

In Him Was Life

New Testament holiness is a joyous privilege, not a heavy burden and duty.

Fidelity In Friendship

Derived from the Latin word *fidēlis*, fidelity is the quality of being faithful, loyal, accurate, or true. And it's a quality essential to all authentic, interpersonal relationships.

Ruth: The Inconsequential Outsider

The Weft And Warp Of Scripture

The word of God is like a vast tapestry, its main theme interwoven with many sub-plots and side stories that run like golden threads through an intricate design. Each of these threads complements the complete telling of [God's story](#) and narrates again and again to us the way in which God views our world and us, the people who inhabit it.

The story of Ruth, a seemingly inconsequential outsider, is one of these golden threads. At face value, it appears to be a brief narrative concerning an unimportant family, living in a

[small and insignificant rural village*](#). It hardly seems a grand stage on which the compelling drama of God's purpose is to be acted out.

The story is placed within the time period known as "The Judges" (thought to be around 1220 – 1050 B.C.), when heroes like Samson the Mighty and Ehud the Brave lived- impressive and inspiring characters, who took centre stage in the dramas that unfolded around them.

The story of Ruth seems, at first glance, a strange and somewhat ordinary inclusion in the rather extraordinary cast that surrounds it. And yet, when we consider each part of this remarkable story, we understand that we are being told something very important about God and about ourselves. We learn that God sees into our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). He is more interested in what we can become, than in who we are right now, and that our very ordinariness is what God sees and works with to bring us to an extraordinary place.

In fact, God often does some of His best work with the most unlikely people, as the story of Ruth proves.

Who Was Ruth?

Ruth was, by definition, an outsider. She was not an Israelite but a native of the country of [Moab](#), a mountainous tract of land now in modern Jordan. She had married an Israelite man who was living in Moab with his family; his parents and his brother. The family had relocated due to a famine that had occurred in their homeland and in chapter 1 of the story, Ruth and her husband had been married for 10 years before he, and his brother, both fell ill and died.

It seems tragedy had already befallen the family previously, with the death of Elimelech, Ruth's father-in-law, very soon after the family's relocation. The death of the sons now left Ruth, her sister-in-law, Orpah, and Naomi, her mother-in-law,

as widows, in probably very bleak circumstances.

Ruth was, of all people, an unlikely heroine. Not only was she a woman, in a time when women were of minor importance, but she was also now a widow. Finally, she was poor and foreign and would have been considered an outsider to any true-born Israelite.

Ruth's Story

Ruth may have been poor in position but she was rich in love and faith. When Naomi, her mother-in-law, made the decision to return to her homeland of Israel, Ruth did not hesitate to follow her. She left all that was familiar, everything that she was culturally connected to, and, much like [faithful Abraham](#) before her, she *“went out, not knowing where she was going...”* (Hebrews 11:8).

She heard the call of God and she followed, with an implicit faith and unswerving devotion. She trusted the journey and embraced the destination, even though she hadn't yet seen it. This is the definition of faith (Hebrews 11:1-3). Faith is what distinguishes her character and faith is what motivated her choices, which become more and more evident to us as we discover her story.

The story is short in its telling and it's well worth pausing here and [reading it quickly for yourself](#).

Like every great story, it contains all the important elements of interest; drama, grief, desolation, decision, redemption, and resolution. As a stand-alone story, it would be successful in its own right. Yet it is the conclusion to the story that makes us really sit up and take notice. This is where we realise that nothing is an afterthought to God, nobody is *actually* inconsequential and His plan is purposeful and far-reaching.

He has a definitive purpose and plan and every single person

can play their part. There is a place for all of us in God's story, if we choose it.

Ruth made the choice and decision to follow Naomi, to become part of God's plan. Yet even she couldn't have realised the extent to which God would involve her. The epilogue of the story contains an unbelievable twist, a beautiful thread that we almost have to read twice to believe.

Ruth's Defining Legacy

Ruth found a home, belonging, and happiness in Israel and went on to marry Boaz, a wealthy and respected landowner. She was accepted completely into the family of [Abraham](#), father of the Israelite people.

She also became the mother to a little boy called Obed (Ruth 4:16). Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse, in time, became the father of David, one of the greatest kings in Israel's history. David would become famous, not only for his skill with the harp and his compassionate love for and protection of his sheep as a shepherd boy but also for his courage and bravery in fighting against the enemy Goliath, his stirring example as a brilliant military leader and king, and his complete trust and faith in God.

Most breathtaking of all, King David became an ancestor of Jesus Christ, God's own Son! This makes Ruth an incredibly significant and vital part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

God's methods often [confound and confuse us](#). He doesn't always choose who we would expect or work in the way we would like. He sees all, from the beginning to the end (Isaiah 46:10), while we can only see a small portion of now. His purpose is perfectly orchestrated and remarkably interwoven in ways that amaze us.

In the story of Ruth, an inconsequential outsider, we see that

God gets involved in the lives of all kinds of men and women, bringing about His purpose. We can take confidence and have faith that He can and will work in our lives, in the same way, and that we too can become part of [His story](#), if we choose it.

* Here's another plot twist for those of you who love a good story! Wondering about that "small and insignificant rural village", found at the beginning of this tale? That village is none other than the little town of Bethlehem, where, many years from Ruth's time, a small baby [would be born](#), in humble circumstances, and would be laid, sleeping, in a manger; [Jesus – the hope of the world!](#)

This article was first published on 19 March 2018

John Writes A Letter

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

“God is love. When we take up permanent residence in a life of love, we live in God and God lives in us. This way, love has the run of the house, becomes at home and mature in us, so that we're free of worry on Judgment Day – our standing in the world is identical with Christ's. There is no room in love for fear. Well-formed love banishes fear. Since fear is crippling, a fearful life – fear of death, fear of judgment – is one not yet fully formed in love. We, though, are going to love – love and be loved. First we were loved, now we love. He loved us first. If anyone boasts, “I love God,” and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of

it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both." – 1 John 4:17-21, MSG

Authentic Christianity

Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.

John's words on this subject are blunt and straight to the point. *"You cannot be a Christian and hate other people"*. It's incompatible and hypocritical. Not only that, it's a blatant subversion of everything that is intrinsically bound up in a Christian's salvation by God's grace. We love God, because He **first** loved us and, despite our complete unworthiness, He sent His son to die for us. There is no greater love than a man dying for his friends, and there could be no greater demonstration of what love looks like, to die, even for those who were your enemies.

"What marvellous love the Father has extended to us! Just look at it – we're called children of God!" – 1 John 3:1, MSG

Of all the people on this earth, it would seem obvious that Christians would understand the implications of this. We are the recipients of a love so deep and vast and completely undeserving, it should be impossible for us to not respond to this in our relationships with others. We haven't received from God what we should have. And what we shouldn't have received, we have. Grace, freely given, has been demonstrated by a love lavished on us in abundance. This recognition of grace should empower and transform us to demonstrate the same kind of love in all our relationships, and especially to our Christian family.

Grace is, perhaps, the easiest concept to speak about in the enthusiastic language of a born-again believer ([John 3:1-21](#))

but, in reality, the hardest virtue to assimilate into our Christian lives. Legalism, not grace, is one of the first lessons we learn in life; that all things come with a price and that nothing is given for free. We can tend to persist in this mentality after our conversion, even on an unconscious level, viewing God and each other in this light.

“The one who won’t practice righteous ways isn’t from God, neither is the one who won’t love a brother or sister.” – 1 John 3:10, MSG

Are We Really Born Again?

There’s a serious crisis amongst Christians. It seems we can talk a lot about love, but we’re actually woefully inadequate at demonstrating it. Instead of showing real, authentic love, demonstrated in graceful, multi-faceted ways, we see the opposite in many of our Christian communities. We’re often religiously wealthy but morally bankrupt; devoid of any real expression of a grace-led life. We say we’re born again but are we really? Has grace really touched our hearts?

Jesus told a story to illustrate what a life untransformed by grace looks like – that of the *ungrateful* servant ([Matthew 18: 21-35](#)). Despite having been forgiven a massive debt of some several million dollars by his master, the servant proceeded to demand repayment of a debt owed to him by a fellow servant, of only a few dollars. When the fellow servant was unable to immediately repay, he had him thrown into prison, ‘until he could repay the debt’ – which would have been practically impossible from his prison cell. The master soon heard of the ungrateful servant’s behaviour and the conclusion of the tale is sobering:

“Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant,

as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.” [Matthew 18:32-35, ESV](#)

The parable was designed to impress upon the listeners the importance of their attitude towards each other in response to the forgiveness they had received from God. In fact, there is a direct connection between our professed love for God and our love for our ‘fellow servants’. John puts it this way:

“Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.” [1 John 4:20, NIV](#)

What Does Real Love Look Like?

“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” – 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, ESV

These are all attributes of a life that is lived walking with God; [led by the Spirit](#). The implications of a Spirit-led life find their way into every aspect of our lives: affection for others, understanding and compassion for their failings, forgiveness of their mistakes (and our own!), confidence in God’s love and kindness, a commitment to cultivate close and loving relationships built on mutual respect and sacrifice.

These are attributes of a person who has fully grasped the weight and implications of saving grace and whose life is being transformed, day by day, following the example of the

One who went before – Jesus Christ. They are choosing every day to put aside the unfruitful works of darkness and to walk in the Spirit, producing the fruit that comes from living God's way (Galatians 5). The bright light of Christ makes their way plain.

Hate Will Destroy Us

The opposite of love is hate. And let's get real. Hate, in all its forms, whether displayed passively or aggressively, is like a poison that destroys our soul. It will ruin our life – and not just ours. It causes havoc in our families, our relationships, our churches and, critically, to our witness of the Gospel. We may think that we have never been guilty of 'hating our brother or sister', but when we harbour bitterness in our heart, when we gossip about them to others, when we withhold doing good on the basis of preference, when we are angry at them, when we don't treat them with dignity and honour, 'esteeming all better than ourselves', we are hating them.

So heinous is the position of hate before God that John says that a person who hates is said to be walking in darkness and not the light ([1 John 2:9, 11](#)). It's entirely possible for a person to continue professing religion but remain at enmity with their Christian brother or sister. The Bible states unapologetically that such a person is a liar ([1 John 4:20](#)).

They may fool everyone else but they cannot fool God.

Hate Is An Issue Of The Heart

We need to be on our guard in our Christian communities that we are not unwittingly or, worse, complicit in allowing lives to be ruled by hate, in all its insidious forms. While we may be vocal on what are perceived to be more serious sins (such as murder or immorality), we tend to overlook or excuse things like slander, gossip, envy, enmity, strife, jealousy, bitter

disagreements, divisions or backbiting. Do we speak against these things and model a better way? We are all capable of such things and we are all responsible for preventing the spiritual disease that results from overlooking these things in our Christian communities.

We are warned over and over in the Bible of how hatred and bitterness can destroy us. We are encouraged to love one another, keep short records of wrongs, and forgive others, not harbouring bitterness or anger in our hearts.

We know that all these issues find their source in the darkness of the human heart.

“For from within the hearts of people come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery.” – Mark 7:21, ESV

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. – Ephesians 4:31, ESV

When we struggle with issues like gossip, slander, bitterness, anger or envy, the problem lies inside us, deep in the recesses of our heart. The issue is not with the person at whom our hate is directed but with us. And if it were not a problem that all Christians face, the many writers of the epistles, especially John, wouldn't have taken the time to warn us of it.

If we can't love our Christian brother or sister, then, quite simply, we don't [understand grace](#).

How Can We Change The Narrative?

The imperative first step for anyone struggling with these issues is to spend some time considering God's grace and work of salvation in their life. Make it personal. Consider what it meant for God to give His Son for you, that you might live.

Consider the weight of your guilt and inability to fully satisfy God's righteousness, and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God.

Perhaps you don't truly believe this to be true for yourself and this is the root cause of your fear and judgment of others. Make it a priority to [find peace and true reconciliation](#) with the God who is for you and not against you. Allow the dark places of your heart to be flooded with the light of Jesus. Ask for God to soften your heart, for Him to remove the bitterness, envy and hate. Confess to Him how ashamed you are of allowing that root of bitterness to grow and ask Him to help you prune it from your life.

And, as Christian communities, we must all love enthusiastically, hating sin but loving the sinner, remembering that we were all at one time enemies of God. We must not tolerate those things that allow hate or division to flourish but show our faith by cultivating [works of the Spirit](#), against which there is no law! (Galatians 5:22-24).

*"So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus."
– 2 Peter 1:5-9, MSG*

"Anyone who claims to be intimate with God, ought to live the kind of life that Jesus lived." | 1 John 2:6, MSG

A Powerful Witness To The Truth Of Jesus Christ

Jesus tells his disciples in John 13:35, that by loving one another as he has loved them, all the world will know that they are his disciples. *The world will see your love for each other and know, without even having to ask, that you are followers of the King.* How we love, as Christians, therefore, is either a powerful witness to the truth and reality of the risen King and our allegiance to him; or a public denial of our belief in the King and his ability to truly transform our hearts. By not loving as the King loves, we demonstrate for all to see that the *ruler of this world* still controls us; that we are allowing this rule to flourish in our lives and govern our actions towards others.

Real faith in the King is more than the words we say, the emotions we feel, ideas we debate or a truth we believe. Real faith is something we do; expressed in visible ways, deeply rooted in and flowing from this focused centre; that “one man died for everyone.” Real faith shows up in our life – particularly in the way that we love the King’s people.

‘Sometimes called “the Proverbs of the New Testament”, the book of James practically and faithfully reminds Christians exactly how to live so as to be compelling witnesses for the name of Jesus Christ. From perseverance to true faith to controlling one’s tongue, submitting to God’s will, and having patience, this book aids readers in living authentically and wisely for Christ.

Many have claimed that James and the Apostle Paul differed on the question of faith versus works, but in reality, the spiritual fruit that James talks about simply demonstrates the true faith of which Paul wrote.’ (taken from the introduction to James, ESV 2000). *If you claim to be a Christian, James says, **prove it by your actions.***

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action. Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we ‘earn God’s favour’ but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as [1 John 4:7-21](#) says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn’t real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

This article was first published 10 February 2020

The Faith | Works ‘Conundrum’

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

Acceptance By Grace Through Faith Alone

The simple truth that we find acceptance with God by grace through faith alone is the Bible’s most beautiful theme. Grace

began long ago when God set in motion the means for humanity to find their way back to Him, to find their way home. He promised Adam and Eve that [a redeemer](#) would come who would save humanity from the [consequences of their sin](#). That redeemer would be His very own Son, born for the specific purpose of reconciling the world back to God (John 3:17). The earth waited, enduring times of difficulty and futility, restless and expectant for the promised Prince of Peace to appear.

With the arrival of Emmanuel, 'God-With-Us', the reality of a whole and healed relationship with God for every person was realised. Brutal tyranny at the hands of sin and death was finally overthrown in the person and ministry of God's Son, whose death on the cross struck the final blow to mortality.

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end." – Isaiah 9:6-7, NIV

Salvation Isn't Earned

This work of salvation, in its entirety, was set in motion and completed by God. Humanity had no contribution in any of this. The Bible is very clear that salvation is given freely, as a gift, and is never attained by works.

"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God." – Romans 5:1-2, NIV

Paul the Apostle was a champion for the need for a grace-led, faith-full life. He had been converted from a life steeped in

religious tradition and law, a life in which a man could become 'more righteous' before God than his fellow man, simply by achieving greater adherence to law. Yet Paul learned that right standing with God was not to be achieved through law-keeping – and in fact was impossible to be achieved this way – but by personal belief in God's promises. Paul learned of the true gospel and He speaks of it often throughout his letters in the New Testament – that of being 'saved by grace through faith alone and not by works, least any man should boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul is very adamant that justification – that is, "right standing with God" – is by faith alone. What are we to make then of the words of Paul's contemporary, James, who writes "As you can see, a man is justified by his deeds and **not by faith alone.**" (James 2:24). It seems, at least initially, that these two men are in contradiction with each other.

Justified By Deeds And Not By Faith Alone

In reality, James and Paul are actually in complete harmony and a closer look at James' letter not only gives us a better understanding of what *faith really is*, but also warns us of the sobering reality that *information doesn't always equal transformation*.

Paul wrote his [letter to the Galatians](#) addressing the growing idea at that time that right standing with God depended on what Jesus did **plus** additional 'spiritual acts' that are undertaken, that we are made "right with God by **what we do**". This is performance-based Christianity and Paul reaffirmed to the Galatians that anything which adds to our standing in the eyes of God, apart from the performance of Jesus on the cross, is legalistic teaching and counterfeit Christianity.

James, when writing his letter and speaking of 'what we do' is concerned with counterfeit Christianity of another kind – the unauthenticity of a life that is 'Christian' in name only. He

is tackling another dangerous distortion of the gospel of grace, the idea that believers can 'continue in sin that grace may abound'. That the new life is the same as the old life, the only difference being that a person has become 'saved'. That is to say, that nothing about the way the believer behaves or lives after being [saved](#) is necessary to change, that verbally expressing our faith in Jesus is enough and that we don't need to 'do better' because God's grace covers all our shortcomings anyway.

The truth, James says, is that *yes, we are made right with God by believing and professing our faith in His promises. Yet, it cannot be real faith, the faith that counts with God, unless its demonstrated by an active, loving response to God's grace. This is, as Paul agrees, "faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6), demonstrated in a Christian's life by 'what they do'.*

James starts his letter by asking an important question:

"Do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, "Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!" and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup – where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense." – James 2:17-24 MSG

He goes on to reiterate his meaning in the plainest of language, saying "Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works." (James 2:26, CSB).

Works Are Essential Evidence Our Faith Is

Real

The kind of faith that is real, saving faith is shown to be vital, living and demonstrable in action.

To illustrate his full meaning, James gives two examples from the life of [Abraham](#), whom he describes as 'the friend of God' (James 2:2). The first was when God promised Abraham a great line of descendants, even though at the time Abraham and his wife were both old and childless. Abraham didn't doubt God for a second and James cites this faith (Genesis 15:6) as "reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." Abraham believed God was 'good for His word' and this is why, James says, he was justified.

Paul, when also commenting at length on the life of Abraham (Romans 4), does not say "Abraham *worked* for God and therefore was justified." Neither does he say "Abraham *undertook acts of love* and, because of this, was justified." or that "Abraham *made progress in character reformation* and therefore was justified. He says, "Abraham **believed** God and that faith was credited to him as righteousness." He and James are both referring to the same event in Abraham's life and are both drawing the same conclusion – that Abraham was 'made right with God by his faith.

However, James goes on to reference a second event in Abraham's life, found in Genesis 22. Here, God is testing Abraham, looking for the kind of works that show Abraham's faith to be not just words but real and living – demonstrable in action. This is not the same kind of justification which gave Abraham right standing with God, but rather a test of Abraham's original profession of belief. Was it the living kind of faith which produces a genuine response or a dead faith that has no effect on life at all?

James therefore has a different meaning in mind than Paul when Paul concludes that people aren't justified by works. James is

answering another question entirely: **Does the ongoing and final reckoning of our righteousness depend on works as the necessary evidence of a true and living faith?** The answer to that question is an unequivocal yes!

If you were to ask James and Paul, “How does a person obtain right standing with God and receive ‘[the righteousness of God](#)’?”, both men would answer “As a gift of grace. Trust God, believe His promise and that faith alone will be counted as righteousness.”

However, if you asked them, “Does our final right standing with God depend on works of love?”, Paul will answer “No, not if by ‘works’, you mean deeds done to show that we somehow deserve God’s blessings” (his point in Romans 4) but James will answer “Yes, if by ‘works’, you mean evidence of a faith that is alive and active in a believer’s life”. Both are in agreement with each other, based on those definitions.

Works, in the way that James defines them, prove that our faith is real. When James says that we are not justified by faith alone, he means that the faith which justifies or makes us ‘right with God’ does not remain alone but bears the fruit of the new, spirit-led life. Any other kind of faith is counterfeit, in reality, dead, and completely useless.

What Does Living Faith Look Like?

“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” – 1 John 4:11

Living faith is really another name for [discipleship](#); learning to replicate the pattern and example left by Jesus in both word and action. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatians by discussing this very thing, making it clear that being called to ‘freedom in Jesus’ is not an excuse to do whatever we want, but rather ‘freedom to serve one another in love’ (Galatians 5:14). It’s in the **believing** and **doing** that faith

is made alive, vibrant and visible.

James agrees with Paul in this, again referencing the life of Abraham:

“Wasn’t our ancestor Abraham “made right with God by works” when he placed his son Isaac on the sacrificial altar? Isn’t it obvious that faith and works are yoked partners, that faith expresses itself in works? That the works are “works of faith”? The full meaning of “believe” in the Scripture sentence, “Abraham believed God and was set right with God,” includes his action. It’s that mesh of believing and acting that got Abraham named “God’s friend.” Is it not evident that a person is made right with God not by a barren faith but by faith fruitful in works?” – James 2: 21-24, MSG

Depending on God and accepting His gift of grace – truly accepting it – will radically transform our lives. It will challenge everything we do, our belief systems and possibly even misplaced prejudices about others. It will compel us to behave justly to others, with impartiality, even though the world around us might not be just or impartial. It will compel us to do better and be better, not so that we ‘earn God’s favour’ but so that our faith can be seen as a reality, not just a matter of empty words.

“But what happens when we live God’s way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of

the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” – Galatians 5:22-25, MSG

Awareness of, and responding to the love of God is at the heart of our Christian lives. We are who we are, first and foremost, because of God revealed in Christ. Yet if our ‘loving union with God’ doesn’t result in a living faith, shown by our good works to others, then, as 1 John 4:7-21 says so eloquently, our love for God **simply isn’t real**. This kind of faith is a counterfeit Christianity and nothing more than a corpse.

This article was first published on 11 June 2019

Majors And Minors | The Danger Of Extremism

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

The appearance of Jesus on the Jewish scene was a dramatic collision between [grace](#) and spiritual performance. Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness for all people; not on the basis of their social status, their ethnicity, or their gender, but on the basis of God’s generosity and undeserved grace (Mark 16:15, Luke 14:23).

“For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that everyone who believes in Him shall not perish but

have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” | John 3:16-17, NIV

Grace gives us what we don't deserve and cannot earn. This is why it's so frequently contrasted against the Law of Moses (the Torah), which still resulted in condemning every man or woman, no matter their sincerity or good deeds. Righteousness could never come by law-keeping, simply because it was impossible for it to be kept perfectly in its entirety.

Straining Out Gnats, Swallowing Camels*

Many of the conflicts that were initiated with Jesus came from the Pharisees, members of a Jewish religious party that flourished in Palestine from around 515 BCE–70 CE. The movement was marked by both a meticulous adherence to their interpretation of the Torah as well as their particular eschatological (end times) views.

The precise details of religious life were the Pharisees' passion and the conflicts they engaged in were usually over minor issues such as fasting (Mark 2:18), sabbath keeping (Mark 2:24), eating with 'unclean' people (Mark 9:11), or attitudes towards civic duties, like paying taxes (Matthew 9:11) – all [performance-driven markers of supposed spirituality](#). They made uncompromising stands on matters of no particular spiritual importance, while issues of greatest significance were minimised or neglected.

The Pharisees 'majored in these minors', presuming that this kind of religiosity made them more spiritual and 'right with God'. In reality, they were actually inverting the spiritual values that God was really interested in, like mercy, justice, and [faithfulness](#).

They should have known better. God had already made plain to His people what He required of them. He'd already told them

that He found the saccharine solemnity of their religious assemblies nauseating and the melodious noise of their songs infuriating.

“He has told you, O human, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” | Micah 6:8, ESV

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps, I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” | Amos 5:21-25,

Jesus called the Pharisees out on their hypocrisy in the gospel of Matthew, where he says:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” | Matthew 23:24, NIV

The Pharisees could recite the law by heart yet they couldn't have said what the heart of the law really was. They failed to see or understand Jesus had no interest in setting up rigid religious and social guidelines for his followers. His focus instead was on majoring in the majors; the gospel and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.

The Danger Of Extremes

Legalism takes different forms at different times and is often hard to pin down, manifesting itself in subtle ways.

There is much that can be said about legalism and the hypocrisy that arises from it. An emphasis on externals makes it very easy to fake what is really going inside. Promoting or insisting on conformity to these outward markers of 'spirituality' often results in people who may look spiritual on the outside but who are, in reality, suffering from deep inner turmoil and sin.

"I know of only two alternatives to hypocrisy: perfection or honesty. Since I have never met a person who loves the Lord our God with all their heart, mind, soul, and loves their neighbour as themselves, I do not view perfection as a realistic alternative. Our only option, then, is honesty that leads to repentance. As the Bible shows, God's grace can cover any sin, including murder, infidelity, or betrayal. Yet, by definition, grace must be received, and hypocrisy disguises our need to receive grace. When the masks fall, hypocrisy is exposed as an elaborate ruse to avoid grace." | Philip Yancey

The focus of this article, particularly in light of the global pandemic, is another issue that I believe arises from a spirit of legalism. This is the issue of extremism; when we begin majoring in the minors instead of majoring in the majors.

Right now, the world is being sharply delineated. Nearly as quickly as the virus has spread, so too has the chatter and the differing opinions about both the cause and the cure. There is an ocean of information and propaganda, together with an overabundance of access to information, some of it accurate and some of it not.

However, the most disturbing aspect of all this is the

noticeable polarisation of people into two opposing groups; *them and us. And the church is not unaffected in this.*

We, the church, are being drawn into extremes, into focusing on external markers (*whether you believe covid is real or not, whether you choose to vaccinate or not...*). We're using these markers as some kind of external test of authentic Christianity and displaying the same misguided zeal for religious purity as the Pharisees of Jesus' day. We're gazing outward, looking for specks of sawdust in other people's eyes, instead of looking inward and paying attention to the plank in our own eye.

The dangers of this kind of religiousness – extremism – are as great a threat in the twenty-first century as they were in the first. As Philip Yancey comments, "*the spirit of law-keeping stiffens into extremism. I know of no legalism that does not seek to enlarge its domain of intolerance.*"

Our focus in this [global crisis](#) seems to have shifted away from our most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ in a darkened and impoverished world, and, instead, Christians are showing themselves to be intolerant, judgmental, and divisive to those who think differently to themselves.

Not only that, we're being distracted from majoring in the majors; *the gospel, and the significant agendas of the kingdom of God.*

I think we must be careful, particularly right now, but in any circumstance, to ensure that the hills we're choosing to die on are the ones that have a cross firmly planted at their summit.

Majoring In The Majors: The Gospel +

Kingdom Of God

While the global pandemic is certainly is a troubling and anxious time, I don't believe *our personal opinion* about it changes anything in relation to our right standing with God. Certainly, there are considerations around [our response to the crisis](#) which must be thought about in relation to our Christian witness, and these are convictions that each Christian must personally decide for themselves, in the light of scripture.

Jesus is the only way to find right standing with God. The name of Jesus is the only means by which humanity can be saved. Jesus' performance, not our own, is what secures this extraordinary gift of grace. And in Jesus, God is saving, rescuing, atoning, justifying, ruling, and reconciling people for the glory of His name, all in pursuit of His purpose.

This is what the Bible describes as *the gospel* and *the kingdom of God*. These are the major agendas that Jesus focused on and these should be our focus too.

The world is changed by our example, not our opinion. Our primary purpose and responsibility as Christians and, collectively, as the church, is to point the world to Jesus. We do this, not by imposing our opinions or judging the world, but by *being salt and light*.

The significant agendas of the kingdom will be seen in lives that are surrendered to the guidance and leadership of God's designated king, Jesus. Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and earth, he becomes the first claimant on our affections, the motivating force in our decisions, and the final judge of our soul.

Therefore, we will also be on guard to avoid any kind of system that employs the use of 'formulas' and 'doctrines' to press good people of faith into conformity with a system

instead of conformity to Christ. We will be on the lookout for cultures that promote or enable power posturing, performance preoccupation, unspoken rules, and a lack of balance.

And we will resist mindsets that seek to quantify authentic Christianity by anything other than a confession of trust in the saving name of Jesus Christ.

What Does This Look Like In A Pandemic?

The ability to exercise critical thinking is an important reality for every person, but, in the end, opinions must be formed by each person for themselves and never coerced or compelled upon us by others.

Christians may therefore see a situation in very different ways but this doesn't make them any more or less Christian than each other. It's important to understand that *unity as Christians* is based on our commonality *in Jesus*, not our uniformity of thought or opinion about *non-essential* topics.

Whether I think covid-19 was created in a lab, whether I think covid-19 is no worse than seasonal flu, or whether I think covid-19 is some kind of elaborate ruse enabling Bill Gates to digitally track the world's population through microchip-carrying vaccines, doesn't make me *any less Christian* (although, arguably, at least one of those opinions infers I'm probably less adept in critical thinking than I should be).

How we *respond* or *behave* as Christians, however, is clearly set out for us in scripture and, in this, we should be united. The Apostle Peter, when encouraging the early church in their Christian witness in relation to the pressures they were under, had this to say:

- Keep your conduct honourable ([1 Peter 2:11-12](#))
- Respect and submit to authority ([1 Peter 2:13](#))
- Love earnestly and do good ([1 Peter 1:22](#))

What I think this looks like right now, in practical terms, is this; that Christians will be people of peace, kindness, and compassion. That we'll look for opportunities to do good and love others well. That we'll give no cause for the name of Jesus to be brought into disrepute and no opportunity for the kingdom mission of God to be thwarted.

That we'll have soft hearts and open minds, willing to listen and understand, rather than judge and disparage. That we'll realise that this time of trouble, at its core, is no different to any other crisis or trouble that Christians have faced and that, in all things, Jesus is over everything.

That we'll choose to not let our differences divide us, but instead, we'll be reminded of what truly unites us.

And that we'll be people who choose to major in the majors, those things that the world needs most; the *gospel of good news* and the *significant agendas of the kingdom of God*.

***The Jews had a law that forbade eating any flying insects that did not have jointed legs for hopping (Leviticus 11:20–23), and in this, they were strictly observant. Because water could have insects and insect larvae in it, pious Jews were careful to strain the water through a cloth before drinking it. They did not want to accidentally ingest an unclean insect and thus violate the law. Jesus mentions this practice in His proverb and then contrasts it with a hyperbolic picture of gulping down a camel. In this way, Jesus accused them of taking great pains (straining out gnats) to avoid offence in minor things of little importance, while tolerating or committing great sins (swallowing camels) such as deceit, oppression, and lust. | [Got Questions](#)**