or churches to isolate ourselves from the hard work of resolving conflicts only complicates matters. It leaves the old wounds unhealed and ready for exploitation by the next oppressor. “A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment” (Proverbs 18:1 NKJ).

3) Aggressive confrontation rarely brings resolution to a dispute. It usually leaves the parties without real understanding of each other’s issues because someone ends up yielding to superior power, intellect, or strategic advantage. The person who yields remains angry and unconvinced and the other is unsatisfied. In 1 Peter 2:16-19, we are directed to:

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Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.

Not only that, if someone's "purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop [it]; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39).

4) Every believer can identify to some degree with the story of Vernon and his pastor. We will all experience conflict between ourselves and another believer at some time. The spiritual authority we believe we have to fulfill God's agenda for our own life will inevitably come into conflict with what another person thinks is a superior agenda with greater spiritual authority. When this happens, it is important that the sanctity of each person's priesthood with Christ is not violated. For some reason, Vernon's pastor did not use reasonable judgment in his assessment of the facts and stepped across the line of his rightful authority. He was judging Vernon as though he was his own servant and not the Lord's. He may have forgotten for a moment that:

To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

Romans 14:4-5

The church is made up of individuals, all responsible to hear from the Lord. Our individual authority is dependent upon our personal relationship with God and how well we are hearing and obeying Him. Vernon's pastor should have been encouraging him

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to continue his growth in the Lord. Instead, he became too aggressive about his own agenda. He was not hearing from the Lord and came dangerously close to where he could be held responsible by God for causing Vernon to stumble. Hebrews 13:17-18 says,

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.

This Scripture surely was not intended to give men the authority to set the agenda for another man's life, nor does it give either party the option of ignoring their personal vulnerability before the Lord. Rather, it places a burden on both Vernon and his pastor to avoid the risks of staying in conflict.

Romans 12:18 provides a simple mandate for people who find themselves in a situation such as this. It says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." When you ask people about how they settle conflicts, they are more likely to describe their peacemaking skills in very limited ways such as yielding or avoidance. I believe it is because most people are trying to attain peace and quiet for the moment, not real and lasting peace. They almost never describe a reasoned, truthful process leading to peaceful reconciliation. They commonly lament the need for a counselor, arbiter, or some reliable process which was not available to them. Fortunately, the Scriptures outline just such a process. Although it has often been overlooked, it provides the steps for two or more people to hold themselves and each other accountable. It puts the parties of a conflict into a search for the truth, forcing each person to honestly reassess his position and seek a resolution in Christ, and the agreed-upon outcome is binding on the participants. Properly applied, it provides a practical model for conflict resolution and the opportunity to develop the skills of a peacemaker. In Matthew 18:15-20 Jesus said,

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If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.

Vernon had a right to due process. But like many people, he did not realize that Matthew 18 provided a level playing field for believers to settle their conflicts. Either he or his pastor could have initiated the process simply by saying, "I think we need to follow the steps of Matthew 18 to resolve our differences." Knowing that both of their actions were going to come under the scrutiny of other believers might have been enough for Vernon's pastor to rethink his position. It might also have helped Vernon to decide how comfortable he was with the facts as he saw them and whether or not his story would remain unchanged before one or two witnesses as they came together in the presence of the Lord. This scriptural process is not intended to give someone the ability to make another person conform to his own perceptions. It is intended to help all the parties honestly review their own perceptions and make whatever adjustments or admissions that will bring real peace. Repentance and forgiveness would have definitely been in order for one of these men and maybe for both.

Too many men have disconnected from the body of Christ, or are thinking about it, because of the failure to properly resolve conflicts. Some of them may even be backsliders. But many of them are probably like Vernon, needing encouragement and the

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support of due process to find a peaceful resolution. Of course, Matthew 18 does not always bring resolution. When it does not, the fault can often be laid at the feet of people who lacked the proper respect for the Lord and one another. Or it can be because one or two skilled peacemakers were not available to assist them. Men who have learned humility and have become peacemakers by resolving their own conflicts are extremely valuable to the Kingdom of God. They are essential to the success of reconciliation, especially when the conflicted parties lack the maturity or wisdom to settle the issues between them. “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). They help bring real peace by requiring each person to see their conflict from the perspective of God’s Word.

Each man is ultimately responsible before God to properly discern his own thoughts and behaviors. Whether or not he does so will have a direct affect on the power and favor of God in his life, and whether or not he has spiritual authority to continue in the path he has chosen. Jesus said,

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:9-12

This Scripture provides hope for the person who has failed to find reconciliation through no fault of his own, but for someone who has ignorantly defended his own perspective, it is a call to repentance. Proverbs 28:1 tells us that, “the wicked man flees though no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.” It is every man’s responsibility to be sure that his boldness is in Christ and not just in the power of his own soul.

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Live by Faith and Principle

Philippians 2:3-7 says,

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

In this exhortation we are encouraged not to take ourselves or our own agenda so seriously that we become unaware of its possible detriment to others. What we want or what we are trying to accomplish may not always be in our own best interests or of the people around us. Because a man can be “led astray by his own great folly” (Proverbs 5:23), he should be prepared to pray and question himself to be sure that his motives are established in faith and principle.

The Kingdom of God operates on reliable principles that are described in the Scriptures. Our ability to function effectively in the Kingdom is dependent upon our ability to apply God’s principles to our life through our faith in Christ. Faith is an expression of our confidence or trust in God as a person and in His principles. When we live by faith, we believe and act in accordance with principles that often go counter to the world around us. Jesus explained this to His disciples in Matthew 20:25-28:

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

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Here the Lord explains the principle of what is often called “servant leadership.” When a follower of Christ reads this Scripture, he must make a decision to fully open his heart and mind to believe it and then act in accordance with it. To do so means that at home he will serve his family, instead of lording it over them. At work he will find ways to serve the interests of his customers and superiors, instead of spending his time and energy reaching for positions of prominence. When he does so, he will be depending on methods and motives that are much different than the world around him. And as he has chosen to trust the Lord with the results of his life at home and at work, he can expect to receive His help. God’s power and favor will sustain a man living by faith and principle.

Another example of faith and principle is found in Luke 4:9-12, when Jesus was being tempted by the devil.

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written: ‘He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.’” Jesus answered, “It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Jesus trusted His Father to protect him. Because He was secure in His Father’s love, He provides us with an important example of not frivolously applying our faith. He could have surely taken a dive from the temple, defying gravity, and landing safely, if it was His Father’s plan. But He was here on earth to become an example for us. He responded to the devil’s attempt to cause Him to act imprudently by acting in accordance with a higher principle. Jesus did not need to prove anything to the devil or any one else about His faith, and neither do we. Our faith is in God and His Word and all we are required to do is to use our faith in reasonable ways as we respond to His plan for us.

From time to time, I counsel with men who are about to do something at home or at work which is comparable to a leap from

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the roof of the temple. They have usually been deceived by the devil into demonstrating the intensity of their commitment to God in some unreasonable way. Instead of living out each day by faith and principle, they concoct an aggressive act of faith to please God, or impress someone else in their life. This kind of behavior is almost always the result of a person's need for acceptance or recognition he has not received. It is frightening to see a man come to the point of leaping, because it is very difficult to turn him away from his ill-conceived idea. By then he has rationalized the risks to his family or business, and has overlooked or rejected the Biblical principles that would direct him to a safe, productive strategy. He has ignored diligence and chosen a desperate course of action, expecting God to "honor" his leap of faith. "It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good" (Galatians 4:18). But sometimes our acts of faith are the moral equivalent of telling God what we want to happen or a foolish attempt to force Him outside the borders of faith and principle. "This is what the Lord says—the Holy One of Israel, and it's Maker: Concerning things to come, do you question me about my children, or give me orders about the work of my hands?" (Isaiah 45:11).

This is not to say that there is never a time for bold or forceful action. The most vivid example can be found in one of Jesus' visits to the Temple in Jerusalem.

He found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" His disciples remembered that it is written: "Zeal for your house will consume me." Then the Jews demanded of him, "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days."

John 2:14-19

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His authority to take this action was unquestionable; He was God, and after He was crucified He rose from the dead to prove it. But the mandate for this kind of aggressive action is rare and should not be carelessly mimicked. Each picture of faith and action that we read about in Scripture must be carefully compared with the principles that come to bear on the subject. When we fail to do so, we can create rules to live by that are based on narrow and unrealistic interpretations of what God intends for us.

For example, when they came to arrest Jesus to crucify Him, and His “followers saw what was going to happen, they said, ‘Lord, should we strike with our swords?’ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, ‘No more of this!’ And he touched the man’s ear and healed him” (Luke 22:49-51). “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:52-53).

Peter (John 18:10) made a mistake that any man could make in a similar situation. He might have misinterpreted a single instance of Jesus’ aggressive actions in the temple as something other than a rarity. After all, Jesus Himself had told them, “If you don’t have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one” (Luke 22:36). When Peter and the other disciples realized they were in a situation which might call for a strong response, they asked the Lord what to do. Then Peter took the kind of action he thought was justified without waiting to hear what Jesus had to say. When a man does not have a full grasp of the situation he is in, does not understand the principles that apply, or does not wait to hear from the Lord, he may very well be committing a sin of presumption instead of an act of faith. “Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1), and “everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

Our home and work life should be centered upon our faith in the Lord and the principles He has given us to live by. We will make mistakes. But like anything we try to do, we can learn from them and grow. Proverbs 24:32 says, “I applied my heart to what I

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observed and learned a lesson from what I saw.” The Kingdom of God is not for the casual observer but for the active participant who is as eager to learn from his trials, tribulations, and mistakes, as he is from what comes easily. When we don’t get the lesson right, He patiently sustains us. “If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand” (Psalms 37:23-24).

I have walked with the Lord long enough to have experienced His intervention on my behalf many times in many situations. The Lord is so kind and faithful that He is able to take almost any event and from it teach us faith and principle. Even the things that are painful and do not make sense to us at the moment can become healing events with wonderful lessons that cause us to trust Him more. When my wife and I lost our newborn baby boy after only one week, we were devastated. Still in shock and reeling from the spiritual battle to which I had given all my strength, I wandered through the halls of my home praying and thinking, trying to find some reason or explanation for our loss. As I entered the nursery we had prepared, I was overwhelmed by the glaring closeness of our pain. At the same moment I recognized the unusual Presence of the Lord. It felt as if He had moved nearer to me and in a very fatherly way put His arm around my shoulders.

I was startled because both the Lord and I knew what was in my heart at that very instant. There was confusion, doubt, despair, and some anger. Just as I crossed the threshold into the room I had come to the point of questioning Him about the inconsistencies I saw and how they were affecting my faith. As clearly as you might hear a father whisper his comfort and in a direct answer to my unspoken thoughts, He said, “You trust me more than that, don’t you?” My heart nearly stopped as I answered with a simple “yes.” There was a pause as seemingly thousands of things flashed through my mind reminding me of His faithfulness and how I had grown to love and trust Him through many previous trials. I was relieved to be reminded that I really did trust Him in spite of what had been going through my mind. Then He said, “And you know I am a merciful God, don’t you?” In an instant, His peace flooded my soul as I yielded to the truth of these two principles. I did know that I

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could trust Him in whatever situation I found myself, and I knew that He is a merciful God and Father.

This was a time of faith and principle. It was not a time to leap from the roof of the temple either in presumptive faith or self-indulgent despair. The devil often tries to take advantage of our honest questioning and turn it into unbelieving doubt, but the Lord is always faithful to bring to our memory what we need to keep faith with Him. He can also use these events to shake us free from doctrines and beliefs that are unrealistic or unbalanced. Although we have received no specific explanation for the loss of our son, we have continued to learn many things about the reality of our faith, the principles we live by, and how the Lord ultimately reigns in sovereignty. As we are told in Jeremiah 6:16, “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.”