What Are You Doing With All Your Time?

Like Little Children: Lessons for Life

HOW WORK

Great Marriages
11 **GOD** 7 Ways to Please God
Every good gift we have has come from God, and He wants to give us “pleasures forevermore.” In gratitude for all He does for us, what can we do to please Him?

14 **CHANGE** What Do You Do With All Your Time?
Our time is our life, and how we spend it shapes our character, our happiness, our success and our future. How does God want us to spend our time?

18 **BIBLE** Is a Relationship With God Possible Without Keeping His Law?
It is God’s fervent desire to give us a fulfilled life of happiness now and for all eternity. If He is generous enough to want that for us, how should we relate to Him?

20 **PROPHECY** Discerning the Signs of the Times
Jesus Christ pointed out the importance of understanding the signs of the times. Why did He say that, and what are the warning signs of the end times?
In an August 2013 article about a famous Hollywood couple separating after 13 years of marriage, the title read, “If Two Happily Married Celebs Can’t Make It, Can Any of Us?”

Hmm. Since when have marriages in Tinseltown (aptly nicknamed for its all-glitter-but-no-substance reputation) provided the basis for predicting the state of matrimony for the rest of us? After all, what usually makes the news is when Hollywood types are still together after 13 years!

But upon reflecting further about the fact that the general well-being of the marriage institution today is probably, at best, described as “so-so,” I thought, well, maybe the headline writer is justifiably cynical (albeit, still a bit over the top). After all, even though most marriages stick together, many seem stuck in a rut!

How many models of thriving, happy marriages do you see today? How many “all-stars of matrimony” do you know?

Great marriages are out there!

So we sent one of our writers out to find some and, if possible, to pinpoint how successful couples make their marriages flourish.

We were not disappointed! There are some great marriages out there, and we loved what these husbands and wives had to say. Had we wanted to counter the newspaper headline quoted above, we could have titled our article, “If Five Happily Married Nonceleb Couples Can Make It, So Can You!”

Oh, their advice isn’t matrimonial rocket science. But then, most keys to success in life aren’t all that complicated. They are usually just overlooked, cast aside or untried. Why does it take so many people so long to realize that the greatest impacts, positive or negative, on their relationships are grounded in some very basic rules of living—simple laws that, sad to say, too many folks have trouble apprehending?

When it comes to relationships, simple laws have profound consequences!

Our beliefs drive our commitment

We also loved what the couples had to say because, here at Discern, we believe in marriage, and we suspect you do too! We believe the marriage institution anchors humanity’s social structure. It is easily one of the most vital elements that shape the spiritual, emotional, physical and mental state of every individual.

We also believe we’re engaged in a fight today to honor the God-given sanctity of marriage. We are therefore committed to regularly featuring articles on marriage and family that will better equip you and your children with godly knowledge, practical advice and sound wisdom to wage that battle well.

We believe the Scripture’s claim, “Unless the L ORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the L ORD guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Psalm 127:1). We are therefore committed to helping you build your marital house and guard your family domain.

Of course, we hope that all the articles in this and every issue broaden your worldview and insight into where humanity has been, why we are here and where we are going. You can broaden our insight too. Tell us where you are—what interests you, what inspires you, what bothers you? What gives you hope? What gives you fear? What do you question and wonder about? What would you like to see us cover?

And by all means, help us spread the word—the whole world needs to Discern!

Clyde Kilough
Editor
@CKilough

Oh, their advice isn’t matrimonial rocket science. But then, most keys to success in life aren’t all that complicated.
In year four of their marriage, their second child was born with Down syndrome.

In year 15 job transfers uprooted them to three cities in four months.

In year 28 he lost his upper-management job and with it suffered defamation that marred the family’s reputation.

In year 46 she suffered a long, debilitating illness.

Now, in year 51 of their marriage, when Larry and Judy reflect on some of the toughest times of life, they are quick to credit their strong relationship as one of the keys that has seen them through.

All marriages have their “for better or worse” times, of course, but looking at Judy with a twinkle in his eye, Larry says, “Judy was always the completely committed team member. We knew that together, and with God’s help, we could get through anything.”

Smiling back, Judy adds, “And we have always been best friends and could talk about everything. From the earliest days we shared the same values and faith.”

Commitment. Friendship. Communication. Shared values and faith. These are essential qualities that make marriages thrive in the better times and survive in the worse times.

Laws that work

“Marriage is a natural union but a divine institution, ordained of God. It was established by the Creator God at creation and derives its authority from the divine laws of God, immutable and unchangeable.” I have introduced many wedding ceremonies over the years with these words, hoping to firmly establish in the minds of the couple standing before me the gravity of the covenant they are making with God.

But I always hope that they will be wise to understand that, in addition to God’s law binding their marriage, they must live by His laws that bind all good relationships. When you see happy marriages, you will see these laws governing them.

How many happy marriages do you know of today? Although increasingly rare, some are around; and when we find them, it’s worth exploring to see what makes them work so well. Larry and Judy were among several happy couples we interviewed, seeking the keys that helped them be successful.

These couples have met the common challenges marriages face today—finding the time necessary for healthy relationships, dealing with financial pressures, counteracting a culture that discounts commitment and obsesses over pursuing personal pleasure, etc. Plus, they have dealt with the cultural attacks on traditional marriage that are relentlessly undermining key factors that help relationships succeed.

These couples know, however, that marriages don’t fail—humans do! But just because too many of us have failed to live up to God’s ideal of marriage, and just because marriage is under pressure, it’s not impossible to build a marriage that is a safe haven of peace, love and inspiration.

While each couple identified different relationship elements, all of them shared the same positive basis of belief: marriage is God’s gift to us. As wise King Solomon told his son, “A man’s greatest treasure is his wife—she is a gift from the Lord” (Proverbs 18:22, Contemporary English Version).

The treasure in marriage is the loving, stable environment that provides secure, lifelong emotional bonds and nurtures children who carry on to the next generation positive contributions to society.

Here are some of the insights our couples shared that helped them find that treasure.
KEY #1: TAKE TIME TO GET TO KNOW A POTENTIAL SPOUSE

When asked what advice they would give to couples considering marriage, the couples gave strong and consistent counsel: Take time to really come to know and understand the person you will marry. It takes time to recognize your own weaknesses and strengths, along with those of your potential spouse.

To David and De Lynn, compatibility is vitally important to a successful marriage. As part of their marriage counseling, they took a survey that confirmed they were quite compatible. After being married for some time, they realized how much their compatibility—in areas such as similar family cultures, both being middle children, and having similar interests and religious beliefs—was a key component of their marital and family success. As they put it: “It is important to take the time to know not only the person you would like to marry, but his or her family and its values.”

For example, we come from different cultures and grow up with varied beliefs regarding husband/wife roles and responsibilities. Most differences aren’t necessarily deal breakers, but they can cause strain and conflict, and they can be key factors in determining what kind of marriage is likely to develop. When two people recognize their differences before marriage and find mutually acceptable ways to deal with the issues, they can successfully resolve and avoid conflict.

Because of this, we strongly advise premarital counseling before couples say, “I do.” The time spent in preparation for marriage can be reassuring and help lay a foundation for a long, successful union.

KEY #2: UNDERSTAND THAT MARRIAGE TAKES WORK

The couples also spoke of the need for realistic expectations. David and Kim noted that going into marriage with the idea of finding the perfect person to fulfill all of your wants and desires is a recipe for failure. As David explained, “No one is perfect. We aren’t perfect, and we won’t find a perfect person to marry.”

David also noted, “Dating and marriage generally start out with a lot of excitement; then comes the realization that marriage takes work. When some people find that the excitement has faded and that their relationship is going to take more time and effort than they expected, they mistakenly think they need to end their marriage and find someone new. What many aren’t told while dating is that all marriages will take hard work and a commitment to constantly strengthen and rekindle the relationship.”

And to get right to the heart of the work involved, we have to fight the influence of our narcissistic age. We aren’t the center of the universe. The world and all the people in it don’t exist just to make us happy.

To truly love someone means that we want to serve the other person and help make him or her happy. Godly love isn’t selfish. It’s outgoing toward others.

As Kim noted, “Focusing solely on what we want and deserve in marriage isn’t healthy. Instead, we are better off underpromising and over-delivering when it comes to showing love to our mates.”

As children come along, the relationship between a husband and wife will likely face extra pressure. When children have needs—which they will until they are grown and self-sufficient—it’s easy for a husband and wife to spend less time on their relationship. Sadly, some partners so neglect their marriages while raising their children that when their children leave home, they no longer care about each other. Divorces are quite common at this stage of life.

To counter this trap, Judd and Quely say that they are trying to remember that their relationship is the foundation for their family’s happiness. “We learned this principle from a parenting class we took called ‘Growing Kids God’s Way,’” Judd said. “Now that we have a child, we continue to have date nights and are careful to continue giving special attention to each other.”

As for how much time to give to each other and their children, Nick and Sarah have found a balance that works for them. While they give each other space to pursue individual interests—Nick is an avid volleyball player and coach, and Sarah has her own outdoor oven business—they also believe that it is especially important to find common inter-
ests they can explore and experience together. They and their two girls have recently completed 5K runs together, even though Nick doesn’t particularly enjoy running.

He summarized their belief this way: “Husbands and wives should have the freedom to pursue their individual interests, and they should also find interests they can share.” Sarah added, “Having fun together helps our family survive and thrive.”

Solomon noted: “Life is short, and you love your wife, so enjoy being with her. This is what you are supposed to do as you struggle through life on this earth” (Ecclesiastes 9:9, CEV).

**KEY #3: DEVELOP GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

How a husband and wife deal with conflict is a good indicator of the strength of their marriage. Because everyone is unique, differences of opinion will inevitably arise. Happy families are generally ones where the husband and wife have learned how to respectfully communicate their differences and find mutually acceptable solutions.

While it may be tempting to avoid a discussion that may have strong emotional overtones, couples who value their relationship will have the discussion anyway. As David and Kim put it, “Don’t go to bed angry. Talk it out.”

From the beginning of their marriage, they turned the instruction of Ephesians 4:26 (“do not let the sun go down on your wrath”) into a relationship principle—don’t let anger stayed buried and festering. Emotional self-control is a key to productive conversation.

Couples who successfully work through their problems usually abide by a few simple guidelines that make it more likely that their communication will yield the desired result. The couples made the following suggestions:

- Spend more time trying to understand your spouse’s point of view than explaining your own.
- Be broadminded, realizing that there may be more ways of viewing and resolving a problem than what you individually see.
- Be willing to yield to whatever is the best solution for your relationship and your family. Doing so sends a powerful message that you truly love the other person and care about the relationship.
- Have a sense of humor, and don’t take yourself too seriously. Some couples have found that having occasional light-hearted moments in serious conversations can help smooth out potential tensions. Sometimes a little “awfulizing”—describing something to a ridiculously awful extreme—or some other approach you both find funny can help you keep an issue in perspective.

When one partner becomes discouraged or has a bad day, a spouse who lovingly provides a different point of view and encouragement to do what is right can be a wonderful support.

Husbands and wives who communicate with true care for each other create a positive environment in which their children can learn and model the same behavior. Several mentioned that special family din-

ers were times for them and their children to freely discuss the issues on their minds.

Hebrews 10:24 advises us to “be concerned for one another, to help one another to show love and to do good” (Good News Translation). Good communication skills help us fulfill this instruction from God.

**Building your marriage**

We could easily include additional keys for happy marriages—such as setting and accomplishing family goals and remembering to take time for romance—but these three principles are a good start. Implementing these concepts can help you and your spouse develop and maintain a joyous marriage.

As you go through life, keep in mind wise King Solomon’s astute observation: “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Psalm 127:1). Looking to God for His wisdom and guidance—making Him the builder of our marriages and families—ensures we can implement these keys. Each person and each marriage and family is unique, but God can give us His guidance and direction that works for everyone.

To learn more about the biblical principles that bring happiness to marriages and families, see the articles in the “Relationships” section of the LifeHopeandTruth.com website.
There is a proper order of things. I strongly believe it is proper for parents to teach their children to become responsible, successful adults. But could it be that children are also teachers?

Looking back, I find it’s often the actions of children that have given me life lessons not found in books. Let me share five meaningful incidents that have touched my heart and mind.

1. Belief

One of my fondest memories is of a five-gallon bucket, some red Oklahoma dirt, a garden hose and the industry of two of our young children. It was a hot summer morning, and these two had plans afoot. A quick breakfast and they were out the back door, heading straight for the old garage.

Our son took a small shovel, handed the bucket to his sister, and together they headed for their granddad’s garden. With dogged determination, they finally managed to fill the bucket halfway with dirt, and then they moved on to the next stop—the garden hose. With a quick turn of the faucet handle, a stream of water softened the clods of clay, and before long they had a thick, goopy mix to their liking.

As parents, we are generally occupied with the responsibility of teaching our children. But could we be missing valuable lessons they could teach us?

By Karen Meeker
My curiosity piqued, I asked what they were doing. Their answer? They were trying to make a man—his name was Muddy.

We had recently read the story of Adam’s creation, and they were enthusiastically trying to replicate the event. Try as they might, though, Muddy remained in his lifeless, amorphous state.

**Lesson:** There was no question in their young minds. They believed what the Bible said. What they soon learned is that some things only God can do.

What I learned is that understanding who God is can begin early in life and in small ways, but it only matures through the lessons of experience and exposure.

2. Generosity

A few years ago one of our granddaughters was planning for one of our special church services. An offering would be taken up, and she wanted to participate. First, she carefully printed a letter to God, ending with “I love you.” Then she folded it carefully, put it in her special envelope, and tucked it away for later when she would include a dollar bill.

The day finally arrived, and the family was en route to church services when suddenly our granddaughter burst into tears. She had forgotten to put the money in her precious envelope! Her mother tried to calm her distress, mentioning that she didn't have a dollar bill, but she had something just as good—four quarters.

The tears flowed even harder as our granddaughter told her mother it had to be a dollar bill. Evidently in her young mind, God preferred paper over coins, and she would have it no other way.

As soon as they arrived, our daughter-in-law found someone willing to exchange a dollar bill for the quarters, averting the pending crisis. Our granddaughter happily placed her offering to God along with her love letter in the offering basket, and I can only think that God smiled that day.

**Lesson:** This experience reinforced in my mind that giving offerings to God is not a haphazard activity. It takes planning and purpose—and it must be from the heart.

3. Faith

Prayer and Mrs. J. just seem to go together. It’s not out of the ordinary for her to get a prayer request from any of her grown children, her grown grandchildren or now any of her great-grandchildren.

Not so long ago she received a call from a granddaughter who had lost something precious—the center diamond of her engagement ring. She and her daughter Alex had looked for several days, using a flashlight, peering into and under and around everything in their home, and it was nowhere to be found. Would Mrs. J. please pray? Of course she would.

The next day 5-year-old Alex came to her great-grandmother’s home for a visit, and she told Mrs. J. how upset her mother was and how desperately she wanted to find that lost gem. “Would you pray that Momma could find her diamond, Meme?” she asked seriously.

Mrs. J. pulled her up into her lap; they bowed their heads and prayed what she called a “simple” prayer.

About a day later, Mrs. J. answered the phone and heard the words she had been expecting: “Grandma, we found the diamond!” Mrs. J. replied, “Of course you did. God is building faith in your little daughter.”

Mrs. J. later told me that God had to have answered that prayer, because the diamond was found about an inch from the shower drain in the bathroom. It could have been washed away at any time and no one would have been the wiser. Instead God heard and, at just the right time, answered the simple prayer of a little girl and her great-grandmother.

**Lesson:** Faith cannot only move mountains, the faith of a little girl and her great-grandmother can lead to the recovery of lost things. Nothing is too small—nor is anyone too young or old—to get God’s attention.
In the early 1950s the United States was in the throes of an outbreak of a dreaded, incurable disease—poliomyelitis. During the worst year of the epidemic, 3,000 people died and thousands more were crippled—many of them children.

By the time I met Linda, a pretty, young girl with lovely blue eyes, she was in an iron lung, the airtight metal tank designed to force the lungs of polio victims to inhale and exhale through regulated changes in air pressure. She could only talk when the apparatus forced her to exhale, so our conversation was dictated by its rhythm. I was a young volunteer at a hospital (they called us “candy strippers”), and one of my assignments was to visit the pediatric ward, and Linda in particular, on a regular basis.

Linda could be pulled out of her breathing contraption for a certain amount of time each day, and that was when we would do most of our conversing. Sometimes we would talk about other kids in the ward, and sometimes we would talk more personally.

One time she confided in me that when she got better, she was going to be a ballet dancer. Her eyes twinkled with excitement as she explained just what she was going to do. The fact of the matter was that there was only one part of her body she could still move voluntarily—a pinkie finger. The rest was completely paralyzed.

Lesson: When I think of Linda, I feel that even the darkest of days can be brightened by the rays of optimism and hope. And I also pray fervently for the day God’s Kingdom will come and such terrible diseases will be healed (Isaiah 35:5-6).

5. Humility

It was only normal that the disciples associated Jesus with power. After all, think of the miracles they had witnessed—the instantaneous healing of the sick, demons cast out, mastery over nature in calming a storm and more. Even they themselves were commissioned by Him to perform similar actions (Matthew 10).

Everything associated with their Master seemed to signal rule and control over any kind of adversity through countless miracles. Ultimately they anticipated His ushering in the prophesied Kingdom of God with authority and might, with themselves at His side.

What they failed to discern was Jesus’s true motivation—His desire to serve mankind, not to be served (Mark 10:45). It’s not surprising, then, that the disciples eventually found themselves embroiled in heated speculation involving power—about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1). It was time for an object lesson.

“Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me’” (verses 2-5).

Imagine what must have gone through the minds of men like James and John (the “Sons of Thunder,” Mark 3:17), Peter and, yes, even Judas—all men of strong will, zeal and action—as they heard these words.

What could be said of a little child? He had no status. She had no power. A little child had no pride, ambition or guile. Indeed, all a child could do is learn, trust and submit, which, of course, was exactly Jesus’ point.

What a teaching moment that must have been!

Lesson: Learning to have a childlike humility toward God is the ultimate lesson, and it will take a lifetime to master.

“Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven’” (Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17).

To learn more about what it means to be children of God, see the LifeHopeandTruth.com article “Children of God.” D
Every good gift we have has come from God, and He wants to give us “pleasures forevermore.” In gratitude for all He does for us, what can we do to please Him?

7 WAYS TO PLEASE GOD

By Mike Bennett
1. **Have Faith in God.**

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6).

This passage identifies faith—belief in God and believing He will do what He says He will do—as a prerequisite for pleasing God. It also gives a prime example of this kind of faith: Enoch (verse 5). Enoch lived in the increasingly evil world before the Flood, but he didn’t go the evil way other people were going. Instead, he “walked with God” and “he pleased God” (Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5).

Enoch not only believed in the Creator God, he believed God would come to earth with “ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment” (Jude 1:14-15) and make everything right. Enoch knew that ungodly deeds bring evil results and must be replaced by godly deeds—walking the way God walks—for this world to experience real peace and joy.

When we believe in God and believe what He says, we will also be pleasing to Him.

2. **Be Spiritually Minded.**

“For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:6-8).

The Bible contrasts two mind-sets: the normal, human one (the fleshly, carnal mind) and the one led by the Spirit of God (the spiritual mind, verse 9). Thus having the Holy Spirit dwelling in us and leading us is another prerequisite for pleasing God.

In Acts 2:38 the apostle Peter summarized the process God has set for us to follow to receive His Spirit: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” You can study this vital process in more depth in our free booklet *Change Your Life!*

Leading up to the passage in Romans 8, the apostle Paul explained his own experience with the two mind-sets. As challenging as he shows the process of change is in Romans 7, he makes clear that Jesus Christ will deliver us (verse 25) and that as a result of the change we become beloved “children of God” (8:16-17). Does this please God? Yes! Jesus said there is “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7). God loves to add to His family.

3. **Fear God.**

“The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, in those who hope in His mercy” (Psalm 147:11).

It’s not that God delights in having us be terrified of Him. Psalm 147 describes God as the One who “heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds” (verse 3). The passage praises His mercy, His knowledge (He knows the names of all the stars!) and His power to save the humble (verses 4-6). The Bible tells us to fear God, not because it is good for Him, but because it is good for us to accurately recognize that He is more powerful than anything else. Acknowledging this shows our deep respect for Him.

The proper fear and respect of God will motivate us to avoid sin (Exodus 20:20). It reminds us that God will hold us accountable for our actions.

Fearing God allows us to rely on Him and revere Him—which can deepen our love for the All-Powerful God who cares enough to stoop down and deliver a puny little human like me!

For more about what it really means to fear God, see the Life, Hope & Truth article “Fear of the Lord: What Does It Mean?”

---

Talk about Someone who has everything! Finding a gift that will please God can seem challenging! But thankfully the Bible tells us not only what God hates (such as in Proverbs 6:16-19) but what He delights in as well.

And best of all, what pleases God is also what will make us happiest and most satisfied. Ultimately we will be most fulfilled when we fulfill God’s purpose for our lives—because He loves us and wants the best for us forever!

So let’s look at seven ways the Bible tells us we can please God.
“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” (Matthew 17:5).

During a vision of the future Kingdom of God known as the transfiguration, God impressed on Peter, James and John the preeminence of Jesus Christ. Jesus truly was the Son of God, and there is no one who has pleased God more! We should all hear Him and follow His example.

Jesus said He always did “those things that please Him” (John 8:29), so we should study the four Gospels to learn how we, too, can please God.

In this passage, the prophet Samuel expressed God’s displeasure with Israel’s first king Saul. Saul had disobeyed God’s direct command with the excuse that “the people” had wanted to give what should have been destroyed to God instead. But God doesn’t want our physical gifts if we are going to break His laws to give them!

Again, God doesn’t command us to obey just because it is good for Him, but because it is good for us (Deuteronomy 10:13). His laws and commands are beneficial, and as a result of obeying Him, we grow in godly, righteous character—we become more like Him!

The fact that obeying God is pleasing to Him is expressed in various ways throughout the Bible. God has “pleasure in uprightness,” He will bless those who “keep My Sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me” and who “abstain from sexual immorality” and avoid breaking any of God’s commandments (1 Chronicles 29:17; Isaiah 56:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3).

We saw earlier that God rejected sacrifices that were gained through disobedience. But there are sacrifices that He is “well pleased” with, including giving praise and thanks to Him and sharing with others. These reflect His teaching on love expressed in the two great commandments that summarize the rest of His law:

“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

In fact, the Bible was given to us to show us His will and to help us in a sense read His mind. Studying the Bible, meditating on it and praying about it are keys to gaining deeper understanding of His will.

God’s will for us goes beyond just knowing what He wants. It involves doing “every good work”—working at maturing spiritually and becoming more like God (Matthew 5:48). Jesus Christ set the ultimate example of doing God’s will when He faced the terrible scourging and crucifixion for our sins, yet prayed, “Nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). He was willing to give Himself totally to show His love and to do His Father’s will.

We must seek God’s help to always do His will as well.

THE FATHER’S GOOD PLEASURE

No matter how much we give God, we can never come close to scratching the surface of what He has done for us—much less what He wants to do for us. In this life He offers awesome benefits, such as:

“When a man’s ways please the LORD, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Proverbs 16:7).

And in the future, He has an incredible gift in store for His faithful flock:

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

One of the most exciting descriptions of the utopian Kingdom of God was recorded by King David, a man after God’s own heart. He wrote, “You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

Learn more about God’s wonderful Kingdom in our booklet The Mystery of the Kingdom. And discover more about how to live in a way that pleases God in our booklet God’s 10 Commandments: Still Relevant Today. Both are free and available for immediate download. You need this life-changing knowledge today! D
Our time is our life, and how we spend it shapes our character, our happiness, our success and our future. How does God want us to spend our time?

By Joel Meeker
A few years ago an African friend making her first trip to a Western nation visited our home. She observed my wife working in the house and preparing dinner. She was amazed to see one labor-saving device after the other: an electric stove, a large refrigerator and freezer, a microwave oven, a garbage disposal, a dishwasher, a washer and dryer, and a vacuum cleaner.

Finally, she turned to my wife in astonishment and asked, “What do you do with all your time?” Most of our friend’s day, every day, was taken up with performing by hand the tasks accomplished by our appliances. She couldn’t imagine having so much free time.

All our time?
It’s an interesting question to consider: What do we do with all our time?

We may not feel like it, but people today have more free time than ever before. For most of human history, people had to spend almost every waking moment providing food, clothing and shelter for themselves and their families. It is still that way in much of the world.

Yet, according to a recent report by the U.S. Department of Labor, Americans over the age of 15 average more than five hours of free time a day. That’s almost a third of the time we’re awake! And, according to the same report, most of that unprecedented leisure time is used for entertainment: television, surfing the Web, video games and so on.

Free time: a blessing or a curse?
The way some people use their free time gets them into trouble. Geoffrey Chaucer, in the 14th century, is credited with being the first to say, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” The more modern expression that someone has “too much time on his hands” usually indicates he’s done or is going to do something stupid or wrong.

It’s important to carefully consider how we use our free time and on what we should spend it. Our lives are composed of time, so how we spend our time is how we spend our lives. How does our use of free time affect us? Are there leisure activities a Christian should avoid? Does the Bible give any guidance on how we should use our free time?

What entertains us, changes us
Jesus corrected the Pharisees many times for their hypocrisy—attempting to appear good on the outside while their hearts were corrupt.

He said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also” (Matthew 23:25-26).

We learn from this strong statement that what happens in our minds counts more with God than the way we appear on the outside.

Jesus also explained that desiring something illicit in our minds is a transgression of God’s law even if we don’t act on the thought: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

So it is vital to keep our minds and hearts clean and pure. This means a Christian should avoid any kind of entertainment that would cause him or her to desire to violate God’s law and way of life.

Virtual company
In the first century, the apostle Paul corrected Christians in Corinth for, as we might say it today, “hanging with the wrong crowd.” He told them: “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits.’ Awake to righteousness, and do not sin;
for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame” (1 Corinthians 15:33-34).

These Christians were spending time with people guided by wrong values and acting in wrong ways; this severely and adversely affected them. Bad examples were crowding God out of their lives, and Paul said it was shameful.

Wise Solomon warned: “Make no friendship with an angry man, and with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul” (Proverbs 22:24–25). The people with whom we spend time affect us. Whether we believe it or not, we come to resemble them.

Today people who wouldn’t dream of consorting with drug dealers, assassins and prostitutes spend hundreds of hours simulating that kind of life in extremely realistic games, movies or books. They listen to catchy song lyrics that unconsciously imprint their minds with wrong ideas about sexuality. Even bad virtual company can corrupt good habits.

Almost all the young barbarians who have committed school shootings, from Columbine to Sandy Hook, were frequent players of graphically violent video games called first-person shooters, where the players practice shooting lifelike people over and over. This doesn’t mean everyone who plays such games will actually kill, but it does indicate the games have a definite and negative psychological impact on players.

Practicing an action over and over desensitizes us to it. So it is crucial to protect our minds. We must not allow ourselves to be desensitized to the destructive behaviors of sin: “Guard your heart above all else, for it determines the course of your life” (Proverbs 4:23, New Living Translation). So we must make conscious choices about what we allow to enter our minds and affect our hearts. This directly impacts the kinds of entertainment we should choose.

**Two traps**

Two of the most destructive themes in today’s entertainment are violence and misused sexuality. Films, books and electronic games are portraying ever more graphic violence. Producers are constantly pushing the envelope to find new ways to surprise and shock audiences.

Sadly, many people have come to expect violence, even to insist upon it. Horror movies portray the sadistic and senseless torture and mutilation of innocent people. Video games have players graphically killing thousands of people, often without any moral framework. A whole generation of young people is becoming desensitized to violence.

Destructive sexuality is encouraged in music videos, in increasingly graphic movies and in video games. The blatant message is that sex is not something reserved for a loving marriage, but an uncontrollable animalistic urge to be indulged whenever the desire is felt and with whomever one wants.

The tragic results are becoming more and more evident in society: broken families, children growing up in dysfunctional homes, and the increasing acceptance of shocking perversions.

Online pornography is an especially loathsome scourge in its own right. According to the Focus on the Family website, among other issues:

- Pornography is addictive, and the addiction is progressive. Once addicted, a person’s need for pornography escalates; the person grows desensitized to obscene material; and this escalation and desensitization drives many addicts to act out their fantasies on others.
- Experts believe that a pornography addiction may be harder to break than a heroin addiction.
- Pornography destroys marriages and families. Interest in online pornography strongly contributes to divorce.
- Pornography plays a significant role in sexual violence. The most common interest among serial killers is hard-core pornography.

Christians must be aware of the terrible psychological and even physical destruction caused by pornography and make a firm decision to avoid it at all costs.

**How should we use our leisure time?**

Free time is what we have when we’ve finished working and recuperating from work. It is our most valuable time because we can use it to improve ourselves.

God set the pattern by mandating one day of rest time each week, the Sabbath day, for us to deepen our relationship with Him, with our family and with other Christians. This shows the importance of taking time to reflect on life, to take stock and to verify that we are pursuing what is most important in life.

The Bible tells us to use our time wisely and with great care. “See then that you walk circumspectly, not
fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16). To *redeem the time* means to make the most of it, to invest each minute in quality activities, not junk. It means to understand that our life is composed of time and we have a limited amount of it available to us during which we have important spiritual goals to achieve.

The apostle Peter wrote that we will “give an account” to God for the way we use our lives and what we accomplish (1 Peter 4:3-6). What will we be able to tell God in that accounting? Will we have to tell Him of hours wasted in mindless and destructive entertainment, or will we be able to show character development, spiritual growth and time spent in service to Him and our fellow man?

How sad it would be to have God say, “That’s all you accomplished with the years of life I gave you?”

**Guidelines**

The Bible explains some guidelines that can help us decide what kind of entertainment to choose and how we should use our free time. “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Philippians 4:8).

These qualities should guide us as we choose the ways we use our leisure time. This list would disqualify much that passes as entertainment today.

Suggestions for using our free time constructively include:

- Talking with God in prayer and letting God talk to us through the study of His Bible.
- Strengthening family ties and teaching our children important lessons and skills for life.
- Serving those in need, including widows and orphans (James 1:27).
- Reading educational and inspiring books, such as biographies and histories, and watching documentaries that help us better understand the world and life.
- Furthering our education or sharpening job skills that can help us advance our careers.
- Learning to appreciate good music and learning to play an instrument.
- Engaging in stimulating conversation with friends about weighty and worthwhile topics.
- Learning a new language.

God tells us that one of the goals of the Christian life is to bring “every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). This applies to every facet of life, including the way we use our leisure time.

We are privileged to have more free time than ever before. To use our time wisely and well is to spend our lives wisely and well, and to please our Creator.

What will you do with all your time? D
With open arms a loving Creator welcomes all who would heed His call for a genuine relationship with Him. So what does it take for mortal humans to have a direct relationship with the immortal God? According to the Bible, obedience to His will—as expressed in His law—is essential. To worship God by any other approach is to worship “in vain” and without a two-way relationship. Jesus Christ is crystal clear on this point. 

“He answered and said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men’” (Mark 7:6-8, emphasis added throughout).

Do these words of Jesus Christ (quoting words God had inspired Isaiah to write hundreds of years before) mean anything to us? If not, could we also be hypocrites, vainly looking to men’s ideas for our salvation?

The Bible has many examples of people who have had the benefit of very real and gratifying relationships with God, and every one of them had something in common. These examples include such people as Abraham (in the book of Genesis), all the way up to the apostle John (who wrote the book of Revelation). And that elite list has not been completed. Thousands more have experienced that joy since the dawn of Christianity, and many thousands do in our day.

What do all these people have in common? They actually believe Jesus Christ when He says that He did not come to do away with God’s law. They are in a relationship with God through His law—which shows us the best way to love God and other people.
Fulfilled or abolished? That is the question

Jesus said: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled” (Matthew 5:17-18).

It would appear that most professing Christians who read the above scripture are of the mind that “fulfill” means “abolish.” However, Christ plainly said that He did not come to destroy it, but (what was directly opposite) to fulfill it.

Fulfilling an office, a task or a role is the opposite of abolishing it. When the president of the United States is inaugurated into his role, he comes to fulfill that role. It would be ridiculous to say he is abolishing it. Similarly, Christ came to preside over the law; enabling His followers to delight in a positive, obedient relationship with His Father.

An end to God’s law?

Let’s look at one other New Testament scripture that is misunderstood by many people, thus inhibiting their relationship with God. “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:4).

Does this verse have to mean that the law has ended? No. The Greek word translated “end” is also used of the Lord in James 5:11, and we know the Lord has not ended. The New King James translators make that passage clear by adding the words “intended by”: “You have ... seen the end intended by the Lord.”

To uphold the apostle Paul’s original meaning, the word “end” might be better translated “end result,” “end product” or “outcome.” Romans 10:4 could also be translated, “For Christ is the aim of the law.” All this goes hand in hand with what we have already seen—that Christ actually said that He came to fulfill rather than destroy God’s law. To wrongfully assume that this verse means we can break God’s laws undermines our opportunity to have the kind of relationship with God that He desires.

Remember that we worship “in vain” if we worship in a way that rejects the commandments of God. How can we possibly have a relationship with Him if we set our hearts to believe His perfect, beneficial law is burdensome or unimportant?

What is sin?

The Bible gives the definition: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4-5). “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).

From these two New Testament verses, we can see that sin is contrary to God’s law and, unless a change is brought about, results in our demise for all time. Sin is lawlessness and consequently is an insurmountable barrier to a godly relationship.

Sin is the violation of God’s laws in mind or in deed. If we are not keeping His law, we are sinful or “lawless.” We just cannot expect a relationship with God in those circumstances.

David and God’s law

King David of Israel had a warm relationship with God. David had faults like everyone else, but in God’s own words he was “a man after My own heart” (Acts 13:22). David said, “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul” (Psalm 19:7). Other psalms show that he bitterly repented of his sins and delighted in God’s laws, which showed him how God thinks.

Paul and God’s law


Not only did Paul delight in the law, he preached it to all who were seeking a relationship with God (Acts 28:23; Romans 3:31; 7:12). Many thousands today delight in that same kind of relationship with God.

The entire Bible preaches God’s law as a means to a heartfelt relationship with Him. To learn more about building that relationship, download our free booklets God’s 10 Commandments: Still Relevant Today and Change Your Life!
Jesus Christ pointed out the importance of understanding the signs of the times. Why did He say that, and what are the warning signs of the end times?

By Mike Bennett
On April 27, 2014, Mark Wade and his family heard the ominous sound of tornado sirens in their town of Vilonia, Arkansas, along with urgent warnings on their television. They were getting ready to ride out the storm in their closet when a neighbor across the street yelled: “Come over! We’re going in the storm cellar!”

So Wade, his wife and 3-year-old son joined 10 other people and seven dogs in the crowded underground shelter. When they came out, their homes were gone. Nothing was left but the foundations.

“If we hadn’t gone to that cellar I don’t know if we would be here,” Wade said (NPR).

Early warning systems
This is just one example of how recognizing and heeding warnings can protect us from the perilous power of the air. From biblical times, humans have stood in awe of the atmospheric forces that have unleashed deadly storms. The wisdom of the ancients included some understanding of the signs that preceded wild weather.

In modern times, the devastation caused by tornadoes, hurricanes and other storms has motivated meteorologists to constantly improve their knowledge and tools to better predict storms. In 1986, the U.S. National Weather Service issued warnings before 25 percent of tornadoes, with an average lead time of about five minutes. Now the lead time has increased to around 13 minutes and 75 percent of tornadoes are predicted (USA-Today.com).

To set up an effective early warning system to save lives from natural disasters, you must know the key signs of impending danger and have continuous surveillance.

The same is true for monitoring man-made dangers in today’s world.

What are the key signs we should constantly be watching so we can be aware of the times in which we live—and be prepared for what’s coming?

Biblical indicators
Jesus chided the religious leaders of His day for not recognizing the biblical signs of the momentous times they were living in.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were testing Jesus, asking Him to show them a sign or miracle from heaven. In reply, Jesus contrasted their knowledge of the weather with their understanding of prophecy:

“When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red’; and in the morning, ‘It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times” (Matthew 16:2-3).

You can read more about the context of Jesus’ statement about the signs of the times of His day in the Life, Hope & Truth article “Signs of the Times.”
But what about now? Can we discern the biblical signs of our times?

**Cause and effect**

A key biblical principle is cause and effect—that we reap what we sow. Many passages highlight this overarching truth that obeying God brings blessings, but disobeying His beneficial laws automatically brings curses.

For example, Deuteronomy 28 introduces a list of blessings with their cause: “If you diligently obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments, … all these blessings shall come upon you” (verses 1-2).

But verse 15 begins a list of the negative effects of disobedience: “But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.”

Reading through this list of curses is a crash course in understanding the signs of the times. Increasing disobedience to God’s commandments is a sign of trouble to come.

**As in the days of Noah**

One powerful example of cause and effect occurred in the time of Noah. The book of Genesis makes clear that “the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). The world then was “filled with violence,” as humans corrupted themselves and God’s creation (verse 11).

This disobedience to God’s beneficial laws caused automatic pain and suffering to the point that God was “grieved in His heart” and decided to start all over again through Noah and his family (verses 6, 18).

Even though, from God’s perspective, the storm clouds of the impending Flood were obvious, the people of Noah’s day ignored Noah’s warnings and lived as if nothing were wrong.

Jesus Christ made this point in His warning to people about the signs of the end time. “For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be” (Matthew 24:38-39).

Like the proverbial frog in the pot that didn’t notice the increasing temperature, we can easily become inured to the increasing sin beginning to boil around us.

Year after year, human opinions about sin have changed. Actions recognized as wrong in the past are increasingly accepted, whether premarital sex, cheating, lying, swearing, lusting or homosexual sex. Jesus warned that we must not fall prey to the apathy of Noah’s day.

**Signs of the end times**

Jesus defined the end times as the period when human survival would again be on the line (Matthew 24:21-22). (Read more about what the Bible says about the end times in our article “End Times Prophecy.”)

In this same prophecy, Jesus also listed many other signs to watch:

- Religious deception (verses 4-5).
- Wars and rumors of war (verses 6-7).
- Famines (verse 7).
- Pestilences (verse 7).
- Earthquakes (verse 7).
- Persecution of followers of Christ, including attacks from within the Church (verses 9-10).
- Lawlessness (verse 12). This means “the rejection of the law, or will, of God and the substitution of the will of self” (Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words)—an apt description of our age.
- The gospel of the Kingdom will be preached (verse 14).
- Jerusalem will be surrounded with armies and the “abomination of desolation” will be set up (verse 15; Luke 21:20; see the article “Abomination of Desolation” for more details).

Understanding the signs of the end times is not just an intellectual exercise. Jesus gave these signs as warnings that are intended to motivate us to change.

**Watch and pray**

At the end of this Olivet Prophecy, Jesus said, “But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. … Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:34, 36).

So we are to watch not only the signs of the times in world events, but the signs of our own spiritual state. We must not be blinded by our daily cares. We need the vision to see ourselves as God sees us—to see the urgent need to repent, change and prepare for Jesus Christ’s return.

The important first steps that God wants us to take are discussed in the free booklet Change Your Life! If you are discerning the urgency of our times, be sure to download and study this booklet today. D
While the eyes of the world have been focused on unrest in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, tensions have flared in the South China Sea, a resource-rich region with overlapping sovereignty claims by seven nations.

China has been practicing “gunboat diplomacy.” Its provocative introduction of oil rigs into disputed waters accompanied by several ship-ramming incidents have been described as its “cabbage strategy.” In essence, this has meant surrounding, blocking and intimidating disputed islands (like wrapping them in layers of cabbage) in order to “prevent reinforcements from reaching them” (Walden Bello, “A Brewing Storm in the Western Pacific,” Asia Times Online).

Crucial to global security

With far-flung nations now intertwined economically by globalized trade, the fierce competition to control and defend trade routes and energy sources has spiked. The oceans remain the key element of the international commerce system, as more than 90 percent of all merchant goods are waterborne. Roughly half—$5 trillion of trade annually—goes through the increasingly crowded waters of the South China Sea.

The noose around the neck of the South China Sea is the Strait of Malacca, which is the most important maritime choke point in the world. Every year 60,000 vessels pass through this funnel, which is shallow and, at its narrowest point, just 1.7 miles wide. It is the shortest sea route for oil transported from the Middle East to the burgeoning Pacific Rim economies, notably China, Japan and South Korea.

The oil that passes through the Strait of Malacca is triple the amount that is transported through the Suez Canal and 15 times the total handled by the Panama Canal. Nearly two-thirds of the energy supplies for Japan, Taiwan and South Korea—and roughly 80 percent of China’s crude oil—is imported through the South China Sea. China, which didn’t become a net importer of petroleum until 1993, is now the world’s biggest consumer of energy and second biggest importer of oil.

In addition, the South China Sea region has the potential of becoming “the next Persian Gulf.” With documented oil reserves of 7 billion barrels of oil (possibly as much as 130 billion barrels) and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under its waters, the area is an energy gold mine.

This has led to a frenzied international scramble to grab remote islands and colonize them with military structures and airstrips. The waters around the roughly 200 rocky islets, reefs and shoals—of which only three dozen are above water at high tide—in the Spratly and Paracel island chains are the most hotly contested waters in the world. They are potential game changers to energy-poor and -dependent nations.

China’s ascent

The Chinese dragon has emerged from its century of humiliation and slumber to begin changing the strategic map of Asia. Looking to turn its economic heft into global power, China is increasingly going beyond its borders to establish a regional economic and military hegemony that
requires projecting power, securing outposts and fending off rivals.

“The material benefits of a growing economy are never enough for aspiring great powers—they also want respect, recognition and influence,” asserts Geoff Dyer, the Financial Times Beijing bureau chief from 2008 to 2011 (Contest of the Century, 2014, p. 8). It’s this “mixture of pride and fear that leads them to build grand navies” (ibid.).

In modernizing its defense capabilities, Beijing’s defense budget has mushroomed eightfold in 20 years. China has become the second largest military spender in the world, outpacing Russia and the United Kingdom combined. While currently still a distant second to the U.S. military, if China’s rate of increase for defense spending continues, it will surpass the U.S. by 2030.

This dramatic growth promises the ultimate prize of East Asian hegemony, with a near-term objective of tilting the balance of power away from the United States. By slowly turning the South and East China Seas into a private Chinese lake, China will control the sea-lanes into and out of Asia and ultimately the principal arteries of the global economy. In this scenario, weak states will be drawn into China’s sphere of influence, with some of them coming under Beijing’s indirect control.

This new age of rivalry has been further aggravated by China’s ambitious application of what it calls “the nine-dash line,” a vague Chinese maritime claim to resource-rich islands nearly a thousand miles from its shores and almost to the coasts of Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

**An old-fashioned arms race**

“Just as German soil constituted the military front line of the Cold War,” writes Robert Kaplan, geopolitical strategist and author of Asia’s Cauldron, “the waters of the South China Sea may constitute the military front line of the coming decades” (2014, p. 15). An unprecedented Asian arms race may be, according to Kaplan, “one of the most underreported stories in the elite media in decades” (p. 36).

In 2010 India overtook China to become the biggest buyer of U.S. armaments. South Korea and Malaysia have doubled defense spending in the last decade. The Philippines is getting almost $1 billion-worth of new aircraft and radar, while Singapore, a tiny city-state, is now among the world’s top 10 arms importers. Hot sellers include ballistic and cruise mis-

---

*Image: Map of East Asia showing China's nine-dash line claim over the South China Sea. Claims over islands and maritime rights are indicated.*
China will control the sea-lanes into and out of Asia and ultimately the principal arteries of the global economy. In this scenario, weak states will be drawn into China’s sphere of influence, with some of them coming under Beijing’s indirect control.

siles, advanced missile systems, drones and cyber warfare.

At the heart of the new arms race are the region’s navies. Vietnam, unwilling to be a vassal state to its colossal neighbor, recently purchased six state-of-the-art Russian Kilo-class submarines. Unable to match China in demographics or naval muscle, competing East Asian nations like Singapore, Indonesia and Myanmar have adopted the strategy of using advanced submarines to project the subtle threat of cutting enemy commercial lifelines.

Across Asia submarines are the “new bling,” in the words of Bernard Loo Fook Weng, a Singaporean defense expert (p. 34). Altogether, Asian nations have feverishly ordered 111 submarines to be delivered over the next 15 years. China, already possessing 60, leads the way and has been outbuilding the U.S. submarine fleet by eight to one since 2005 (ibid.).

**Japan hears long-suppressed whispers to rearm**

Most troubling is Japan, which is reorienting its defense posture to what it sees as a major Chinese threat. Though surrounded by 4 million men mobilized in the neighboring nations of China, Taiwan and the two Koreas, Japan has remained a military eunuch for the last 70 years. Since the end of World War II, Japan, while strong economically, has remained a “toothless tiger,” being the only major nation in the world to have formally renounced war. Even though Japan’s military expenditures are the third largest in the world, its security is largely provided by the U.S. Seventh Fleet.

Japan’s younger generation is worried about their nation’s economic future, and long-suppressed ideas of nationalism are starting to emerge. While the Japan-U.S. relationship has been the key to peace in the region for the past seven decades, some hostility is emerging as skepticism grows about whether the U.S. will continue to place its mutual defense treaty with Japan over its enormous trade relationship with China.

With Prime Minister Shinzō Abe working to alter or reinterpret the Japanese constitution to allow for collective self-defense, long-suppressed whispers for Japan to rearm, perhaps unilaterally and potentially even with nuclear weapons, are being heard.

**Change at the gates**

“Nationalism, especially that based on race and ethnicity, fired up by territorial claims,” wrote Kaplan in *Time*, “may be frowned upon in the modern West, but it is alive and well throughout prospering East Asia” (“Old World Order: How Geopolitics Fuels Endless Chaos and Old-School Conflicts in the 21st Century,” March 31, 2014).

“Distant water can’t put out a nearby fire,” a Chinese proverb goes, and that is how Asian nations are viewing the reduced presence of American forces in the Pacific. Regardless of Washington’s much-hyped “pivot to Asia,” the days of an unchallenged *Pax Americana* may be drawing to a close. Asian allies are deeply concerned that a U.S. decline, diversion of attention or retreat to isolation could prove massively destabilizing.

Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister and founding father of modern Singapore, gives the following chilling analysis: “The 21st century will be a contest for supremacy in the Pacific because that is where the growth will be. ... If the U.S. does not hold its ground in the Pacific, it cannot be a world leader” *(Lee Kuan Yew: The Grand Master’s Insights on China, the United States and the World, 2012*, p. 35).*

For centuries, modern commerce has functioned under the umbrella of either the British Royal Navy or the U.S. Navy, which ensured freedom of navigation by controlling the world’s major naval choke points or sea gates. The biblical blessing to Abraham’s descendants to “possess the gate of their enemies” (Genesis 22:17) has been shown through control of key sea gates—the Panama Canal, Suez Canal, Strait of Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Singapore and the Strait of Malacca.

When the British Empire ruled the waves, few nations dared to challenge the supremacy of the Royal Navy as the international policeman. After World War II, the mantle of maritime leadership was passed to America. The freedom of navigation that allowed global commerce to increase exponentially is one physical aspect of how many nations were blessed through Abraham’s blessing (verse 18). (Read more about this in the Life, Hope & Truth article “Blessings of Abraham.”)

But God warned the descendants of Abraham that if they disobeyed Him, they would eventually lose these blessings and “the pride of your power” *(Leviticus 26:18-19).*

With China’s shadow looming larger and the American presence waning in the Asian seascape, the Bible shows that we will likely see another global powerhouse—in Europe this time—step up to the economic and military forefront to challenge for preeminence.

We urge you to keep informed of prophetic trends being fulfilled in our modern world. Subscribe to our weekly newsletter to see our latest blog posts and articles on news and prophecy and other important subjects. D
MERS Spreading Around the World

The head of the World Health Organization has called Middle East Respiratory Syndrome “a threat to the entire world.”

There have been over 500 cases of MERS confirmed around the world since 2012. Soon after the second case of MERS was confirmed in the United States (a 44-year-old health-care worker who had been working in Saudi Arabia), 22 airports posted warnings about MERS from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NBC, Boston.com).

MERS shows how a virus can develop in a specific geographical area and spread around the world rapidly.

Middle East

“A generation of Egyptian Islamists will turn to other means to seek power.”

—ROBERT KAGAN, writing about the results of the military coup and the crackdown on the elected President Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood (quoted in The Week).

Cold War Revisited

“It was straight out of a movie.”

—U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OFFICIAL, speaking of an incident that took place between a Russian fighter jet and a U.S. spy plane in international airspace in April. The Russian jet flew less than 100 feet from the U.S. plane and “showed its belly”—meaning it revealed the weapons it was armed with. The U.S. official described it as “one of the most dangerous close passes in decades,” putting “the lives of the U.S. crew in jeopardy.”

The incident came amid increased tensions between Russia and the West over Russian actions in Ukraine. Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas McInerney said that the Russian action was “far worse than we experienced during the Cold War.” Russia’s recent geopolitical behavior under Vladimir Putin has led to many comparisons with the Cold War (CNN, Daily Mail).

Moral Trends

2.3 million

“The United States jails more prisoners than any nation on earth—about 2.3 million, or more than 1 percent of all American adults,” wrote Jeff Jacoby (quoted in The Week).

A federal study found that after three years 68 percent of released prisoners had been rearrested, and after five years 77 percent had. Most new arrests involved either property crimes, such as burglary and robbery, or violent crimes like assault, rape and murder.
“Recently, specific concerns have arisen that advances in the life sciences and biotechnology have made bioweapons capabilities accessible to an increasing number of actors.”

—KATHLEEN M. VOGEL, associate professor, Cornell University, in a 2013 op-ed. Threats include “not just individuals linked to terrorist organizations but also garage biohackers, proverbial ‘mad scientists,’ and other bio-criminals” (VirtualBiosecurityCenter.org).

How scary is the situation? She pointed to former CIA Director Jim Woolsey’s assessment of the growing number of security threats being like a “jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.” But bioweapons have the added danger that some could spread out of control, even far beyond the intended targets.

Bioweapons Proliferating?

437,000
Number of people murdered worldwide in 2012. Of these murders, only about 43 percent result in convictions. This number does not include those who died in warfare (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, as reported in Time).

3,000
The average number of references to alcohol brands that an American teenager is exposed to in popular music every year. A study by the University of Pittsburgh and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Norris Cotton Cancer Center found that young people’s binge drinking is linked to their ability to identify alcohol brands mentioned in popular music (Dartmouth.edu).

It is important for parents to understand the influence that celebrities and popular music have on their children. To learn more about the danger of alcohol addiction and how to overcome it, read our article “Alcoholism.”

Gambling: A Bad Bet?

Bloomberg Businessweek reports that the U.S. gambling industry has taken major hits in the past year. Gambling is a $38 billion industry in the United States, with 39 states allowing casinos to operate legally. Major casinos around the country are either closing or reducing the number of slot machines. The cause of this downturn seems to be the still slow U.S. economic recovery. With money tight, some Americans are more wary about spending money in casinos, though those with gambling addictions continue to play.

Read our article “Gambling” to learn how to deal with this major addiction that plagues thousands of people.
Do the teachings of Jesus Christ on peace and nonviolence contradict what many “Christian” nations and individuals practice? The answer may surprise you!

By Erik Jones

Christianity is the largest religion in the world. Today over 2.18 billion people around the world, representing over 32.5 percent of the world’s population, profess Christianity. From the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life list of the 10 countries with the largest number of Christians, the following are the top five ranked by percentage who are Christians:

• Democratic Republic of the Congo (63,150,000 Christians; 95.7 percent of population).
• Mexico (107,780,000; 95 percent).
• Philippines (86,790,000; 93.1 percent).
• Brazil (175,770,000; 90.2 percent).
• United States (246,780,000; 79.5 percent).

But do the high percentages of professing Christians in these nations make them safe and peaceful refuges from crime and violence? Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Consider three of the top “Christian” nations. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), with its nearly 96 percent Christian population, is also one of the most dangerous nations in the world. The Congo has been embroiled in a bloody civil war for many years that has resulted in over 3 million deaths. The DRC is also considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women due to the high occurrence of rape.

Mexico, with its 95 percent Christian population, is also a very dangerous nation. Mexico has been engaged in a drug war for many years, and 27,199 people were murdered in Mexico in 2011. (That’s a rate of 24 homicides per 100,000 people.)

The United States has the highest murder rate of highly developed countries; 14,827 people were murdered in the United States in 2012.

And some of the most destructive wars in human history have been fought by Christian nations. World War I, World War II, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War and the Thirty Years War were all wars where the majority of combatants, on both sides, were Christians.

Clearly, Christianity has not led to world peace—even among professing Christian nations.

Christians are to be peacemakers

The purpose of this “Christ vs. Christianity” column is to show how many churches and individuals who profess the name of Christ teach and practice things that are directly contrary to what Jesus Christ actually taught. If you would judge Jesus Christ by some of those who profess to follow Him, you might think that Jesus would be an advocate of individuals’ expression of disdain and even hatred toward their enemies and of nations’ reliance on battle-hardened military might.

But is this actually what Jesus stood for—or would stand for today?

The Sermon on the Mount (found in Matthew 5, 6 and 7) is one of the most detailed teachings of Jesus Christ recorded in the New Testament. In this
Why Violence in the Old Testament?

How do we reconcile the clear teachings of Jesus Christ on nonviolence with the many examples of violence and war in the Old Testament? Even a casual reading of the Old Testament will show that the nation of Israel engaged in warfare and some of God’s servants (like King David) fought and killed people.

Here are four keys to understanding why this is not a contradiction.

1. GOD’S CONSISTENT LAW

God’s law against murder is universal and existed during Old Testament times. His expectation was always for human beings not to kill or harm other human beings (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17). In fact, God’s law against murder existed even before the 10 Commandments were codified on Mount Sinai (Genesis 4:8-11).

2. LACK OF FAITH

God promised to fight Israel’s battles for them if they would demonstrate faith and obey Him (Exodus 14:13-14; 23:27-30). Unfortunately, by Israel’s refusal to trust and obey God, they chose to fight to receive and defend the land God gave them (Exodus 16:2-3, 28; 17:9; Deuteronomy 1:26-45).

3. THE “HEART” FACTOR

God permitted certain behaviors, such as divorce (and, we believe, warfare), in ancient Israel because of the “hardness of your hearts” (Matthew 19:8). One of the primary differences between the Old and New Covenants is that under the Old Covenant, Israel was not given the Holy Spirit that is necessary to understand and fulfill the spirit of God’s laws. The Holy Spirit is provided under the New Covenant to write the law on human hearts and minds (Jeremiah 31:31-33). In simple terms, New Covenant Christians are expected to live up to a higher standard than those who lived under the Old Covenant.

4. CONSEQUENCES

King David, though he was a man after God’s heart, was reprimanded by God because he “shed much blood and … made great wars” (1 Chronicles 22:8). Because of this, God did not allow David to accomplish one of his greatest goals—to build a permanent temple for God in Jerusalem.

In summary, there is no contradiction between the Old and New Testaments! God’s consistent will was for His people to be peaceful and nonviolent. In the New Testament Jesus Christ expanded on the Sixth Commandment to include hatred and anger—and He expects Christians to show love to others and practice peace and nonviolence.

To learn more, read our LifeHopeandTruth.com article “War in the Bible.”
Jesus showed that it’s not just the physical act of murder that breaks the Sixth Commandment. Inner anger and hostility toward other human beings also break this law.

basic truth that Christians are to “pursue peace with all people” (Hebrews 12:14; see also 2 Corinthians 13:11; Galatians 5:22; James 3:17).

Christ and the spirit of the Sixth Commandment

Jesus Christ also made a shocking statement in commenting on the Sixth Commandment (of the 10 Commandments). He said:

“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, ‘Raca!’ shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of hell fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus was expanding the meaning of the Sixth Commandment by revealing the spirit of the law against taking human life. Jesus showed that it’s not just the physical act of murder that breaks the Sixth Commandment. Inner anger and hostility toward other human beings also break this law.

Yes, having feelings of hatred toward other human beings is a sin and breaks the Sixth Commandment!

The rest of the Bible elaborates on this key statement by Christ. Notice what John wrote: “Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him” (1 John 3:15). Many other scriptures make it clear that hating another person is sin and breaks this commandment (2 Corinthians 12:20; Titus 3:3; 1 John 2:9-11).

The ultimate intent of this commandment is to help us understand that God wants us to show love toward other human beings (Mark 12:31; 1 John 2:10).

Christ’s approach

Notice this teaching later in the Sermon on the Mount:

“… ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44).

These words could be considered some of the hardest to apply of all of Jesus Christ’s teachings! The Gospel accounts show us that Jesus not only taught this standard, but practiced it (Matthew 10:23; 26:51-53; Luke 4:28-30; John 8:49; 10:39).

Christians should operate on the principle found in Romans 13:10: “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

The implications

Jesus Christ’s teachings and practices are very clear when we honestly read the four Gospel accounts. Christ’s followers are to demonstrate love for others—and one major way we are to demonstrate love is through a life of peace and nonviolence.

Jesus Christ wants His followers to put their trust in Him for protection and to be noted for their peace and love for others! The Kingdom of God, the focus of Jesus Christ’s message, is all about how Jesus will bring peace to the world (Isaiah 9:7).

Read more about the peace He will bring in the Discern article “Neither Shall They Learn War Any More.” And to learn more about how Jesus Christ expanded the meaning of God’s law, read the Life, Hope & Truth article “Jesus and the Law.”
A BEAUTIFUL JEWEL OF THE INDIAN OCEAN, the island of Mauritius is unique. Singular volcanic mountains jut up over fine-sand beaches. The cultural and linguistic mix on the island is surprising: a swirl of French, English, African, Malagasy, Indian and Chinese, with religions including Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, each a legacy of its colonial past. Yet Mauritian get along quite peaceably.

The island is also famous for something that hasn’t been seen there for the last 350 years. Mauritius was the only known home of the dodo bird. Measuring up to one meter (three feet) tall, it weighed up to 20 kilograms (45 pounds). The dodo, larger than a swan, must have been quite an imposing fowl.

Today the dodo is famous for its extinction. If anything is “dead as a dodo,” it is impressively dead. When something or someone has “gone the way of the dodo,” the passing was definitive.

So what caused the dodo to go its way?

No fear
When Mauritius was discovered by sailors in the early 1500s, there were no human inhabitants. The dodo had no predators at all until the Dutch began using the island as a resupply base. Meat-famished sailors quickly learned that the dodo had no fear of them. Men could walk right up to the placid birds.

Hunting by humans and by the animals they introduced caused complete extinction in only about 60 years. One could say a lack of fear killed the dodo.

Know fear
The Bible presents a dichotomy on fear. Jesus told His disciples several times not to fear (Luke 12:7, 32). The Spirit of God is not one of fear, the apostle Paul said, but of a confident, sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7). The apostle John wrote, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Yet the Bible also speaks of a healthy fear. Fear can take the form of profound respect for the damaging consequences of foolish behavior; dread of catastrophe that we can unwittingly unleash on ourselves.

When fear is your friend
The Bible instructs us to fear God first of all—to have a profound respect for Him and apprehension of the ruinous results of ignoring His will. Solomon went so far as to say that fearing and obeying God is man’s entire duty (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The Bible also says we should fear God’s Commandments (Proverbs 13:13)—that is, fear the painful results of breaking them.

Proverbs 14:16 warns, “A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident.” A corollary states (twice!): “A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on and are punished” (Proverbs 22:3; see also 27:12).

Imagine evil and potential catastrophes from foolish decisions barreling down the road toward us. The wise person fears what could happen and takes precautions. The fool imagines himself to be untouchable, or ignores the danger, and pays a heavy price.

Christians are not to live in terror. God is good, and His hand is on the reins of the universe. He has set in motion laws of cause and effect, springing from choices we make, to teach us important lessons that will remain part of our character for eternity. That’s why we must learn the proper fear of God, His law and His will.

The alternative is the way of the dodo.

Delve deeper into these subject in the article “Fear of the Lord: What Does It Mean?” and our free booklet God’s 10 Commandments: Still Relevant Today, which you can find at LifeHopeandTruth.com.

–Joel Meeker
@JoelMeeker
LEARN WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT HOW YOU CAN
BECOME THE PERSON GOD WANTS YOU TO BE

CLICK HERE TO
DOWNLOAD

You really can experience the life God wants you to have—one full of meaning, satisfaction and joy!

CHANGE YOUR LIFE!