

VISUABLES

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Contents

Resolute	2
Entering the Closet	3
Honesty in Prayer	4
Bible Baptism	5
Why Jesus was baptized	6
Blame	7
Orange is Awesome!.....	9
When Giants Fall	11
Entropy	13
Irony.....	15
What Did You Say?	16

Resolute

A story is told about the great quarterback, George Cafego, during the early days of professional football. Playing for the old Brooklyn Dodgers football team against the New York Giants one day, Cafego brought the ball up field practically by himself. Just before the half ended, he broke away over the left tackle. First one man hit him, then another. But Cafego kept going. Finally, about five Giants ganged up on him, and still he plowed goal-ward. At last he made a touchdown--just as the timer's gun exploded.

“Incredible!” a child in the stands shouted. “They had to shoot him to stop him!”

Are you like George Cafego . . . resolved? ‘Tis the season to make resolutions. What are your resolutions? Lose weight? Eat healthier? Exercise more? Get out of debt? Reduce stress from your life? Get closer to God?

Even if you have resolved to not make New Year Resolutions, I encourage you to make it a priority to be more of the kind of person God wants you to be. Let me suggest two simple ways to make you resolute:

Start with your personal devotion. There is one absolutely wonderful resource for building your own personal faith - - God’s Word! Reading larger sections of Scripture has reinvigorated my walk with God. Yes, preachers spend a lot of hours in the Big Book but they have a tendency to scrutinize small sections at a time. I am finding that reading entire Bible books is inspiring. When was the last time you read Proverbs? Amazing! Struggling with issues? Start at Psalm 1 and work your way to 150. Finally, Christian, give the Book of Revelation a try. It will fire your resolve and bless you. To know God is to love God and be more deeply devoted to Him.

Secondly, if in this last year, you didn't share your faith with someone outside Christ, there is no time like the present to make this important resolution. In fact, why don't you say a short prayer about it right now? Say something like: *“Dear God, I want this new year to be different for me. I know that I'm going to need greater faith so help me turn off all the electronic screens and pick up Your Bible. I will also be needing greater courage in order to take my faith outside of the church property. Lord, I am resolved no longer to linger. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”*

Blessings,
John

Entering the Closet

I've been thinking a lot about prayer lately. I freely admit that I still find it challenging to get to my "prayer closet." How are you doing in our prayer life? That critical time we are alone with God offering our praise, petitions and intercessions. It's not that we don't want to draw nearer to the Lord. It's not that we think prayer is unimportant. And it's not like we don't pray for our meals or with others. The challenge is for us to put on hold our schedule, close out the world and spend time on our knees in the Master's presence. Ironically, once I do enter my room and start praying I really enjoy it, I spend a good while in it and feel richly rewarded by doing so.

So what's the problem? If I want to do it and know how good it is for me then why do I struggle to practice personal, private prayer? I discovered there are two basic reasons. One is external, the other being internal.

The external is spiritual warfare. The devil and his host don't care if I teach a class on prayer or preach on the power of prayer. In fact, they are not even bothered that I'm writing an article about prayer. But there is serious resistance when I decide to bow my head and close my eyes and open my soul because that is a serious threat. English poet William Cowper wrote, "Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint upon their knees." Why? Because he knows that is how the power of God gives us victory over the works of darkness. **"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe – and tremble!" (James 2:18).**

The internal conflict, for me, centers on three areas. One is the lack of discipline. I neglect to make and keep my daily appointment with God. Prayer is like working out. I have to train myself to do it whether in the mood or not. The second area is sulking. I have a tendency to not want to talk to the Lord when I don't see things going my way. The third is shame. When I have sinned, I am embarrassed to enter my Father's presence and admit what I have done, even though I know He has already seen me do it.

When I fight my way through the barrier to my room, when I confess my transgression and when I give Him thanks for all the generous things He has done for me it feels as if a solid lead yoke has been lifted off of me. This joy ignites the fire in my soul. I am His and He is mine.

Lord, when I am weak and feeling hopeless, remind me that the enemy trembles even when the most imperfect and frail believer is praying. It is a weapon of the Spirit. Through prayer You give victory. Lord, teach us how to pray even better. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Honesty in Prayer [Adapted from writings by John Baillie, D.D.]

There are times when my prayer life needs inspiration. Times when I could benefit from hearing someone who really knows how to enter the throne room of God and pray from the heart. While at school I confessed this fact to one of my professors and he provided me a small blue book called A Diary of Private Prayer. It contains short prayers for every morning and evening for each day of the month. Several of these diary entries are truly remarkable in their honesty. Below is my favorite from the evening of the twenty-fifth day.

Holy God, to whose service I long ago dedicated my soul and life, I grieve and lament before You that I am still so prone to sin and so little inclined to obedience:
So much attached to the pleasures of sense, so negligent of things spiritual:
So prompt to gratify my body, so slow to nourish my soul:
So greedy for present delight, so indifferent to lasting blessedness:
So fond of idleness, so indisposed for labor:
So soon at play, so late at prayer:
So brisk in the service of self, so slack in the service of others:
So eager to get, so reluctant to give:
So lofty in my profession, so low in my practice:
So full of good intentions, so backward to fulfil them:
So severe with my neighbors, so indulgent with myself:
So eager to find fault, so resentful at being found fault with:
So little able for great tasks, so discontented with small ones;
So weak in adversity, so swollen and self-satisfied in prosperity:
So helpless apart from You, and yet so little willing to be bound to You.

O merciful heart of God, grant me yet again Your forgiveness. Hear my sorrowful tale and in Your great mercy blot it out from the book of Your remembrance. Give me faith so to lay hold of Your own holiness and so to rejoice in the righteousness of Christ my Savior that, resting on His merits rather than on my own, I may more and more become conformed to His likeness, my will becoming one with His in obedience. All this I ask for His holy name's sake. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Bible Baptism

Easter is powerful. Why? It sets our focus on the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, Christ actually allowed Himself to be crucified in order that His blood shed on that cross could cover my sins and yours. Yes, Joseph and Nicodemus hurriedly wrapped Jesus in spices with strips of linen and rolled a big stone at the entrance of the tomb. And yes, Jesus was raised from the grave never to die again. Talk about power! Look at the amount of miraculous strength it took to resurrect the Nazarene!

Death . . . burial . . . resurrection . . . this is the heart of the gospel message. This is a beautiful definition of the word, “gospel.” Death, burial and resurrection are how we experience the new birth. The new birth is being born again of the water and the spirit. In the New Testament all of these phrases are associated with baptism.

And yet, could there be any more misunderstood teaching in all the Bible than that of baptism? The Spirit of Christ did a beautiful job of revealing it in Scripture yet it seems to be the most controverted and conflicted doctrine today. Christendom could not be more divided over baptism. *WHO* should be baptized . . . infants or adult believers? *WHEN* should baptism be administered . . . before or after salvation? *HOW* should baptism be done . . . immersion, pouring or sprinkling?

Can a common person come to their own conclusion on the matter? Yes. Does one need to be a Greek scholar or even an English scholar in order to grasp what the Bible teaches concerning baptism? No. When I was a very young Christian, I was challenged on multiple fronts about baptism. I was flabbergasted at how many variant views there were. It was astonishing that everyone trying to teach me was quoting the same Bible and yet coming to so many differing conclusions.

In time, my head was swimming with all the opposing doctrinal positions. So I decided to set out on a course of action. I decided that I would take all I heard about the subject and shelve it for the time being. Next, I took my own New Testament and beginning at the first chapter of Matthew, I would read it all the way through Revelation, watching for the word “baptism” and all of its various forms (“baptized”; “baptizing,” etc.) Everywhere I found it, I would examine carefully the passage in the context in which I found it, and learn all I could about it. When I got through, I would put all of this together and I would make up my mind on the whole subject of baptism. Doing this I would feel sure that it was God teaching me, and I would then be able to distinguish between divine revelation and human opinion.

Beginning next Sunday morning I will be preaching a new series called “Bible Baptism.” It will follow the approach I mentioned above and by the time we finish the New Testament, I am certain that the honest seeker will discover what the Bible has always said about baptism.

Blessings,
John

Why Jesus was baptized

Mark doesn't mess around. Its almost as if he couldn't afford ink. His gospel is a fraction of the size of the others. Perhaps it's because he was writing to Romans, the busiest people on Earth. In our hectic and hurried culture I find it easier to recommend people read the Gospel of Mark than one of the longer versions. We barely begin the first chapter of Mark when he ushers in Jesus' baptism. **"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:9-11).**

People wonder why Jesus was baptized since He never sinned (**Heb. 4:15**). Bible students are quick to point out that Jesus stated it was to "... *fulfil all righteousness.*" Christians also readily reason it was so we would follow His example. I agree. Jesus never commands us to do that which He Himself had not already done. But, I've discovered an additional reason which I shared recently with my Wednesday night Bible Class on the Holy Spirit.

Before His baptism, there is scant mention in Scripture of the role of the Holy Spirit played in Jesus' life. Luke 2 shows that John the Baptist was the original "holy roller" while in His mother's womb. And of course we know that the Holy Spirit came upon the virgin, Mary, to bring about Christ's conception. But, I have yet to find any clear biblical evidence that Jesus did anything miraculous, preached a sermon or prophesied prior to his immersion. Why was He baptized? To show us how to receive the Holy Spirit. Just as He was coming out of the water the Spirit descended upon Him. After this the Father proclaimed Him as His Son. After His desert temptation, Jesus hits every village and burg with miracles and messages. It was after receiving the Spirit that Jesus changed the world.

So it is with each of us. We too come out of the water of baptism and become children of God by being born again of the water and the Spirit. The Lord wants us also to be Spirit-led ambassadors telling the good news of God. In our own humble way, we too can improve the world. Jesus gave us more than an example, He gave us the secret to living successfully. This is the way to truly being an impacting force for God in this world. **Acts 10:38 is just too good to be forgotten, "... how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."**

Father, just as you were with Jesus we ask that You be with us in a powerful way. We read in scripture the enormous change that occurs when Your Holy Spirit enters a person. We see it in our fellow Christians – what was once shy becomes bold and what was once apathetic becomes passionate. Help us to be helpful. Thank You for empowering us through the gift of the Spirit. In Christ. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Blame

How much does God control? How do you reconcile God's sovereignty and will with all the suffering in the world? Our answer to this tough question will reveal the depth of our trust in God. How ready are we to defend the skeptic's criticism? Their accusation goes something like this: "The amount of pain and suffering in the world proves that if indeed God is loving and good then he is not all-powerful, and that if He is all-powerful, then He is not loving and good." This type of circular logic may seem sensible, but we Christians know that human reasoning doesn't always reveal truth. Nevertheless, most of us would admit that at one time or another we have asked the same disturbing question – "Why, Lord?"

The grandmother of a teenage girl killed by a drunk driver has stopped going to church. When members try to comfort her she only becomes angry. She says that a loving God would not let things like this happen. A 39-year-old husband has lost his desire to live because his wife has run off with a younger lover. He has been devout and questions what he has done wrong that God would curse him.

Be it the loss of a job, loss of health, or loss of a relationship, sometimes it's just hard to reconcile belief in God's power and goodness with what we experience. Oswald Chambers' observation on the subject is that, *"The root of all sin is in the suspicion that God is not good."* It seems that the very first thing the serpent did, in tempting Eve, was to cast doubt on the integrity of God. It is still his modus operandi today.

Is it possible that Americans have been softened into believing that we must have a great and wonderful life while on this earth or else our God is not who He said He is? What happened to the understanding of the early settlers? Their families died wracked with disease, their children slaughtered by savages; yet they looked up to heaven and saw a powerful God, not an impotent one. While seeking religious freedom, they kept singing of the hardship of life while the lyrics focused on the "sweet by and by." What happened to the attitude of our nation during World War II? To see son after son go off and return crippled or not at all; yet they poured out their distraught emotions to the One who cared. They took comfort from passages like, **"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:7).**

By way of contrast, what is it that people seek most today? Zero discomforts, zero hassles, zero disappointments. We can't seem to handle when anything goes wrong. Evidently Jesus didn't have these same expectations. He knew that if you stood for righteousness there would be plenty of pain. He understood that although people are suffering great pain, God is not only aware but will recompense anyone who has caused it. He believed that the Father is pleased with those who do good, and surely becomes angry with those who do evil.

We have no right to blame God for the consequences of our sins or of the sins of others. We must resist blaming Him when someone wrongs us or perpetrates a terrible crime. Are you heartsick and distressed by the wickedness, injustice, pain, and sorrow around you? So is God! Are you heartbroken because you are being wronged? So is God! He feels your grief and anger. In the end, scripture promises, all of this will be worked out. So, no matter what, remain faithful until that Day.

Father, we take great courage in knowing that You are just. We believe that all evil doers will be held responsible for what they have done. Help us remember that You have promised to work with us through all trials and that hard times cannot sever Your love for us. Lord, we don't blame You for sin. Remind us through Your Word that we are not in heaven yet! You alone are worthy of praise, honor, thanks, glory

and power forever and ever. Amen!

Blessings,
John

Orange is Awesome!

I got in trouble with the school principal. Okay, here's the deal . . . I am the Character Coach at Julien Elementary here in Turlock. As a *character* coach it is expected of me to set an exemplary example for the students as well as staff of this wonderful school. So, Principal Henderson did not enjoy hearing that I jumped the fence to enter the campus today.

Okay, let me clarify . . . it wasn't like a six-foot chain-link fence but actually was only a waist-high rail. But, that mattered little because the perimeter of the campus must only be entered where there are designated gates. Once I parked, I noticed the easier access nearby and began that inner debate. You know the kind of debate I am talking about: "Do I do the right thing and walk all around the sidewalk to the main entrance by the office or hop this rail and take a short cut?" I honestly don't understand why I lose so many of these inner debates. Ask any of my family members and they will tell you stories of me choosing the path we *can* use over choosing the way we are *supposed* to use.

Well my time on campus was going especially well, in fact it was one of my best so far. I was doing my rounds in the cafeteria when all of a sudden I felt a tug on the back of my shirt. I turned to see a second-grader wearing a bright florescent orange shirt with an equally bright, albeit toothless, smile. Why the excitement? I wear a bright orange polo shirt with "Character Coach" embroidered on the chest and "Turlock Chaplaincy" stitched on the sleeve. This way the kids can easily identify me if needed. When the school year began, at the back-to-school rally I was introduced by Principal Jenny Henderson as the new campus Character Coach. When I stood up in front of the crowd and asked the kids to repeat after me, "ORANGE IS AWESOME!" they were more than happy to call it out. Since that time if I find anyone wearing an orange shirt, shorts, pants or hoody I present to them a glorious neon orange pencil and congratulate them for being part of the Orange is Awesome Club. Hence the joy in this boy who tugged on my shirt. He knew that he was now a candidate for the prestigious club of which I am president.

Just as I was making my pencil presentation welcoming our newest member in came running Braylon Reese wearing an orange shirt and then came another. We were celebrating the orangeness of us all and the revered status of my new pencil possessors. To our astonishment when we went to the outside tables, we found yet another awesome orange shirt wearer. Well there was no doubt a movement has begun! I



asked another kid to take a photo of our awesomeness.

What a great day, I thought, until – I returned to the office to sign out for the day. As I was heading to the door out came Mrs. Henderson with an index finger pointed in my direction. "Am I in trouble with the principal?" I asked. She replied with her own question, "John, did you jump the fence to get on campus today?" "Oops, I'm sorry" I answered. Jenny went on about how that cannot happen again and I assured her that I would not repeat the trespass. All those in the front office were enjoying seeing the Character Coach being corrected for his behavior and the graciousness of Mrs. Henderson in forgiving my "offence." As I walked out, I proclaimed, "I don't know how long it's been since I was in trouble with the

school principal. Must have been at least a . . . year!" giving the staff had a good laugh.

As I walked (all the way around the sidewalk) back to my parked car. I started feeling bad about how many times I have lost one of those *do the right thing* debates. And that I must be much more diligent to follow what the Apostle told the preacher in **1 Timothy 4:2**, “. . . **set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity.**” Please pray for this coach as he shines forth his light for the Lord, that it won’t be dimmed by having a compromised character. Orange is awesome but sometimes I am not.

Blessings,
John

When Giants Fall

The inevitable announcement was made, retail giant, Sears, filed for bankruptcy. Here's a question: what can churches of Christ learn from this? We too were once one of the fastest growing churches and now are in serious decline. Last March, Rick Chromey, of Group Publishing, wrote a revealing blog about Sears' demise. Below are excerpts followed by my two-cents at the end.

Sears was founded in 1886 as a watch company and two years later launched a catalog that created customers. Within six years, the catalog was advertising 'everything from sewing machines to sports equipment.' America was largely rural, and Sears revolutionized how retailers operated. They succeeded by engaging modern middle-class desires, mainstream print media, and mechanized business formulas.

Sears didn't open its first store until 1925. Two years later they launched the Kenmore brand, followed by All-State insurance (1931) and the famous Christmas catalog (1933). By the end of World War 2, Sears was topping \$1 billion in sales.

By then suburbia was bubbling in post-war America. Sears led the way and built new stores all over America (1946). They pioneered credit cards and innovated fresh brands like DieHard batteries and Craftsman tools. Sears could do no wrong. In 1973 they built the world's tallest building: Chicago's Sears tower.

But in the 1980s, the Sears brand fumbled. Despite their anchor store status at malls, Walmart was the new retail giant. People wanted 'superstore' variety but with affordable convenience. In 1991, Sears lost their 'top-selling retailer' mantle to the Arkansas superstore. Three years later, Sears sold its namesake tower. In 1993 they stopped producing their catalog and moved the Christmas catalog online (1998). In the early 2000s Sears merged with Lands End (2002) and Kmart (2005), but profits continued to slide.

In the past four years, Sears has been selling everything just to keep the lights on. Nothing's worked. In the fourth quarter of 2016 Sears lost \$607 million. Christmas never came for Sears. Nor Kmart. Nor other juggernaut stores like Macy's and JC Penney. The malls they anchor are also dying a slow death.

The new goliath is cyber-store Amazon. Originally specializing in books, this online retailer now delivers groceries (something Sears originally did) and a zillion other things. Amazon gift cards are popular Christmas presents. The online retailer continues to rake in financial fortunes as it pioneers future home deliveries through automation (robots, drones, driver-less vehicles).

It's a jungle out there, and it's called Amazon."

As a preacher in a church of Christ, what lesson can I learn from the Sears story? Adapt or dwindle. Isn't it ironic that Sears grew through catalog sales and yet is now being put out of business by a catalog store (albeit it online)? Instead of following their market when it moved they held on to their brick and mortar buildings. The church must never place maintenance above mission. The Church of Christ once delivered what we had (the gospel) to people's homes (Bible studies) now we anxiously wait for families to come to

our buildings and wonder why they don't. Too many congregations have built temples. Its time for us to build bridges. Pathways for us to reach those who are looking for God and pathways for those praying for God's help to find us.

If we don't pay close attention to the trends of our current culture with its sweeping fluidity we may cease being relevant. Thankfully, the Church is Eternal and Living. The wine is always fresh but may we never forget the wineskins grow old. The teaching of the New Testament is ageless but the methods of teaching it must adapt in order for us to fulfill our mission.

Blessings,
John

Entropy

Recently while on vacation in San Diego, Becca and I visited a museum called the Creation and Earth History Museum. The thing that really drew my attention is that this museum is dedicated to the biblical account of a literal six-day creation and young earth. Here is the website link to learn more: <http://creationsd.org>. One of its primary proofs is the Second Law of Thermodynamics, also known as entropy. In physics, the definition of this law is complicated, nevertheless, it can be easily remembered by understanding that all things in motion eventually slow down and hot things, in time, cool off. Christian apologists use the law to prove that the universe has a finite beginning. We call it “creation” as recorded in the Book of Genesis. Scientists call it the “Big Bang.” No respected expert denies that our universe is expanding slower, getting older and getting colder.

Congregations with long histories are prone to entropy as well. What I mean is, they tend to slow down and lose their fire. Statistics show that the older a church becomes the less growth they experience. Why? The congregation’s focus is no longer on the mission but on its members. The energy required to meet outsider’s need for salvation is swallowed up by the demands of the insiders. In far too many Church of Christ congregations today, it would appear that Bible study, worship and fellowship have trumped that great commandment of loving our neighbor (outsiders). What we do inside our buildings is significant to God and exceptionally important to church members but should not neglect the needs of those new to us.

In **Luke 10**, a man asks Jesus what he must do to go to heaven. Christ answers by asking him what the Bible says about that. The man says “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and, Love your neighbor as yourself.**” Jesus says he’s right and tells him to do it. But wanting to justify himself the man seeks a loophole by asking, “Who is my neighbor?” The Lord answers the question with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. At the end of the story there is an exchange, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Church movements tend to degrade into a state of being inert. The once dominant denominations bustling with growth and expansion are witnessing millions of members leaving their ranks. They are having to sell their church buildings and close their schools. Recent Christian Chronicle articles (www.christianchronicle.org type in “decline” in the search box) confirm statistically what church leaders have known for years. The Church of Christ in America is not growing nor on a plateau but is in real decline.

How is it that God can work in a church to remedy entropy? He does something new. The Lord is more than willing to turn a church around. Christ greatly desires to renew His disciples. Do you sense He stands ready to gently blow His breath across your glowing embers? Is He able to fire us up through a renewed love for Him? Can He fan into flames our hunger for truth and mercy? What happens when members of a congregation begin to ask what changes they can make in order for their neighbors to answer the gospel’s call?

I imagine if this article is stirring something within then you may be asking, “*What can I do to get fired up about loving our neighbors more?*” Let me make two suggestions. First, feed our guests. After worship service, instead of running home to feed yourself or joining your family again at a restaurant. . . pick a Sunday and invite one of our visitors to lunch. This has great potential for fellowship and draw

people back to the Turlock church. Second, if they decline the meal then get a phone number and call or better yet text them during the week to see how they are and plant some spiritual seed. Offer to pray or share a Bible verse. This can convince people we care.

Father in Heaven, the time is now. We entreat You for energy, Your Holy Spirit energy. We call upon You to open our eyes beyond what we want to see at this church and to see what we might do to fire others up. To the praise of Your glory. In Jesus. Amen.

Blessings,
John

Irony

Have you been out there? Have you seen them? There are two kinds of shoppers this time of year. The ones obligated to give something for Christmas and the ones who enjoy finding that special gift and can't wait to see the reaction when its opened. The former are grumpy and can be quite rude. The latter whistle Christmas carols down the aisles. I notice they have a tendency to talk to themselves. They mumble things like, "Oh, she'll really love this!" or "If that isn't him I don't know what is." The former love when there are no hassles in their life. The latter love their loved ones. Why did God, the Father, send us His greatest gift, the gift of his Son? It was His way of saying, I love you.

Charles Schultz in his sensitive and entertaining way summed it up in a Peanuts cartoon strip. The scene shows Charlie Brown reading the Christmas story to his younger sister. **"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled."** Charlie pauses and turns to Sally to explain. "Caesar Augustus was the Emperor of Rome and the most powerful person on earth! One night in the little town of Bethlehem, a child was born, but no one paid any attention. After all, he was born in a common stable. Who would have thought that this child would someday be revered by millions while Caesar Augustus would be almost forgotten?"

Sally interrupts and says, "No one paid any attention when I was born either, but now everyone loves me, and I'm gonna get so many presents for Christmas, it'll make your head swim." Charlie turns to leave, Bible closed, and Sally says, "Hey! Aren't you gonna finish the story?" He replies, "I think you have finished it." Sally had no idea about the deeper implications of the Christmas story. At her tender young age she tragically was already a victim of materialism. The opportunity to focus on the simple and yet profound message of the birth of Christ was dulled as her head filled with the opioid of opening presents. Have you been out there? Have you seen this?

It is an irony, of significant proportions, in America that we celebrate the birth of someone we refuse to recognize. It amazes me that in many public settings on public properties we can't celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, we can't sing His praise or articulate His uniqueness without the threat of a conflict. Yet the truth is, nobody wants to stop the celebration. Oh no we can't do that! The commercial world wants it because they want the money. The government wants it for the tax revenues this holiday produces. The partiers want it so they can have the fun. We have made the party more entertaining by excluding the Birthday Boy.

Father, use Your church to calmly and lovingly proclaim that your Son is the greatest gift. Remind us that He has the supremacy and that He isn't the figment of some well-meaning Christian's fantasies or some character of archaic antiquity who has been embellished through the years. The Savior is significant He is magnificent His proclamation must not be quieted, His praises must be sung! Why? Because You love us so. In JESUS' name. Amen!

Blessings,
John

What Did You Say?

Once upon a time a group of frogs was hopping through the woods, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All the other frogs gathered around the pit. When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the two frogs that they were as good as dead. The two frogs ignored the comments and tried to jump up out of the pit with all of their might. The other frogs kept telling them to stop, that it was no use. Finally, one of the frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and just die. He jumped even harder and finally, to the onlookers amazement, made it to the top and crawled out. As he lay there exhausted, the other frogs said, "Didn't you hear us?" The frog explained to them, "I am really hard of hearing, you were encouraging me, right?"

There are a couple lessons from this anonymous fable. Never underestimate the power of a discouraging word. To destroy another's drive, zeal or happiness with a caustic opinion is far more damaging than we realize. The thing about words is that they have a tendency to sink in slowly. People's immediate reaction to them is often different from the reaction they have several hours after they are stated. If you have ever been corrected or rebuked by someone you know what I mean by a slow sink rate. These kinds of words are hard to shake. They occupy the mind. Once they have settled to the bottom of our hearts the damage is deep and sometimes irreparable.

The other lesson is that once someone has demonstrated that they hurt with words, it will be nearly very difficult for others to trust them again. When a murderer takes another's life and later is contrite and repents they can be forgiven but that doesn't mean they will be trusted. Well, a "worderer" is much like a murderer. Once they have shown they are capable of taking another's heart and hurting it with their tongue, they can be forgiven but that doesn't mean they will be trusted.

I don't imagine the frog in the above tale listened to his comrades much after narrowly escaping with his life. I also imagine he was grateful, for once, that he was hard of hearing. I too, wish there were times that I was hard of hearing. I wish that the horrible things people have said to me in the past had never gotten into my soul. Even more, I wish that a number of other people to which I have said mean things were at that time deaf. Then I wouldn't have to think of the discouragement I have done.

A final thought, let's follow the requirement of **Ephesians 4:29** and not let any corrupting talk come from our mouth. The Turlock Church has had a challenging couple years and is vulnerable to naysaying comments. Let's cheer the frog to the top! Let's use words that only build up the hearer. **Let's season our speech with grace (Col. 4:6).**

Father in heaven, help us to be far more careful of what we say from now on. Let us build and give life to others with our comments. Lord, while we wait upon You with faith. Please bless this congregation even more so we can glorify you in an even greater way! In Jesus' name. Amen.

Blessings,
John