THOUGHTS OF SEPTEMBER, 2016

This is Thought Number 1: Let’s be honest about being a Christian. Eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ is free, to us. It cost the Lord everything to purchase it for us but it costs us nothing to receive it. Thousands believed in Him [as much as was given to them to believe] while He was here; only a few were disciples. Since His departure, many millions have believed in Him, and only a few have been disciples, as defined by the Lord in the gospels.

The differences between “only-believers” and “disciples” are remarkable. Only-believers have received sonship in God through Jesus but in turn have offered only a measured obedience that could lead to real transformation into Christ’s holiness. Disciples make a full-life commitment to their Lord. Submitting to His requirements, they: 1) Put Jesus and His call on their lives above their love for father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even their own lives. 2) Carry their crosses daily so they can die to themselves and bring God’s glory into action without delay. 3) Have counted the cost before starting, thus avoiding shame upon their Master when trials are encountered. 4) Have given up all their own possessions. 5) Do not elevate themselves above their Master or His word by reinterpretation or higher understanding of what He said. 6) Do not deny, tone down, or otherwise minimize Him before others. 7) Wish to lose their lives for His sake. 8) Know that they will be hauled before courts and rulers because of their discipleship, but go anyway, knowing that He will give them words to speak. 9) Know, also, that they will face the anger and persecution of only-believers, even family, and be put out of the church.

Jesus promised those things only to His disciples. Are you objective enough to evaluate yourself in regards to being only a believer or a disciple? Need help? If you are serious go to Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and an older brother or sister. A three-fold cord is very reliable.

2. Foreign aid usually aims at health care, education, and infrastructure. Who would demean those very necessary helps? Not I. With those helps in mind, a look around the world at those who still remain mired in poverty shows something that can be very helpful. While receiving foreign aid, studies show that those three types of aid [health care, education, and infrastructure] do not impact poverty. Put another way, they don’t create wealth. Wealth is good; poverty is bad. The creation of wealth among the poor is a blow against embedded, deeply rooted, systemic poverty.

Here comes a list. 1) Genuine hope is essential for anyone who wants to climb upward. Jesus’s gospel brings hope and much more. 2) Add to that real hope the ownership of property [land, homes, money, animals, etc.]. When property belongs to a person, it is cherished, improved and increased. People become creative. They produce and save.

A second look around the world shows that in nations where property rights are established and honored, poverty is minimal. Where property rights are missing or minimal, poverty is abundant. Having our own property changes the way we see the world. 3) Then add freedom from corruption, another righteousness that results from Jesus’ gospel. 4) The rule of law produces freedom from fear. Established boundaries [upheld by police and courts] establish social order and set acceptable and protected limits for all sorts of action. 5) Thrown into this list is something that develops from the first four – social institutions like schools, private associations, strong families, churches and synagogues, and INDEPENDENCE!! Independence is anathema to civil governments, and to some religious ones.

3. The church is a spiritual organization. To the world it presents a human face, but the church is a spiritual organization with that human face. Each spiritual person of that spiritual organization was humanly born and raised in the kingdom of this world, having had to learn first the ways of that human kingdom. There was no way to get out of that worldly kingdom other than being rescued by God, being re-born by His putting of Himself into us.

At that point we became a different person, not physically, but a whole new inner person by virtue of that re-birth. If we had been raised by godly parents, and we had responded to them, when we were born again our outward behavior may not have changed remarkably, but within us God’s Holy Spirit began to shift our awareness, our thinking, and our conscious allegiance to the Living God, into whose presence we had been ushered. Everything inward had passed away; we had become a new creation. Our souls, having been patterned after the ways of the world [some having been outright evil; some having been obscurely evil, such as simply thinking of ourselves first], needed to be re-patterned after the way of Christ Jesus. That process continues throughout our stay in this earth-life body.

But the world cannot see the reality of or deal with our spirituality. It wants us to be physical [which we are] and to behave as only humans [which is the rub, because we are not!] on its playing field and according to its rules. According to the degree of unrighteousness of the world around the church, and the righteousness of the church, persecution may range from martyrdom to simple marginalization. The world may appreciate the church for such as its genuinely good works or, on the other hand, for its shared worldliness, but if the church stands out in sufficient contrast to the world in righteousness, it will be persecuted. It’s remarkable that when the church simply [but truly] desires righteousness it brings persecution.

4. A bit of acting here: “Those spiritual dolts back there with Jesus in Galilee could not see the trees for the forest. They followed after Him for the bread [and fish] that He gave them at mealtimes – John 6:26. They did not seek the Bread of Life for Himself, but for their needs. How spiritually blind!” Of course they did, because those folks were like we are.

Have a little fun. Do this; keep a record for a week or so. Record the time spent on asking the Lord for something or someone, and the time spent on talking with Him about Him. If we receive answers to our prayers for our temporal needs, we are temporarily filled. When we have communion with Him we are filled in ways that won’t be leaked.

What is offered to us who are “in” Christ Jesus, once the Holy Spirit has snatched us up by the nape of our neck and plunged us into God’s Son? 1) Real life! All things have passed away. All things are new. We are new creatures. As we learn to live by faith, the quality of our new life shows. 2) Eternal [quality and quantity] safety and provision, meaning that the Lord may put us in a mansion on the hilltop, or in a dungeon, and our testimony will be that we lack nothing. 3) A position from which we may view all of creation, down to the smallest part of our lives, from our Father’s viewpoint. That’s an abiding place that really does help the accuracy and quality of our prayers, and gets “self-centered me and other junk” out of our prayers and relationships. That is now every born again believers’ place, but we tend to reject it in favor of needs and desires of self and flesh. Prayer is not for getting things from the Lord, although that does happen and He invites us to ask for things. Prayer is for getting us into perfect communion with Him, and keeping us there.

5. Yes, mercy given to someone who deserves mercy is mercy. However, mercy given to someone who does not deserve mercy more clearly displays mercy. Mercy is given on the basis of need, not of justice. Have you noticed?

6. So very much is compressed in the record of Scripture! It is hardly more than an outline. John pointed this out at the end of his gospel – John 21:25. It is true throughout Scripture. Archeology does a good job of filling in, but even then history is still spotty. In this respect it is interesting to dig out the ethnic composition of that which was “Israel” as they came out of Egypt. Their number is interesting, but we are not told it, although we are told that “All the souls who came from the loins of Jacob were seventy in number” when they went into Egypt, except for Joseph and his family who were already in Egypt.

We can look at that with a limited view, and decide that 70 persons were all who came to Egypt with Jacob, but there were more “associates” with him, and many relatives [descendants of Abraham and Isaac] and friendly folk who were associated with him in various ways. Some, being nomadic, may have arrived in Egypt many years before he arrived. Some may have stayed back in Canaan, or traveled about the old Chaldean homeland. I’m saying this to loosen us up for that which the Bible record does tell us about those who left Egypt with Moses, and those whom he encountered in the wilderness, and probably more who were already in the Promised Land.

In Exodus 12:37-38 we are given the number of 600,000 men on foot, then [women and] children, plus a mixed multitude. In Number 11:4 we are told of “the rabble who were among them,” indicating that the mixed multitude were not staunch Israelites. There were Egyptians among the escapees, such as in Leviticus 24:10-16. They traveled in the wilderness with Midianites among them [Num. 10:29-32], including for a time Moses father-in-law, a priest of Midian – Ex. 18. King Saul pointed out that the Kenites, an Edomite clan, had been good to Israel while Israel was in the wilderness, and remember that one of Israel’s heroic leaders, Caleb, was a Kenite descendant of Esau [Gen. 36:11, 15; Josh. 15:17]. “The Israelites” were more than Jacob’s descendants, for good and for bad.

That’s worth remembering as the Lord adds souls to our current wilderness wanderings. There are many, and of great diversity, who receive God’s grace to be included in our walk, for good and for bad. Stay open and hospitable to those who are not like us and to those who are bothersomely like us.

7. How important has failure been in your life? Has it driven you away from being involved in some things, and driven you to succeed in some others? Yes, I would wager. Were temptation, ignorance, or pride involved in your failures? Of course.

How did you handle your larger failures? [If not faithfully handled, we were driven from failure to failure, or to withdraw into the back of our cave.] How large were shame, guilt, repentance, and “never again;” or did failure become a positive challenge? What did the Holy Spirit do with you, the real failure? [With me, when He had made me sick of myself, then made me the offer of His life for mine, I jumped at the opportunity.] Why didn’t Jesus pray that Peter would not fail, instead of praying as in Luke 22:31-32? The answer is found in verse 33 – Peter thought He could go all the way with Jesus but needed to be faced with his inadequacies before he could see his need for and accept Jesus’ adequacy. The same went for the Israelites in the wilderness with Moses – Ex. 19:8.

Have you been able to identify temptations that offer shortcuts to what God wants of and for you? The temptation to think we can do what God wants is only one such temptation.

Do you have a list of “What I Want to do for the Lord?” Makers and keepers of those lists are highly vulnerable to self-direction and subsequent self-condemnation, for which more “To Do” lists seem to be the only apparent balm.

When we begin to get a hint of a calling we start looking for a place to do it. [When I began to want to be a doctor I did not start looking for a place to open my office.] [When the Lord marched into my life, I knew that He and I could do anything, but that I needed a body of others like me to accomplish that “anything.”] But faithful, spiritually eager Christians can do exactly that – at first light they start looking for a place to fulfill their calling. Jesus did not do that; He forbad His disciples from doing it; Paul did not do it; but we tend to do it. When we eventually come short of our vision for success, in our weakness and self-condemnation we tend to try even harder, still in the weakness of our best flesh.

But we have an Intercessor who is praying for us. And how is He praying for us? That in our failure our faith will not fail; that when we have turned back to the Lord we will strengthen our brothers. Brothers, do not fear failure, or even fear sin, but pray that your faith will not fail, so that when you have turned again to the Lord you may strengthen your brothers – Luke 22:32.

Failure, as sin or as simple inadequacies, is important. 2,000 years ago the Lord dealt with sin and failures of all kinds. He made sure that He paid the WHOLE PRICE for the sins and failures of the WHOLE WORLD, once and for all. Now our properly handled sins and failures are part of His workmanship on our souls, His qualifying of us to be good building material for His house – Heb. 3:1-19.

The solution: Be a vital part of Christ among believers [the Holy Spirit places us in the body], sit down and grow [learn to take up our cross daily], learn to hear the Lord, submit our lives together to the Lord, know the mind of Christ among us, then be sent into the work by the body and the Holy Spirit – Acts 13:1-4.

Our good works are perhaps our biggest distractions from the Lord’s work, but they will never match God’s best. That’s why we are offered a walk in the Spirit, and are not instructed to “now get out there and be good and do good.”

8. To varying degrees, the religious mind sees Christianity and other religions as systems of beliefs and forms of religious ceremonies. We know those things as shadows and types of the **Substance** that was to come and has come. That mind also identifies individuals according to our theologies and our religious behaviors, especially in our religious ceremonies – not on the basis of our **substance**, which is our relationship with the Lord and one another. The religious mind sees only the religious expressions of inner realities, so uses those outer expressions to label and judge us.

For example, it is difficult to fault those who first observed the Jews with their sacrifice system, manner of dress, and other religious practices. Those things stood out to the world, and the world mind saw only the externals. But something very basic changed when Christ came. Those special externals were almost completely abandoned, leaving the world with believers in Jesus Christ who displayed their personal and group relationship as their identity. Even the church had a difficult time settling for the **substance** of that identity during its early years, and yet struggles to bring it to the front as we accept the world’s view of things. That **substance** is made of personal relationships [“living family,” unity] and internal realities [faith, hope, love, freedom, deference, peace, care, joy, strength, substance, patience, kindness, reliability]. Of such **substance** the Lord has constructed the identifying elements of those who believe in Him. Those are the things that make us fishers of men.

9. Yes, fruitfulness in ministry is shown by the results of our ministry, but the fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 are not those kinds of fruit. The Galatians fruit are the gradually showing results of us decreasing and Christ Jesus increasing as we take up our crosses daily and follow Him. It is the result of having receiving the seed and letting it grow. It is our transformed character.

10. Let’s try to put this Thought together so that it has a chance to say something. I will focus this on our cities, although it is broadly international in scope.

The growing violence in our cities has been blamed on police mistreatment of blacks, and on hampered policing. Both may be going on, but both are superficial to our Thought. Major things are happening; things that are spiritually based. They cannot be sidestepped. We are in a time when we must go through them. Changes are going on that not long ago would have seemed impossible, and definitely intolerable. During the past few years we have been witnessing a crescendo of chaos. We are becoming a lawless people amid a sea of laws.

The basis for society is law; law is based on an organized system of group-thinking; thinking is based on religion because only religion can produce a core value of eternal truths. During my lifetime there has been a steady push to purge our nation of religious values, ours being Judeo-Christian values. The thought has been that religion, especially Judeo-Christian religion, hampers freedom and unity. The result has been anarchy and the rule of men by force, not of laws by common, earnest agreement.

Here comes a great collision, like two hurricanes coming together: The civil rights movement of the 1960s, which was to recognize and remedy the problem of unequally applied law among blacks and whites in our one culture, met head-on with liberalism, which featured free-lance man-made laws. That was a classic “immovable object and unstoppable force.” In short, laws are being made, and others are being ignored, based on political motivation. The result is general disorder from lack of righteous government.

No amount of man-made laws will fix a society that has no sense of what is righteous, what is the truth. People will align with the truth. They will die for the truth. They have become chaotic without the truth.

We are giving power to people who lack the truth. We are giving them power to define what marriage is, when life begins, who gets or is denied medical care, when and where we can pray, and a long list of additional powers. We have done that, so no wonder that one man’s truth is as good as another man’s truth, no matter the injustice involved and the violence necessary to gain dominance.

11. In Luke 12:1 Jesus said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.” “Beware” means that if we are not duly careful we will fall into a trap. If we think, “At least hypocrisy is one sin that I have never committed and will never commit,” let’s think about it. Is it possible that I could get religious even while I’m following Jesus and I think I’m only following Jesus?” Certainly those country boy Galilean disciples of Jesus didn’t think they could fall into that religious cesspool with the Pharisees! They could very clearly see that sin, and considered that they were immune to it. But, sure enough, soon thereafter they found themselves arguing over who was greatest among them. Jesus hasn’t changed, sin hasn’t changed, people haven’t changed, and situations have not changed. Self-made visions and improvements on faith and life in Christ Jesus are still the enemy of Christ and His disciples. The best prevention of hypocrisy is a heart that is easily convicted of today’s sin, and runs to repentance.

12. How self-responsible are we for God’s grace, at least for some of it? If we are in any way responsible for God’s grace, is it still grace? If a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, and the Lord therefore makes his enemies to be at peace with him [Prov. 16:7], is that peace by God’s grace, or did it have something to do with the man’s obedience? Does God’s grace only come out of “nowhere,” meaning having absolutely nothing to do with our righteousness of action or heart?

“A gentle answer turns away wrath” [Prov. 15:1], so does God’s grace in turning away that wrath have something to do first with our gentle answers? Considering grace from that viewpoint, we have much to do with receiving it. Remember Jesus’ words, that if we would abide in Him and His word abide in us, we could ask what we would and He would do it. When we ask, and He grants our requests, do we consider it grace that we received or do we see that we had a hand in receiving because of our abiding? Perhaps the most practical thing to this Thought is that our righteousnesses may stir and distribute God’s grace.

Yes, it’s all by God’s grace.

13. The New Testament tells us that the Old Testament is full of types and shadows of the real things to come, and that we are now in the time of those “things to come.” How many of the shadows seen in the Old Testament do you see now in their fullness, and have embraced that fullness while dropping off the shadows? Consider:

Animal sacrifice – Jesus’ sacrifice.

Physical circumcision -- Circumcision of the believer’s heart.

Being chosen by God due to one’s family membership/heritage – Being chosen by God according to one’s personal faith in Jesus.

The tithe being 10% of one’s “income” – The tithe being that small percent of humanity that lives entirely given over to the Lord [although imperfectly] per His gospel instructions.

The Sabbath being one particular day of the week – The condition of a believer’s soul when having entered personally into the Sabbath Rest.

Add to those and other shadows of the Old Testament such as the Ten Commandments, which Jesus and the New Testament writers greatly expanded:

Having no other gods – Letting nothing or no one influence us contrary to the Lord.

Making no idols -- Exalting our beauty, wealth, religious or social positions, etc.

Taking His name in vain – Pronouncing the gospel of Christ, but not living it.

The Sabbath – As above.

Honor parents – Honoring those over us in whatever religious or social position.

Nor murdering – Anger and other unrighteousnesses are murder.

Committing adultery – Not keeping covenant of any type, even if only by desire.

Stealing – Self-controlling, not stewarding God’s possessions [everything] according to His instructions.

False witnessing – Lack of godly love, unforgiveness, unfaithfulness, believers’ unrighteousness.

Coveting – Inordinate desire, undue wanting and “taking,” even if not of full possession.

Do you remember how infuriated the religious leaders were with Jesus when He “did things” with their Scriptures? They thought He was twisting and misapplying them, and thought they were honoring and holding to the truth of Scripture. Then Paul and the other writers did the same sort of thing as they listened to the Holy Spirit and “embellished” and “enlarged” those precious words from the Old Testament, penning them afresh for us in the fullness of their meaning.

The religious mind possessed by believers and unbelievers wars against the Holy Spiritual mind. The natural mind appreciates the natural, the temporary, that which is passing away. The spiritual mind reaches for the reality, the permanent, for which we are created and which is being offered to us by faith while we yet exist here in our worldly bodies.

14. How much of our righteousness is supposed to show to those who know and observe us? All of it? I’m not talking about showcasing our righteousness in order for us to be applauded, but simply our daily righteousnesses that dangle on us throughout the day. Again, all of it? Yes, but no. There are some righteousnesses that are to not show in that way, that are supposed to be private between you and the Lord, or at least by necessity to very few others. Among that group of righteousnesses are such as donation of money and stuff, acts of love that can be planned unnoticed, and spontaneous good Samaritan opportunities. Yes, let our lights shine, but some can and should be hidden until the day of real rewards.

15. Have you been aware of the Potter’s hand on you lately? We are a lump of clay in His hands, being formed into someone particularly useful to Him; made to fit perfectly into place in His present and eternal kingdom among others with whom He is doing the same but at least a little differently.

Have you gone through a time when you knew you could do nothing to help yourself, so had to relax in His hands and be a “little person” or “nobody” again? We are His workmanship. If He wants us to be a beautiful lamp as we let our light shine [as did He], so be it. If He wants us to be a sewer pipe to drain off the waste refuse of the world [as did He], so be it. He knows what He wants and is a good potter. Yield to Him.

16. The peacemakers of Matthew 5:9 are equipped to make changes in this chaotic world. We have what it takes to labor successfully. We have peace and are peaceful, so we are equipped to make peace. When Jesus said we would be called sons of God He did not mean we would be called sons of God by our Father in Heaven. Believers who are not peacemakers are also sons of God, so who is it that will be calling peacemakers “sons of God?” Answer: The people who observe us, whether they are believers or unbelievers. Those are the ones who will call us sons of God. Our best example of that is seen in Matthew 27:54 when the Roman centurion saw the ultimate act of peacemaking and responded with, “Surely, this was a son of God.” An alternate reading is, “Surely, this was the son of God.” That centurion saw the truth, had the revelation, as that peaceful, righteous Man atoned for the sins of the world and established peace with God for those who would accept the gift.

Peacemakers are equipped with the life-message that heaven is with us, that light is available, that liberty is granted, and that Jesus is now absolutely Lord of all situations. That message attracts those who are called by God. They see and hear Him in us. They come to peace with Him and man, not by bargaining, not by force or enticement or manipulation or fear, but willingly and gladly.

On the other hand, the world’s methods for making peace involve force, intrigue, bribery, and the sort. The results are fruitlessness, failure, temporariness, unreliability, deceit, and the like. Look about us now as the nations talk about peace. Their peace agreements do not establish peace, they are broken at will, and portend holocaust.

17. Here are some quality statements: 1) A civilization is a society based upon the opinions of its civilians. 2) Basics are the things that are always true. 3) Without unity, the voice of God is silenced in the church.

18. The Lord’s call on our lives is dramatic, intentional and progressive in its unfolding. It is life-changing all the way. When the changes stop it is not the Lord who has stopped; we have. Examples: Mark 1:16-20; Romans 8:28; Ephesians 1:4-5. The Holy Spirit is like an artist who has a picture in his head before starting. First He may splash some paint across the canvas, then advance steadily toward His planned goal.

19. Our departing Thought: Jesus is the Head of the church, but He can do nothing unless He is recognized [identified, acknowledged, accepted, and appreciated] as our Head. When He is recognized, He will do everything. That statement is about “spiritual order” and applies to marriages, families, corporations, nations, etc.

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