

## GOD'S DEARLY LOVED CHILDREN

Let's play pretend for a minute. Imagine that you're not a Christian. Imagine that you have never read the Gospels or heard the Gospels read to you. You've heard the word "Christian," but you're not really sure what a Christian is or what being a Christian involves. You don't really know who Jesus Christ is. This is the very first time you've walked into a church building. But despite your unfamiliarity, you're curious about Christianity, and you've come here today to check things out and learn something about it. Good for you. You're never too old—or too young—to learn.

So you listen to this morning's reading from Ephesians. It sounds a lot like a "to-do" list—or maybe a "to-don't" list, and you assume it's an important guideline for Christians to live by. So you pay close attention to what it says, because you want to know how you would measure up if you decided to take the plunge and become a follower of Jesus. You hear Dan Davidson read: "In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry . . ."

No anger? Oh, that's not good. You have one strike against you right off the bat, because on your way to church this morning, at the corner of Route One and the Black Point Road, somebody ran a red light and almost broadsided you. And you got plenty angry. You let loose with a long honk of your horn and a flurry of words your mother would wash your mouth out with soap for saying. And, in all honesty, you're still pretty annoyed about the incident.

Okay. Maybe you need to take some anger management classes before you can be a good Christian. That's doable. What's next?

"Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer."

That's a relief. Maybe there's hope for you yet. You're not a thief. You don't steal. Then you remember that you've taken a few paperclips at the office. They weren't that expensive, your company is making plenty of money, and the office didn't miss them. And what about those unused plastic spoons and straws you sometimes bring home with you when you go to Wendy's? And . . . .

Well, perhaps not stealing depends on what your definition of stealing is. Let's move on, shall we.

"[You] must work, doing something useful with [your] own hands, so

that you may have something to share with those in need.”

Sharing something with those in need? Hey, you would gladly give some of the fruits of your labor to the poor and unfortunate, if you had more fruit to share. But you need every penny you get to pay the bills, put food on the table, and purchase the little luxuries—like those regular coffees at Starbucks and a subscription to Netflix —that help you make it through the drudgeries and difficulties of life.

And you’re not really sure what the author—what was his name again? Paul?—what Paul meant when he wrote about working and doing something useful with your own hands. What if you worked at WalMart, waiting at the door and greeting people as they entered the store? Is that doing something useful with your hands? It doesn’t seem all that beneficial.

Maybe the next “rule” is a little less ambiguous.

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

No “unwholesome” talk. What on earth does that mean? Swearing? Well, you can’t say you never swore, recalling again the bad words you used after that near-collision you had earlier. And only say things that build up other people? That doesn’t sound very promising. It was only a few days ago that you criticized your brother for his political views, and he stormed out of the room before your opinion could benefit him.

Then there was the time you turned to your spouse as you were pushing the cart around for her at the grocery store and quietly disrespected that very overweight guy who was driving one of those strange looking riding carts. You snidely commented that it would be better if he walked around the store rather than driving that cart so he could get some much needed exercise. Those words weren’t exactly spoken with the intent to build up.

Your hope of ever becoming a Christian is fading fast. But even so, you continue listening, to see if there’s any possibility at all. And you hear, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

Grieve God? How is that possible? God doesn’t get sad. God gets enraged and wrathful. God responds with vengeance against those who don’t tow the line. God isn’t saddened over wrongdoers; God smites wrongdoers! They’re toast.

The line about the God “with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” goes in one ear and out the other. You have no idea that, back in

Jesus' day, the Greek word translated "redemption" referred to people who purchased a slave for the purpose of setting that slave free from bondage. In effect, to redeem someone was to liberate them from their otherwise permanent condition of bondage and captivity. But what did God liberate human beings from?

And the difficult rules of Christianity kept coming. "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Practice kindness and compassion? Forgive each other? Surely Paul wasn't serious. That's simply unrealistic. In this cutthroat, merciless, dog-eat-dog world, anyone who practiced touchy-feely stuff like kindness and compassion wouldn't survive. They would be ripped apart. And forgiveness? Yeah, right. Suggest forgiveness to the grieving families of murder victims, like the parents of students who were shot and killed in schools, or the sufferers of injustice and unfairness, or those who have been beaten down, stepped on and chopped up by the rich and powerful in society. Tell them to forgive, and they'll probably tell you what lake you can go jump in.

Thank goodness the reader seemed to be close to finishing.

"Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children, and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Okay, there are a couple of problems with the directive to "follow God's example as dearly loved children." The first is, "What example did God give us?" No one has ever seen God—well, at least not recently, although you've heard that the Bible has a good number of stories about divine visions and heavenly appearances. But you're not sure you believe those stories. They're too strange to take literally. They might only be fairy tales, for all you know. So, how can you follow God's example if you can't see it?

The second problem is with the term, God's "dearly loved children." Maybe there are people in the world who are good enough to be called "dearly loved children" of God, but they sure can be hard to find. God must have some standard, some kind of criteria a person has to meet before he or she can be considered one of God's dearly loved children. And just a quick look at the state of human affairs here on earth is all that's needed to conclude that almost no one is "good enough" to meet God's criteria for loving them. Especially if kindness and compassion are part of God's standard, because those traits appear to be the exception rather than the rule in the human heart.

And "walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"?

Now you're really scratching your head. You don't know anything about this Jesus person, except that, from the little you've heard, he was a pretty nice guy and told people to love others and turn the other cheek if someone slapped it. But this Paul guy is claiming that Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice to God? He gave up his life to be a human sacrifice? As in willingly being killed? On purpose? And even more mind-boggling is Paul's claim that God perceived Jesus' killing as a fragrant offering. But, that implies God was pleased by Jesus' murder; that, to God, Jesus' death was sweet, like a rose.

To a person who is unfamiliar to Christianity like you are, what you're hearing is starting to be too much. Your brain shifts into overload as you try to process this strange and, in all honesty, somewhat repelling information. You don't know what to believe. And, in fact, you don't know if you want to believe. Living the kind of life you've just heard being described is totally contrary to the world's way of living. If you lived such a life, a lot of people might walk all over you and take advantage of you. They would probably think that you were strange and would keep their distance from you; and it's possible that they would reject you because you would challenge their own way of living. Things would likely get pretty uncomfortable for you if you chose to follow the Christian way of life.

And yet, something deep in your heart is tugging at you. Calling to you. Inviting you. Saying, much to your amazement, that this life you're afraid of committing to is the only true and blessed life. Yes, some people in your life—maybe even the majority of them—might reject you if you decided to boldly and unashamedly live as a Christian.

But others—even if it's just a few individuals—might not. And who knows? Maybe one or two or half a dozen people you encounter might take notice in a positive way and actually be inspired by you. And perhaps, down the road, they would even look to you as an example and commit themselves to becoming a Christian like you did, because they would like to have the kind of peace and joy in life that you have.

You wouldn't be a perfect example of a disciple of Jesus, of course—after all, you're only human. But what you could do is try your best to live the way a Christian is supposed to. And that's all the Lord can really ask of you, right? To do your best? The only thing God is asking from you is to make the choice to follow Christ. After that you simply try, as best you can, to walk in Christ's footsteps day by day, stumbling and bumbling your way forward, and regularly pray for God's guidance so that you might continue to learn more and more about what a true Christian life entails.

You would ask God for strength.

You would appeal to God for courage.

You would trust in God's mercy and grace when you fall short of the mark. And you wouldn't need to worry if on occasion you fell short of the mark as a Christian, because the Lord isn't calling you to be perfect. Only faithful.

So, if you're concerned that God keeps track of how many times you mess up; that God is recording everything you think, do and say and the severity of each offence you committed in some big black book, you don't have to be; because from what you've heard this morning, God is going to be so busy loving you and encouraging you after each stumble to get up, dust yourself off and keep moving ahead in your efforts to be the best Christian you can be that God won't have time to keep track of your sins. Only to forgive them.

It's such a relief to know that being perfectly faithful isn't what God wants from you at all. What God desires from you, as one of God's dearly loved children, is to be faithful, even in your imperfection. And as you go downstairs to join others for Neighboring, you say to yourself, "With God's help, I believe I can do that!"

Thanks be to the Lord. Amen.