

VISUABLES

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Autism

By John S. McCranie IV

Years ago there was a story in the Arizona Republic about a 14-year-old autistic boy named John who lived in Mesa. He had an older brother named James. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition featuring disconnects in the brain that impairs one's ability to process and communicate. It is characterized by self-absorption, inability to interact socially, repetitive behavior, and language dysfunction. This story is about John's repetitive behavior that nearly killed him.

John's ASD caused him to have no sense of safety or self-protection. He didn't think things through enough to determine if it was dangerous or not. He knew no fear. At John's school, there was a jungle gym in the middle of the playground. Every time the bell rang for recess, John would dash to the jungle gym and climb to the top as fast as he could. He would then stand victoriously on the very top and spy out the land. One clear day while John was taking in his lofty view, he saw it in the distance. He thought it was awesome and he knew it had to be his next conquest! What John saw was a high voltage tower.

After sneaking off the school campus, he eventually found the tower and immediately bolted to the top. Meanwhile, James, John's 17-year-old brother, was already alerted to his escape and was driving through the area on a search and rescue mission. James' heart sank as he caught John's silhouette nearing the tower's top. James immediately climbed the tower and when he reached the top he clutched John with one arm and iron with the other.

James knew immediately that there would be no possible way to get his brother down the way they came up. John was so excited about his adventure he refused to go down no matter how much James implored him. Soon the police came, then the fire department, the sheriff's helicopter and of course the news choppers showed up. The rescue team tried to figure out how to get the boys down safely. Every plan was filled with risk until a man from the power company requested a heavy duty truck with a special crane used to repair these titans. The bucket was raised up to the boys and they were lowered to safety. James was interviewed by the media and someone asked, "You nearly lost your own life up there, didn't you??" His reply was, "It's what you do when you love your brother."

We can be a lot like John. We are often self-absorbed, don't always interact well socially, repeat our destructive behaviors and, sadly, show little abandon when it comes to sin. We see towers we want to climb! They are so tempting and we can be so compulsive. We run to sin and climb aboard and then get in some serious trouble, eternal life trouble.

Jesus is a lot like James. If we repent of our spiritual autism, He comes to our rescue. He clutches onto us and doesn't let us die. If you asked Him why, He would simply say, "It's what you do when you love your brothers and sisters."

Blessings, John

Beach Cleanup

by John McCranie

In today's youth culture there is something truly impacting in getting kids to do something for others without compensation or reward. Jesus lived out the principle of giving without getting. In our modern era I find this very principle reverses society's "Please me or pay" mentality.

This brings to mind years ago my family participated with a church's youth ministry in an "Adopt a Beach" service project in Ventura. Our group scoured the beach between Seaward Ave. and Marina Park for litter. Armed with buckets, bags and trash pickers we removed anything that wasn't natural to the environment. Most of what we picked up was just trash but some of the things we picked up were offensive and others are too gross to mention. A lot more goes on at the beach than sand castles and swimming.

When we arrived at our destination, Marina Park, the Park Patrol Ranger was very impressed with the amount that we gathered. All of us felt really good afterwards. There is such fulfillment in doing a big project that benefits others.

I've been thinking that the beaches of our souls need cleaning on a regular basis so that our litter doesn't build up and our divine beauty isn't spoiled. 1 John 1:7-9 states "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." When we don't confess our sins in prayer, the shoreline of our soul becomes cluttered with ugly and grotesque litter. When we repentantly ask God to forgive our violations, it is Jesus Himself who picks up our trash. He and the Spirit become our "soul patrol."

When we worked the beach that day, there were some who followed the group from behind and were able to pick up the things that the others had missed. I'm sure the main bunch thought they had gotten everything but the others in the back made the cleanup more thorough. James 5:16 tells us "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." This instruction is clear - - we need to confess to others in order to pick up on the things we would miss if we just confessed privately. When you tell a person, who can hold a confidence, the shortcomings and mistakes you have made they can help you see the things you couldn't on your own.

God, thank you for adopting us! It's hard to express how grateful we are for you using faithful brothers and sisters to make our souls cleaner. We love walking on the beach, in the light! Keep us spotless in Christ. In His name. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Bristlecone

by John McCranie

Presently I am at 8,600 feet elevation in Angel Fire, New Mexico near Taos. I recently finished preaching at the wonderful Angel Fire Bible Symposium and am now enjoying a day of rest and reflection in this amazingly beautiful setting. I am reminded of an article that appeared in the Reader's Digest telling about a most unusual tree called the Bristlecone Pine. Growing in the western mountain regions, sometimes as high as two or more miles above sea level, these evergreens may live for thousands of years. The older specimens often have only one thin layer of bark on their trunks. Considering the habitat of these trees, such as rocky areas where the soil is poor and precipitation is slight, it seems almost incredible that they should live so long or even survive at all.

The environmental adversities, however, actually contribute to their longevity. Cells that are produced as a result of these rigorous conditions are densely arranged, and many resin canals are formed within the plant. Wood that is so structured can withstand enormous adversity. The article made an interesting point saying, "Bristlecone Pines in lower elevations and richer conditions grow faster, but die earlier and soon decay. The harshness of their surroundings, then, is a vital factor in making them strong and sturdy."

How similar this is to the experience of the Christian who graciously accepts the hardships God allows to come into his life. In Hebrews 12:11 we read that such chastening produces "the peaceable fruit of righteousness." Are you in a difficult place today because the winds of trial are sweeping over your life? Remember that when you are walking through a valley . . . a mountaintop experience lies ahead. Instead of complaining, thank God for the assurance that "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).

Being strengthened by the strongest person in the universe sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Having the Almighty Himself affirm who you are and what you're doing is exactly what is needed after enduring hardship. Rejoice in the added power and grace that come through adversity.

Blessings,
John

Calm Storm

by John S. McCranie IV

Although I had lived in Ventura County for several years I had never been to UCLA Medical Center. After getting directions and picking up a brother, we headed for the hospital to see our friend and church member, Troy. The heart attack he had was serious enough to send him to the premier cardiac unit in the area. Troy's wife, Lucille, told me on the phone the news of his post-surgery condition. He was doing better than expected but was still very much critical.

Once we found the entrance to the hospital (no easy feat!), we asked our way to the ICU ward. Now keep in mind as a minister I have been in my share of Intensive Care Units but, I was stunned by how much technology surrounded my suffering friend. There were tubes and wires running everywhere in and out of Troy's body: breathing aides, multiple IV's, monitors and an array of sensors. It looked a lot like what you see when you remove the back off an old television – wires, electronics and tubes. In the midst of all this was his grandson, Scott, holding Troy's hand encouraging and comforting the man who had undoubtedly done the same for him many times previously. Troy's daughter, Laqueta and mother, Lucille, looked on, wearied from worry and lack of sleep.

I went in and bent over Troy so he could recognize me. He surprised me by grabbing my arm and pulling me into himself. It was obvious he was in pain and frustrated he couldn't talk (due to the breathing tube). But that's not why he pulled me in close. At first I thought it was because he wanted a hug since he always enjoyed those in church and he really needed one now. So I gave him a gentle squeeze. As I straightened up, he pulled me in again. I told him how much the church loved him and was praying for him. I told him the Lord was answering all those petitions and was working hard to help him. Then I straightened up again, brushed his hair with my hand and told him to keep fighting. It wasn't until he pulled me down yet again a third time that I realized what he really wanted.

Troy wanted me to pray! His preacher came all the way to see him and he wanted to pray to God in heaven to relieve the fear and pain. He wanted to pray that Lucille, the lovely pea who had shared his life pod, would be blessed with security and rest. He wanted to get better and go home. So we prayed.

When I closed the prayer and stood back up he loosened his grip and relaxed. It was the calm after the storm. I suggested he get some sleep and soon he closed his eyes. We all left the room to the nurses who were reading instruments and preparing for procedures. A number of weeks later Troy left the hospital to go home, His heavenly one in Paradise.

Father, what a tremendous privilege to minister to others when they are in such great anxiety. What a blessing to meet a spiritual needs with a loving heart! It's hard to express what a great relief it is that when tragedy strikes we don't have to be merely bystanders. We can pray to You and know You will do right. Lord, you fix broken hearts and bring home the faithful whose bodies are broken. Thank You for prayer! In Jesus' name.

Amen.Blessings,
John

Departure

by John S. McCranie IV

When did Jesus know? What was He doing when He heard the call to leave home? How did He know it was time for His departure? Imagine Jesus in Joseph's carpenter shop working on a project when the Father's voice spoke to Him and announced that the time was coming for Him to begin that for which what He was born.

Because the Bible is silent about Jesus' years as a teen and young adult, we tend to miss that Jesus was thirty-years-old before leaving the family. Throughout His twenties don't you imagine the Carpenter's Son must have sometimes wondered how long it would be before heaven would call? He continued to meet his familial obligations as a firstborn knowing He had the greatest of all destinies to fulfill. Until we meet Him face-to-face, we won't know exactly when the call came but we can be sure that throughout those years of His life the Nazarene learned what it means to "wait upon the Lord."

Abraham and Sarah learned to wait upon the Lord and at the right time, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to Isaac. Moses learned "faith patience" by tending Jethro's sheep for forty years in Midian before heading back to Egypt to be the deliverer of God's people. The Israelites must have been very anxious marching around Jericho for seven days waiting upon the Lord before getting the signal to take the city. But back to my original question, "When did Jesus know the waiting was over?" .

I see the Son of Man finishing His project in the shop, slowly taking off His dusty apron and hanging it on its worn wooden peg. He then turns around in the shop's doorway and takes one last look. He breathes in deeply to imprint the shop's aroma in His memory, turns around and heads home. That night, He finishes getting things in order and prepares Mary, His brothers and sisters for his departure. The next morning as the sun rises He walks out of the city of Nazareth heading toward the Jordan River. He changed the world for the glory of God . . . by taking the next step.

Friend, God beckons you. There is a purpose, a role, a ministry He has in store for each of you. You have been waiting upon the Lord now its time to intensely pray and prepare for your journey. There is a world to influence, people to teach, lives to change for God's glory.

I believe it's time to stop keeping shop. It's time for us to leave behind the waiting and begin the walking. The mission is clear, and the challenge is great. We have a purpose, a destiny. God calls each and every follower to be like living stones, being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Father God, help us hang our aprons and step out to that which may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Our church routines and rituals have their place. They serve to prepare and equip us. It is now time to begin our journeys outside the church property. Protect us, lead us and remind us of how proud You are of us when we take the next step. In the Shepherd's name. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Faithfulness

by John S. McCranie IV

Have you ever noticed how easy it is for us to displace God's standards for our own? How quickly we adapt to mind-sets that fall short of God's requirements. It is this mentality that pervades page after page of the gospel narratives. In Luke 18 the Pharisee prayed, "*I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of my income.*" In his own mind he had the appearance of faithfulness, but to God he was lacking the crucial quality of humility. The itinerant preachers who followed the apostle Paul in Corinth had a fallible standard. "*Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.*" (2 Cor. 10:12) If one of their own were asked, I'm sure they would say they saw their colleagues as faithful, but God saw them as men lacking understanding. They didn't comprehend the difference between His definition of faith and theirs. Therein lies the problem. We often think that what we determine as faithfulness is what Jesus defines as faithfulness. Not necessarily.

In John 15, Jesus said "*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.*" Our requirement is to abide in Him. Those three words describe faithfulness. If I abide in Christ, in His work and His ministry, then I will bear the fruit He intends me to. Abiding in Him means more than attending services. Attending Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night is not abiding in Christ, it is attending services. Too often this is our standard of faithfulness. Someone asks, "Are they faithful?" to which the quick response is, "They never miss a service!" Church attendance is the *fruit* of faithfulness, but it is not faithfulness in and of itself.

Faithfulness simply means being committed to what God wants, no matter what. It is being given to that which the Master was given. We must be involved not only in God's worship, but also in God's work, God's Word and God's Way. Here is the assignment: that we be faithful to the task assigned us. The beautiful thing is that when we are faithful to Him, *He* produces the fruit. When He's given one of us the gift of teaching He then tells us to teach. When we do, the result is fruitfulness. If we have the gift of evangelism and we evangelize the result is fruitfulness. Faithfulness is not fully accomplished until it is demonstrated by fruitfulness because . . . *Being faithful means being fruitful.*

Lord, it seems more difficult to find faithfulness in modern times. The great majority of our citizens claim to have faith in You. Yet, we strain to witness the consequence of that proclaimed belief. Jesus taught us to know a tree by its fruit. Things are looking barren. We know too, that You are the divine Husbandman who audits His orchard to ensure that each tree is fulfilling its purpose by bearing fruit. So, Lord, when you inspect us what do You see? Love and joy? Peace and patience? Kindness and goodness? Gentleness and self-control? Father, do You see faithfulness in us? We long to abide in You. We want to be committed to the mission you commanded. We want to be more than on the role of church membership we want to be faithful. In Jesus name. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Heavy Lifting

by John S. McCranie IV

As compassionate and caring as our Lord Jesus was with people, He had some strong points of view. Jesus loved the lost and it showed. He made it clear that the Father sent Him to save us and provide for our freedom. It is a freedom from not only sin but every other type of bondage that tires, exhausts, and burdens. In John 8:36 He promised, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus grieved for people who were imprisoned by their religion. Faith in God is supposed to give us joy, hope and fulfillment. Man-controlled faith causes guilt, frustration and insecurity. Jesus told His followers to look around at the weary people who were like wounded, emaciated sheep without a shepherd.

Jesus befriended thieves, tax collectors, drunkards and ate meals with them to demonstrate He was on their side. But it's easy to overlook that while dining with the discouraged, Jesus confronted the practice of the teachers of their religion, the Pharisees. The very leaders charged by God to enlighten and lighten His people were in fact placing great burdens on the people. The Pharisees' message was one of salvation by performance (according to their definition, of course). How many of us have fallen into that trap?

Jesus also disturbed the comfortable by reminding them that God's standard for holiness was far higher than they had rationalized. Some in His day did not appreciate His opinion and some today still don't. What I'm witnessing is the tendency of church folk to quote and comment on the passages of Christ that speak of the warmth, comfort, compassion and love of God but remain silent on the verses that speak of God's wrath, justice and demands for repentance. Does God want his sheep in the fold? Yes. Will He allow every sheep to pasture in paradise? No. The Lord loves them enough to tell them that many are called but few are chosen. He made it clear that the demands of being a disciple can be very high at times.

Modern American preachers are telling the citizens of this land that the Christian of life is easy with no heavy lifting. I have found that in order to follow Christ there is indeed heavy lifting. I must carry my own cross daily. A.W. Tozer said, "I am afraid we modern Christians are long on talk and short on conduct. We use the language of power but our deeds are the deeds of weakness. We settle for words in religion because deeds are too costly. It is easier to pray, 'Lord, help me to carry my cross' than to pick up the cross and carry it; but since the mere request for help to do something we do not actually intend to do has a certain degree of religious comfort, we are content with repetition of the words."

Years ago in Simi Valley, CA a speeding man lost control of his car and ran off the freeway, was thrown out, his car flipped over, landed on him and then burst into flames. The police who arrived on the scene endangered their lives to lift the car off the man and pulled him out to safety. Those officers cared enough to save his life. Do you think they spoke up to the man later and had words with him about the foolishness of driving at 100 MPH? Yes. Why? Because that's what you do to help people live. The Master wants people to live with Him eternally. His loving voice makes clear that in order to have eternal life folks must leave behind their foolish ways.

Blessings,
John

In A Clutch

by John S. McCranie IV

Ever take on something you thought you could handle yourself but just couldn't and had to have someone else's help? Let me share one with you from way back when. One of the hardest projects I ever took on was replacing the engine in my 1966 Chevy pickup. I found this great deal on a used 292 engine to replace my worn-out 250. I was excited as I gathered all the necessary equipment to complete the monumental (at least for me) task. With a borrowed engine hoist and stand I set off to do what needed to get done.

For the most part all went fairly smooth. The old engine came right out. The new one was a bit tight but with some adjustments and wisdom from some church buddies, I got it in. Now the tricky part was to get everything else pieced back together. The transmission was a bit ornery but finally gave in and bolted up. Then it was time to put the clutch on and hook up the drive line. It wouldn't be long now until I could fire this baby up and test the new powerhouse under the hood.

Periodically throughout the day, my sweetheart bride, of only a few months, would come out of the house and ask if she could help. I would tell her "No thanks" and joke about her not being mechanically inclined. Now as I wrestled alone to get the clutch lined up and installed I was getting frustrated. It alone stood in my way of mechanical victory but, the stubborn clutch plate wouldn't line up. I grumbled as I tried for over an hour to conquer this strong-willed beast, but to no avail. Noticing my daylight was slipping, I lay there on my creeper and screamed out in anger! Guess who heard my cry?

Becky came out to see if I was okay. I said I was okay but just couldn't figure why the stupid clutch wouldn't line up. She leaned over and looked under the hood and made a small suggestion. I whispered to myself, "Yeah, right," but was so desperate I tried it. Yep, it worked and everything slipped into place. I could hardly believe it! My relief was coupled with a strong sense of embarrassment. All the while Becky danced around the yard saying "It worked! It worked! I fixed the truck!" I never saw her quite so proud. She figured out what I couldn't fix. On *my* truck no less! Thirty-three years later she still brings it up.

*Father in heaven, sometimes we get so close and involved in a problem we can't solve it. Remind us that when we are frustrated it takes someone else to point to the answer. Also, prevent us from underestimating others' ability to help, no matter how "unqualified" we might assume they are. Lord, keep us humble so we're capable of being rescued. Thank you for teaching us that, "**Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.**" Finally, Father, help us to look for and accept the help You send our way through Your Holy Spirit and Holy Bible. In Christ. Amen..*

Blessings,
John

Nobody Wants Bible

by John S. McCranie IV

We here at the Turlock Church will be enjoying a new Bible class quarter starting February 28 so I have been thinking about the role of Scripture in the modern church. I perceive there is a negative inclination in Christendom these days. It is a growing disposition that is radically changing the way churches worship and teach. The more I travel the more I see it. This viewpoint holds that people don't want the Bible any more.

By the practice of many mega-churches the above saying is true. By time the concert of praise songs and the live drama is followed by personal testimonies there just isn't much room for a good sermon on God's Word anymore. Their paradigm seems to work like this: the less we focus on Scripture the more popular our church will be. Perhaps Satan's old ploy still works after all. This propaganda states that the Bible has done nothing but divide the church and the more we focus on Scripture the more arguments we will have, the more that discouragement will drain the church of its all-important enthusiasm.

Take Bible School for example. It is heartbreaking to see education ministries develop Bible class students that don't need to bother bringing their Bibles. A lot of kids today see videos and have to place their Bibles out of the way for song and dance, punch and cookies.

I guess this is one reason I love the church of Christ. Although we use multimedia in our classrooms and craft handouts, the Bible is spotlighted and is the center of our curriculum. Our children bring their own Bibles because they will get used. The children receive their own personal Bibles from their teachers. Why? Because of our wonderful Bible teachers. They have instilled in our students the value of knowing and obeying the Word of God. They spend hours preparing relevant lessons for their students. They not only share truth but they share the love of Christ.

The primary focus of our worship is to glorify the Lord God. Our worship service doesn't offer a lot of production nor is especially complex. We invite member and guest alike to take part. That's one reason I love a capella singing because all worshipers are encouraged to participate in singing praises. We collectively pray and commune with Christ at the Lord's Supper. Each family is encouraged to contribute from their blessings. Central, in our attention during our assemblies, is God's Word. Since God is preeminent so is His Word.

The idea that people don't want the Bible any longer is anything but true. I've done a lot of preaching at Bible Camps and teen and college retreats. I've used just as much Scripture in these sessions as in older settings and the students seem to love it. Young people love to hear the interpretation of His Word.

Perhaps the Bible hasn't fallen out of favor but the boring and lifeless presentation of the lessons is what we don't want anymore. Dead, thoughtless Bible classes have no room in the vibrant,

living kingdom of our Savior. Perhaps if pulpiteers quit relying on theatrics and started releasing the power of the living Word then God again would have the supremacy in worship instead of the emotional needs of the worshiper.

Father in Heaven, You are light and You are life. Your Bible is a bright lamp and a living letter. You redeem the lost and forgive the repentant. Your Word contains the message of reconciliation and if read by a humble heart will lead to holy transformation. Thank You for reminding us that people in our post-modern culture still want the Bible. And Father, thank You so very much for those teachers and preachers who have been dynamic and convincing. All in Jesus' name. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Parable of Fishermen

by John S. McCranie IV

Now it came to pass that a group existed who called themselves fishermen. And lo, there were many fish in the waters all around, In fact, the whole area was surrounded by streams and lakes filled with all kinds of fish. And the fish were biting.

Year after year these who called themselves fishermen met in meetings and talked about their call to fish, the abundance of fish, and how they might go about fishing. Continually they searched for new and better definitions of fishing. They sponsored costly nationwide and worldwide congresses to discuss fishing and promote fishing and hear about all the ways of fishing.

These fishermen built large, beautiful buildings and held "Fishing Assemblies." The plea was that everyone should be a fisherman and every fisherman should fish. One thing they didn't do, however. . . they didn't actually fish.

They organized a board to send out fishermen to other places where there were many fish. The board was formed by those who had the great vision and courage to speak about fishing, to define fishing, and to promote the idea of fishing in faraway streams and lakes where many other fish of different colors lived. Also the board hired staffs and appointed committees and held many meetings to define fishing, to defend fishing, and to decide what new streams should be thought about. But the staff and committee members themselves did not fish.

Expensive training centers were built to teach fishermen how to fish. Those who taught had doctorates in fishology, but the teachers did not fish. They only taught fishing theory. Year after year, graduates were sent to do full-time fishing, some to distant waters filled with fish. After one stirring class on "The Necessity for Fishing," a young student went fishing. The next day he reported he had caught two outstanding fish. He was honored for his excellent catch and scheduled to speak at several big assemblies to tell how he did it. He soon found it difficult to find time to fish any more with the demand of lecturing to would-be fishermen.

Imagine the shock and sensation he caused when at a large gathering he proclaimed, "Is a person a fisherman if year after year they never catch anything?" Several notable attendees were offended when this young man suggested that those who didn't catch fish were really not fishermen, no matter how much they claimed to be.

As with all parables this one makes a spiritual point. There is indeed a moral to this story. So, like the young student in the parable, let me close with a question: Are we all truly following the Master who said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men?"

Lord God, the church in America is in decline. Why? Because our fishermen don't smell like fish. Awaken us all to this reality and inspire us to reverse this trend. Help us cast the nets in the waters surrounding us. Through Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John

A Praying Church

by John S. McCranie IV

I think P - R - A - Y stands for P- ersonally R- evealing A- ffections for Y- ahweh. Why that particular acronym? It seems in my personal prayer life, I am spending more and more time expressing to God how much I love Him. My prayers used to focus mostly on the “I need You’s” and “they need You’s.” Now they center upon how much I adore the One who adores me. This has lead to a novel discovery.

What is the key scriptural element of prayer? Search your mental list for one particular element. Before I give you what it is, I would like to share that if someone had proposed this essential element in prayer years ago I don’t think I would have noticed. I would have allowed it to ricochet off my mind and dismissed it as obvious. So, I am confessing that I did not realize how essential this is in my prayer life. I didn’t realize how simply it could be stated.

It is LOVE. What makes for a great prayer life is a great love for the God to whom we are praying. Yes, loving other people causes us to pray to God on their behalf. And, the benefits to the one prayed for is obvious as well as the stress it reduces from our own concerned souls. But, when you close your eyes and tell the Father how deeply you love Him and how much He means to you that is when prayer becomes meaningful.

In my recollection, most of the public prayers I have heard “in church” are an expression of gratitude for what the Lord has done on our behalf and an intercession on the behalf of others. It is scriptural and correct for us to do so. But every once in a while I hear a brother open his heart and then open his mouth and simply declare how dear his Lord is to him. Churches that have these kinds of prayers see things happen. Big things. Church changing things. People changing things. There is a difference between a church that prays and a church devoted to prayer.

Prayer is not to be a small segment of our life but a source of our spiritual life. I am reminded that the most powerful personalities in the Word were people who prayed . . . a lot . . . as a lifestyle. It seems modern Christians don’t seem to have time to pray or don’t take time to enter their closets and spend time alone with God. That is a problem with which I struggle.

Father, what makes a church great? It’s not big budgets but large hearts in love with You. It’s not about soft seats and beautiful decor, but about courageous, visionary leadership grasping the magnificence of Christ. It’s not about programs, personalities or plaudits it’s about prayer. It’s about having enough faith to get out of Your way. It’s about You and how much we love You and Your Word. Please open our eyes to see the work in which You have already begun. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Push

by John S. McCranie IV

["Visuables" is a compound of the words "Visual" and Parables". As I journey in life and ministry I tend to notice things that remind me of spiritual principles and insights. It is the intention of these articles to encourage greater trust in the God who reveals Himself to those looking - J.M.]

Newsday Magazine did an article on a woman named Jean Nidetch. Jean was a 214-pound homemaker desperate to lose weight. She went so far as to go to the New York City Department of Health, where she was given a diet devised by Dr. Norman Jolliffe. Two months later, discouraged about the 50 plus pounds still to go, she invited six overweight friends to her home to share the diet and talk about ways to stay on it.

Today, 53 years later, 1.3 million members attend 250,000 Weight Watchers meetings in 24 countries every week. How did one woman come to help so many people take control and thus improve the quality of their lives? To answer that, she tells a story.

When she was a teenager, she used to cross a park where she saw mothers gossiping while the toddlers sat on their swings, with no one to push them. "I'd give them a push," says Nidetch. "And you know what happens when you push a kid on a swing? Pretty soon he's pumping, doing it himself. That's what my role in life is--I'm there to give others a push."

Life in Cascade County is like a park. First, the landscape here really is quite breathtaking. Second, there are plenty of precious people that need a loving push to get into the spiritual swing of things. They will continue to do all right once given an encouraging nudge.

Jesus loves "pushy" people. He delights when His followers see someone stuck in life and render a welcomed act of kindness or offer a simple prayer to help that person get going again. "Swing sitters" crave momentum. That's why folks walked for miles to witness Christ for themselves. They needed motivation on a deeper level. Jesus was pretty pushy if you think about it. He crusaded for God's will to be the first thing on people's mind. He pushed for people to know the good news of the kingdom. He pressed people to get going on His narrow path that leads to holiness and happiness.

Lord, help us see beyond ourselves that we may give those outside your kingdom a little nudge. We want to be the kind of person of selfless significance who love with your kind of love. Exhort us to go beyond the temporal or ritual but have in mind the eternal. Move us Lord God, to move people closer to You and be pushy like Jesus! In His name. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Rattled

by John S. McCranie IV

When my family moved to rural eastern Arizona in 1992, the locals in the little mining town of Morenci felt obligated to instruct this city boy how to deal with life in the high desert. It wasn't long before I was told how to get untangled from cacti or where to look for water when out in the wilderness, or how to handle a startled javelina. The most serious – and by far the most animated – teaching concerned rattlesnakes. I learned a lot about these deadly demons. Did you know there are thirteen different kinds of rattlesnake in Arizona? I was told many fascinating stories about the encounters folks had but the following stands out in my mind. I heard that if a rattlesnake is cornered, it can become so frenzied that it will bite itself with its deadly fangs.

Sounds like some people I know. These quick-tempered types feel cornered quicker than the rest of us. They coil up to strike and sometimes end up biting themselves. In the same way, when a person harbors hatred and resentment in their heart, they are often hurt by the poison of their own malice. They think they're injuring their enemies by displaying their wrath, but the real harm is inflicted deep within their own soul.

Anger can also cause us to do and say things we may deeply regret. George W. Martin tells the following true story: "I remember a fellow who once wrote a nasty letter to his father. Since we worked in the same office, I advised him not to send it because it was written in a fit of temper. But he sealed it and asked me to put it in the mail. Instead, I simply slipped it into my pocket and kept it until the next day. The following morning he arrived at the office looking very worried. 'George,' he said, 'I wish I had never sent that note to my dad yesterday. It hurts me deeply, and I know it will break his heart when he reads it. I'd give 50 dollars to get it back!' Taking the envelope from my pocket, I handed it to him and told him what I had done. He was so overjoyed that he actually wanted to pay me the 50 dollars!"

Jesus' brother wrote *"My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires"* (James 1:19-20).

Father, help us to be eager to hear others out, patient in our response and place the obstacles of faith, love and truth in the way of our anger. Prevent us from hurting ourselves with rage and teach us to bring our toxic emotions to you so you may take them from us. Lord, we just want to be more like you. In Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Sweet Gift

by John S. McCranie IV

At the turn of the 20th century, a certain farmer owned land that was a far distance from the big city. He would only go there if absolutely necessary. He disliked the crowds and the rude manner in which people treated each other. The busyness of the streets often made his horse nervous as it pulled the buckboard wagon. But, it was the only way to do certain commerce and carry out any legal obligations.

It came time to head to the city again. The farmer's son was 10 years old and the man decided it was time to introduce the boy to the world outside the farm. Both of them boarded the buckboard with a nice lunch basket prepared by the mother and younger sister. Mother was unusually nervous so the boy felt compelled to reassure her that he was old enough to look after himself even in the big city. Father nodded with pride at his son's statement and signaled the horse to set out.

The boy's eyes opened wide in the city. From one official building to the next he kept close to his father just as he was commanded. With all paperwork properly completed the farmer notified his son that their last stop would be the mercantile. Mother needed a number of items and Father had a short list of things needed to repair some equipment. The boy was given permission to look around the store on his own. As he did so, the owner eyed him carefully since young boys were prone to slip things into their pockets. In short time, the proprietor began to be impressed with this young man. The future farmer was careful as he investigated things he had never seen. His curiosity about what he was looking at caused him to ask questions yet he did so in an exceptionally polite manner.

As Father completed his transaction, his son stood nearby sensing it was time to leave. The merchant said to the farmer, "Sir, I have seen countless boys and girls walk through my store. I believe your son may be the best behaved boy I have ever seen." The farmer replied, "Thank you, Sir. He is indeed turning out to be a fine young man." The storekeeper then asked, "Would it be all right if I allowed your son to take some candy, free of charge?" The father nodded his approval so the merchant turned around and grabbed a large glass container filled with colorful candies. He removed the lid and said, "Son, do you have any siblings?" "Yes sir. I have a sister." the lad answered. The man then said, "Go ahead and grab a handful and take it home."

But the boy did not stick his hand in the jar. The proprietor waited and grew puzzled. He reassured the lad there would be no charge for the candy he took and yet the youth kept his hands in his own pockets. A bit flustered and impatient the owner put the jar down, reached in and grabbed a handful, then instructed the boy to cup his hands and poured the candies into the lad's hands. The father retrieved a clean handkerchief from his overalls to hold the gift. Once the cloth was nicely tied off the farmer and his son got in the wagon and headed out of the city.

During the quiet ride home Father asked his boy, "Son, why didn't you reach in the jar when the owner had already given you permission to do so?" "Because, Father," the lad replied, "His hands were bigger." The farmer smiled wide as it dawned on him the wisdom his son possessed. He then told the boy to pick out the largest piece of candy from the sack and enjoy it. The boy instead grabbed two and shared one with his father. They laughed and chatted all the way home.

Father in heaven, how many times have we rushed to grab something for ourselves and walked away with much less than if we had asked You to provide it, waited upon Your providence and reaped a greater

reward? This season, as we busy ourselves with buying gifts, help us always remember the greatest gifts in our lives come from above and that they are always so much more than we can muster with our own little hands. Thank You. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Thankful

by John S. McCranie IV

In 2007, I visited a leper colony during a mission trip to India. It was a government-sponsored facility far removed from all other villages. My team had arranged to have meals prepared each of the lepers we expected to meet. The meals were tightly wrapped in newspaper and tied with yarn. We also had in our van boxes of Bibles in the Tamil language and were excited to present these to the colony.

Upon our arrival we were instructed to meet with the village chief and the lepers underneath a huge tree in the center of the compound. When we climbed out of the van the chief came up to greet us and his people remained seated in the shade of the tree. The chief was an exceptionally short man, missing several digits from each hand and yet was very bold and commanding. He is definitely what we would call an “alpha male.” Louis Swakkiam served as our spokesman and interpreter. Two of the preachers on our team grabbed the tub from the van that held the meals and brought it under the tree. The chief inquired what it was and he then told Louis that his people were ready to hear our message.

I preached about why we had traveled half way across the world. That we were compelled to help them in their condition and that we ourselves once had terrible diseases, spiritually, and life had become very discouraging. I spoke of the beautiful result of turning to Christ in faith to heal us and make our lives manageable. I finished by explaining that when the Word became flesh He shared in our humanity (Heb. 2:14) and that Jesus knows from experience how difficult it is to be human in a fallen world. His compassion for those who were hurting was the source of our compassion to be there that day.

All the while as I was preaching, it dawned on me there is probably no other malady that makes a person more self-conscious than leprosy. The entire time there, lepers were hiding their hands and bare feet from view. When the chief pointed to the tub and gave us permission to hand out the meals, Louis and I grabbed several and began to give them to each person there. They were very grateful for the food but at the same time deeply embarrassed that we could see they were missing teeth, fingers, toes and even hands and feet.

Then came a sequence of surprises. I instructed a young preacher to retrieve a box of Bibles from the van. He brought them to me and I grabbed one and presented it to the chief as a gift. He was shocked that we had given him such an expensive gift. We then asked his permission to give each person under the tree a Bible and he heartily agreed. As they clung to their meals and Bibles, I stated that we wanted to provide food for both their bodies and their souls. The lepers became surprisingly animated. I asked Louis what they were saying and with tears in his eyes he said, “Brother John, they are praising God.”

Luke 17:11-19 records the story of ten lepers that Jesus healed. *“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He **threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him**, and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and **give praise to God except this foreigner?”***

Being thankful leads us to being worshipful. Gratitude changes everything, because it changes our whole perspective. It changes us from angry, sullen, negative complainers and whiners to joyful, sensitive, caring and joyful Christians. Heartfelt gratitude is the only appropriate response to the reception of God’s tender mercy. An attitude of gratitude causes us to praise God. That is thanksgiving!

As the team drove off in the van all of us were also praising God. Thankful that we were used of Him to bring such joy to such suffering people. May this time of Thanksgiving be a time when our minds and hearts are dominated by thoughts of gratitude and the worship of God.

Blessings,
John