

Preview of Coming Attractions

Memory Verse for the Week:

Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on earth.

Colossians 3:1-2

Living as Kingdom citizens requires us to live in light of a greater, but less obvious reality. We have been “born from above” and are “seated with Christ in the heavenly realm.” We live in the mixed reality of now/not yet. The Kingdom of God is *now*, Jesus *inaugurated* it and we can live in light of this reality and enjoy the blessings that come from this now. The Kingdom of God is *not yet*, Jesus has not yet *consummated* it and we live in a broken world where we struggle, and suffering and disappointment are part of daily life. The key to living in this conflicted reality is, by faith, to see ourselves and our world through the lens of the heavenly reality and through the power of the Holy Spirit seek to walk in *this* reality rather than the *old* reality of life before Christ. A key component of doing this is setting our mind on things above. As we live this faith-walk, God progressively transforms our experience to match the heavenly realities and we become a sign-post to the watching world. We become a preview of coming attractions that will be fully realized when Jesus returns.

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Day #1 [Read Psalm 1; Acts 2:37-47]

The disciplines for the spiritual life, *rightly understood, are time-tested activities consciously undertaken by us as new men or women... They help by assisting the ways of God's Kingdom to take the place of the habits of sin embedded in our bodies.*

Dallas Willard

“I don’t think so – not if he were the last guy on earth!” I am sure this is precisely what my wife thought when she first realized I was romantically interested in her (although she has graciously never told me her thoughts quite so bluntly). In somewhat typical “what happened to the girl next door while I was at college” fashion, I returned to my home town after messing up my initial foray into both the world of higher education and the world of work and took notice of Davette in a new way.

She was passionate for God and determined to smuggle Bibles into China or do some equally challenging ministry, while I was worldly and profane. I was a child of God, but wasn’t acting it. Our families were close, so we spent a lot of time together in a wide variety of settings and over time a friendship grew, but something more... well that just wasn’t going to happen.

Undaunted, I settled into a life of trying to build our friendship and hoping for something more. This required a lot of time in church and other spiritual activities (because that’s where she was). This is a dangerous thing to do for a Christian who is not walking in the Spirit. God sometimes, unexpectedly, shows up and changes everything. I found that the more time I spent around godly people, the more they “rubbed off on me.

Over time my heart and outlook began to change, subtly at first, and then dramatically. I began reading my Bible again and soon devoured the whole thing. I began asking God what He wanted in my life, more than what I wanted in my life. I prayed a lot and often had times of quiet reflection. I began to live my life with a greater awareness of God at all times, not just at church or in my quiet times. I began being more overt about my faith with the people around me. I started ministering as opportunities arose. I taught a 6th grade Sunday school class, preached at the local rescue mission and even led a youth group at the local African Methodist Episcopal church. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I was devoting my attention to what are commonly called spiritual disciplines and my life was changing in the process.

I began to obey His commands more easily. Things that were once hard were becoming less difficult. I had joy in nearly every area of my life... every area but one: my relationship with Davette. My transformation was obvious to her and she had a growing respect and affection for me... just not the kind of respect and affection I was looking for. This soon became the big heart issue for me. My feelings had grown to full blown love and hers had not. What did God want from me in this area?

I wrestled with God a great deal over this. I prayed. I even began a habit of fasting to sharpen my spiritual focus. My life had undergone a complete overhaul and a number of the disciplines God used to do the work had become part of the fabric of who I am. He had shown Himself faithful and gracious in all things... I had been praying for Him to work out our relationship, yet nothing was happening. I finally relinquished the idea to Him. I remember very well giving “my dream” up to God and telling Davette I would be content just to be friends. It was wrenching for me, but I was trusting God’s wisdom and in the end it was very freeing.

Sometimes, like Abraham and Isaac, God returns our sacrifice to us. It was only a short time after this that things changed dramatically and we went from being “friends” to “engaged” in just a few weeks. I believe God wanted to teach both of us something in this process. I know he used the fires of this difficulty to forge my character and shape my life around the disciplines that he could use for a lifetime of giving me grace.

This story began nearly 25 years ago and we have been married nearly 22 of those years. God has given me great joy through the love that we share, and has continued to shape me through the care and wise counsel of my wife. He has also blessed me immensely and changed me greatly through the life patterns that he built in me through that process.

The Spiritual disciplines are not just some “religious” activities we do... they are a means of seeking God’s grace. They are not just about “spiritual” things like church, they are to help and shape us through all the “normal” details of life as well. We can never make ourselves grow. This is always the work of God’s grace as applied to our lives by His Holy Spirit, but he has ordained certain “holy habits” that we can practice in faith through which He loves to channel that grace into our lives. He has given us practices that allow us to partner with Him in the shaping of our souls and transformation of our lives.

What role do spiritual disciplines play in your everyday life? Are you in the word? Are you praying? Do you ever take time for meditation, for silence, for solitude? Have you ever fasted? Do you serve or witness as unto the Lord? Do you ever sacrifice anything to God? Do you seek to live each day before the face of God... are you practicing the presence of the Lord moment by moment? Read today’s passages with this lens: what does this show me about the practice of spiritual disciplines and what does God want me to do in response? A life grounded on God’s word brings blessing according to Psalm 1. In Acts 2 we see that the new believers, after they receive the Holy Spirit, devote themselves to certain practices and as a result the Holy Spirit works through them to impact the world around them. We are utterly incapable of living Kingdom lives by practicing life as usual... we need God’s grace and the work of His Holy Spirit... both are ultimately gifts that God must choose to offer us, but He has always made the spiritual disciplines a channel through which that grace and power can flow. A life

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grounded in these disciplines is a life that can begin to live the spiritual realities of the Kingdom in the “real world.”

Day #2 [Read Psalm 119:1-16; Ephesians 4:17-24 (also 2:10, 4:1, 5:2, 5:15)]

Many Christians have a basic desire to live a holy life, but have come to believe they simply cannot do it... While not living in gross sin, they have more or less given up... and have settled down to a life of moral mediocrity with which neither they nor God are pleased... [But] through our union with Christ in His death to sin, we have been delivered out of the realm of sin and placed in the kingdom and realm of righteousness.

Jerry Bridges

Christmas Eve 1821 16 year old George Muller* sneaked out of his hotel. He had just spent the last week in an expensive room and now the bill was due. The week prior he had managed to sneak out of another hotel in a different town without paying, but this time the police caught up with him. He spent Christmas in jail, dreading his father's arrival. He was away at school and decided to take a little vacation using his "creative finance" method to pay. He had written his father to say he would be late coming home because he had been asked to help in a church. Nearly a month later Johann Muller bailed him out and paid his bills. George was out of jail, but by the time his father was done, he wished he were still in his cell. He promised never to do this again in his whole life... not that he would never steal again, just that he would never get caught... that's what he meant.

George spent the next 3 years carousing, drinking, gambling, lying and stealing... sometimes just for the thrill. He always had an angle, always had a plan, always came out on top. He was happy to lie and deceive, even steal money from his friends. He was known as a young man who could tell a good story, had a sharp wit and could drink 10 pints of beer at one sitting... all while going to seminary in order to become a pastor! In his country, Lutheran pastors were both well paid and well revered, so he decided he wanted to become a pastor. Never mind that he only went to church 3 times a year and didn't even own a Bible. He got other young seminarians to hang out in taverns with him playing cards and getting drunk as well. He was arrogant, self-willed, hedonistic and corrupt to the core.

Once, Muller decided to go with a friend to a Bible study on a lark. He thought it would be fun to mock. Besides, he might be able to manipulate the people to his advantage some way. This time, however, he was out maneuvered. This time, he was pitting his wit and cleverness against God... and lost (or better, won). A few minutes after Bibles were opened, George was hooked. He was being drawn to the message so strongly he attended every night that week and by the 6th day he fell to his knees and tearfully repented of his debauchery.

Immediately the difference began to show. He quit the taverns, carousing, drinking, gambling, lying and "creative" financing of life. He devoured the Bible he had recently purchased for appearances (after all, what church wants a pastor that doesn't own a copy

of God's word, he had thought at the time). George's friends were skeptics. They thought he was "playing them" for something. But soon they could not deny that his heart and character were changing in addition to his habits.

As George read his Bible and prayed, God began changing his passions, his character, his behavior, even his life's ambition. Within 6 weeks he felt called to missions. In fact, he walked away from a young lady he loved because she was unwilling to be a missionary.

His growing holiness soon led to financial troubles. In the past he would have stolen, conned, borrowed, pawned or gambled for the necessary income, but now he knew that none of those would honor God. He looked for work, but nobody was hiring. He was becoming desperate. He chose the simplest, but most difficult response – he prayed, then he trusted God. Within an hour after his prayer, there was a knock at his door that led him to easy employment paying 8 times the going rate. This knock also resulted in him getting connected with an orphanage across the street from his rooms. Both of these "chance" events changed the shape of his life.

Today, George Muller is known as the man of faith and prayer who cared for thousands of orphans without ever asking for support. His radical example has affected generations of Christians. He did not believe his approach was the one for everyone, but he believed God wanted him to be an example for the church and he gladly obeyed. His life was sustained by prayer, Bible study and worship... and God made an example of this man of humble holiness for His own glory. Once his orphanage was completely out of food and money. At breakfast time he thanked God for what he was going to provide and then 300 children noisily scooted their chairs out and settled at the empty table expectantly. No sooner had the noise faded than a knock was heard at the door. A baker was there with a giant load of bread, explaining that he had felt so burdened for the orphanage the night before that he had gotten up at 2:00 a.m. to bake the bread and had only just finished. They ate bread still hot from the oven. No sooner had the baker left than another knock came and it was a dairy man. His cart had broken a wheel in front of the orphanage and had to be lightened... could they use a load of fresh milk?

Muller's life was filled with such miracles, but the greatest of all was how God transformed him from selfish to servant, from schemer to pray-er, from late nights of drinking and gambling to early mornings of scripture, prayer and worship. The dross of his worthless heart was burned away leaving a man of sterling, Christ-like character – a man of humble holiness who pointed people to his master.

All of us are called to be transformed, to be holy, to be Christ-like. Kingdom citizens walk in God's paths, not the way of the world around them. As you read today's passages ask the Holy Spirit to give you a hunger for holiness and to show you where you need to change. Prayerfully meditate. Don't hurry over this. Let God break your hidden pride and give you a heart of humble trust. Picture yourself laying aside your sin as if it were

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filthy clothes and putting on radiant new clothes, putting on Christ and His holiness. God sees His children this way. We must, by faith, learn to see ourselves this way, and in the power of the Spirit seek to live in light of this vision. As God allows us to see ourselves in Christ and walk in that picture by faith, He will also allow others to see into our transformation and behold the wonders of His glory and grace.

*Taken from *George Muller*, by Janet & Geoff Benge

Day #3 [Read Numbers 11:10-30; Romans 8:9-39]

But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away: for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.

Jesus (John 16:7)

The Church still has a theology of the Holy Spirit, but it has no living consciousness of His presence and power. Theology without experience is like faith without works: it is dead.

Samuel Chadwick

Dwight Lyman Moody* was one of the most effective ministers of the 19th century and a man deeply passionate for Christ. His impact has reached into many of our lives. He was a great influence over R. A. Torrey, one of the founders of Biola. From the moment he came to Christ he worked hard at serving Him and bringing others to Him. Early in his ministry, Moody struggled... until he learned to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Sarah Cooke, whom he eventually referred to as, “aunt” described him this way: “Mr. Moody was an earnest, whole-souled worker, but ever to me there seemed such a lack in his words. It seemed more the human, the natural energy and force of character of the man, than anything spiritual.” Aunt Sarah encouraged Moody to seek the Spirit’s power in his ministry... something he wanted to do, but wasn’t quite sure how. He prayed earnestly that God would empower him and fill him with His Spirit.

In 1871, Moody was holding a series of meetings in New York and on a walk he was mulling over the impotence of his preaching and seeking the Spirit’s help, when God stepped in. “God revealed Himself to me, and I had such an experience of His love that I had to ask Him to stay His hand.” With a fresh sense of God’s loving presence and of his own neediness, Moody returned to his ministry campaign. He preached the same sermons that he had been preaching all along, but now, instead of falling flat, they had great spiritual power. In a short time, 100 people professed faith in Jesus.

This was just the beginning of what God would do through him. From 1873 to 1875 he ministered in Britain. Through a communication snafu he wound up in the country with no one expecting him and no ministry opportunities on the horizon. He began to do what he could and God began to work. It started out slowly, but soon opportunities came and churches filled up. In Scotland he preached until one church was full and another one across the street opened its doors for meetings. Moody would preach to the crowd in one church, while his ministry partner, Ira Sankey sang in the other, and then they would switch places. It didn’t matter how much opposition there was, or how difficult the logistics were, or whether there was even anyone expecting him, God was at work and lives were changed. In a period of 4 ½ months in Edinburgh 6,000 people made professions of faith and 7,000 new members came into evangelical churches. During his

British ministry he held 285 services and conservative estimates are 2.5 million people heard him preach the gospel. The impact of his ministry created a crisis for British publishers and bookstores who struggled to keep up with the demand for Bibles... and that was just one short period of ministry. Over his lifetime God used the power of Moody's preaching and of his humble, holy life to affect two countries and lead uncounted numbers of people into His Kingdom family.

You may think, "I could never do that." Exactly! Neither could Moody. The truth is, we cannot become the people we are supposed to become and we cannot affect the world the way we are supposed to affect it. The reality of God's Kingdom in our lives is that we now have the Holy Spirit living and active in our lives. The only way for us to be and do what God expects is to draw deeply on His power. As you read today's passages, notice how important the Holy Spirit is in God's plan. In Moses situation, the people who are tasked to lead the congregation need the Holy Spirit to do the job. In Romans, we find that the critical factor in living in this now/not yet world is that we would walk in the Spirit. God has radically declared Himself for us in Jesus and He has radically provided for our daily living in His Holy Spirit. Our daily prayer should be, "Lord, let me walk in step with your Spirit today." Is this your heart cry? Where do you see the Spirit operative? Are you quenching Him by hardening your heart or persisting in some sin? Are you moving through the day without consciously submitting to Him... living in the power of your flesh rather in His power? Is prayer your last response to a challenge... or your first? A life centered on the Spirit looks different than one lived in our own power. Are you passionately seeking to be filled with His Spirit? If not, are you willing to change? It is His desire for your life... He's waiting for you to make it yours as well.

*Taken from *Living with the Giants*, by Warren Wiersbe

Day #4 [Read 1 Kings 10:1-9, 24; 1Thessalonians 1:2-10]

There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... [Your Christian neighbor is profoundly holy because in him Christ] the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.

C. S. Lewis

“Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?!” A friend of mine was confronted at a family Thanksgiving celebration with these words. His large family was “religious” but no one ever had a personal relationship with Christ, until then. Just a few months before he had trusted Christ and everyone in the family could see changes, both subtle and obvious. He was different in who he was, what he said, how he lived and how he interacted with them. Prior to the meal, he asked if he could give thanks. His simple prayer was powerful because it was real. He was a child earnestly speaking to His father, not a person fulfilling a traditional ceremony – and the difference was obvious. When he said, “amen”, his brother couldn’t stand it anymore. Something was drastically different and he had to ask.

A few years ago, we became friends with another family on our block. The husband and wife were both professionals, but when children came along, the wife switched to being a stay-at-home mom. Our relationship began when we would run into each other on the street or on family walks. Soon we were having dinner in each other’s homes and even going to family events like birthday parties.

Our friends were good, moral people, but not Christians. The differences between us seemed obvious to us. We could see a number of struggles and challenges they had that seemed to have spiritual roots... but that is what we saw, from our perspective. We didn’t know if they saw any differences beyond the obvious distinctions that church involvement brought. One day, the wife dropped by in the middle of the day to spend some time with Davette. The conversation eventually turned to spiritual issues. They frequently did this, but it was different this time. The woman was more earnest than usual, almost urgent. Suddenly she blurted out what was on her mind. “I don’t know what it is, but there is something different about you guys and I want it. I think it has to do with your religion.”

We were two families, with a lot in common. To the casual observer, the biggest difference was one went to church and one did not. But our friend could see the difference was much deeper. There was something about the shape of our souls and the structure of our lives that was different, and to her view, better. She could tell it was related to Christ, but wasn’t exactly sure how it all worked.

As followers of Jesus, our lives are to be distinctly different than the world around us – we are to have the aroma and texture of heaven about us. We are to be like Jesus not just

in the behaviors we do or do not engage in but in deeper things. We are to be like Him in our character, the way we see the world, the values and attitudes we have and how we treat others. Christ-likeness stands out from the surrounding world. It can put people off, but it can also draw them to God. This is the way God's Kingdom works. He transforms us and uses us to impact the world. As we live the "born from above" Kingdom life, not only are we enriched, the world around us takes notice... and in the process notices Christ, our King.

We are a preview of coming attractions that the world watches, and in part, bases its decision about Christ on what it sees. What picture are you portraying? As you develop friendship with people who don't know Jesus, do they see something deeply different about you... not just that you think church is important or that you have a slightly different vocabulary... but that at the core there is something completely and refreshingly different from anyone else they know? Can they see that this comes from your relationship with Christ? Are there areas where your faith is really only "behavior-deep"? God is in the business of transforming hearts and reshaping souls... he is not into cosmetic surgery. Ask Him to reveal what is keeping your faith at a surface level and then seek His help in going deep. Repent, get help, find someone to pray for you, get accountability, get equipping, change life-patterns... do whatever is necessary to move beyond the trivial. As you meditate on these passages, notice that God's work in and through Solomon and the Thessalonian Christians is what He uses to draw others to Himself as well. Our holiness is intended for His glory in the world. Are you living a life in relationship with non-Christians... relationship that is real and deep enough that they can see beyond your mere behaviors, which are likely to be unattractive, to your heart, which may be water to their parched souls? Do you need to get out of your Christian bubble and make some new friendships? Do you need to interact more deeply with people you already know? Their friendship may be a great blessing to you. Yours may be heaven to them.