

GOD'S CALL

Major themes in the Scriptures

Quality of being (8)

The gospel seen in quality of being

Reference: GDC-S17-008-Mw-R00-P2

(Originally spoken on 12 February 2012 edited on 13 February 2012)

Web site: <http://www.ajourneyinlife.org> and <http://www.ajourneyinlife.com>

This message is protected by copyright © 2012 Lim Liong. Permission is given to reproduce part (where the meaning is retained and the part is not quoted out of context) or all, of it, for personal use or for distribution, on condition that **no changes are made** and the message is **distributed free** of charge. Please do so prayerfully and discreetly.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

The paragraphs above as well as this paragraph must be included when the message is reproduced so that others who reproduce it will be conscious of the conditions stated above.

The Lord willing, today we will consider the subject, "Quality of being", the eighth message, in seeking to appreciate major themes in the Scriptures.

A short summary of today's message:

Without moral quality of being, we can still bring the message of the gospel to others. However, it will also cause damage to the proclamation of the gospel. The message of the gospel is most effectively transmitted and illustrated by a high quality of being.

We will seek the Lord to appreciate more of what this means.

We are seeking to appreciate the relationship between quality of being and the gospel. And we have seen that at the heart of the gospel, the objective is to help us to be like God in His holiness and then to walk with Him, relate with Him and work out His purposes together with Him. We see that the way that we should transmit the gospel is by living out the message of the gospel.

However, it is important for us also to recognize that even when there is poor quality of being, it is possible for people to proclaim the gospel and for God to speak and to work in that situation. God can still speak to people when those who proclaim the gospel do not live according to the message of the gospel.

The apostle Paul was very conscious of this and he wrote to the Philippian Christians in this way:

Philippians 1: 15-18

- 15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will;
- 16 the latter *do it* out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel;
- 17 the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment.
- 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.

The apostle Paul was conscious that different ones may seek to preach the gospel with different motives. Some preach Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will. There are different kinds of attitudes within the hearts of people who seek to communicate the gospel. “The latter *do it* out of love; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives”. However, although there are people who may preach Christ... from envy and strife, from impure motives, yet the apostle Paul could say, “whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice”.

What was he seeking to communicate?

Surely, the apostle Paul was not pleased with those who preached with wrong motives. Surely, he was angry with the wrong direction of their hearts.

But he was emphasizing that even though there may be wrong motives and impurity of hearts, God can still speak to people when the gospel is proclaimed. God can override; God can help those who desire to know, even in situations when the gospel is proclaimed by people whose hearts are not right.

And the apostle Paul concentrated on the benefits that people could derive and he said, "in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice." He rejoiced that people could hear the message of the gospel and in God's mercy, He may speak to them and they could benefit.

However, it is also very important for us to recognize that when the gospel is proclaimed from the wrong motives, when we speak of God and communicate what He wants to say with the wrong attitude of heart, there will also be negative consequences. It will also result in people being stumbled by the life that contradicts the message that we bring.

When we bring a message of life and holiness and our lives are contrary to that, we are by our lives contradicting the message that we bring.

Although God can speak in spite of that, we need also to remember that our lives can stumble others, in that as a result of what they see in us, it may hinder them from believing in the message of the gospel.

The apostle Paul was also very conscious of this:

Romans 2: 23-24

23 You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?

24 For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written.

The apostle Paul was referring to the Jews who were called the people of God and they took pride in that they were called by God specially as a nation. They boasted in the Law. They regarded themselves as disciples of Moses and that they were honouring God.

But for many of them, in their lives, they were in reality breaking the Law. They were not living according to God's intentions. They kept to the outward forms of the Law but in their hearts, they were far away from God.

This was especially so in the lives of the Pharisees whom the Lord Jesus rebuked and denounced as being hypocrites who might say things that are right but their hearts were wrong.

"THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU" – so the Gentiles, looking at the Jews living their lives contrary to what they professed, could readily say: "The God you believe in is not worth believing in".

So while God may work in situations where we are not faithful to Him, let us remember that the gospel is most effectively transmitted when our lives are lived according to the message of the gospel.

The more our lives are lived according to the message of the gospel, the greater the power, the reality that we can transmit in bringing the gospel to others. So the message is powerfully communicated by living out the message of the gospel.

This was an aspect that the Lord Jesus sought to impress on His disciples.

John 13: 34-35

- 34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.
35 "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

It is very helpful for us to take heed to what the Lord Jesus has said in this context. He said, "I give... you... a new commandment... that you love one another". We know that God had already commanded that we should love our neighbour. But here, the Lord Jesus said, "I give... you... a new commandment".

It was an old commandment in that we are to love our neighbours but it was a new commandment in that the Lord Jesus was seeking to help them understand the kind of love that it ought to be, as shown by His life: "...even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" – we are called upon to learn to love in the way that the Lord Jesus loved us.

And He said, "If you do this, all men will know that you are My disciples. If you have love for one another in the way that I have loved you, that will be a proclamation of the message of the gospel: that people will come to know that you are truly My disciples, you have benefited from My life, My death, My resurrection; you are truly following Me." So the "if" tells us that it is very critical: If we want to transmit the message effectively, we must learn to love even as the Lord Jesus loved.

So the Lord Jesus set the perfect example for us: In bringing across the message of the gospel, He lived by it. And we see that as the Lord Jesus lived out His life throughout His stay on earth and in His death and resurrection, this example of His life was learnt and transmitted by His disciples.

We see in the Scriptures the sadness in His heart, the anger that arose within Him at those who sinned and especially those who were evil and hypocritical. The Lord Jesus manifested anger towards those who were evil and hypocritical and those who sought to cause harm to others. And at the same time, we see the depth of love and compassion for those who could benefit from His sacrifice on the cross.

The Lord Jesus manifested the moral perfection of God in His life and transmitted the message of the gospel even as He lived and as He died.

And so we know that when He was hanging on the cross, in the process of dying a very painful death, He was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." In the midst of His great suffering because of the sins of men, because people had brought about His crucifixion, He prayed to God and said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

The Lord Jesus was gracious, compassionate and He sought to help even those who sought to do Him harm. He called upon God to forgive them.

But we cannot say that the people who were moving in the wrong direction did not know what they were doing. Certainly, they sinned, and every sin is a moral choice, and we cannot say we do not know what we are doing when we sin.

Why then did the Lord Jesus say, "they do not know what they are doing"?

This is an expression of His grace, that although He knew that they were sinful, although He knew that they knew what they were doing, He gave room for their failures.

He knew that many of them were affected by various other factors – they could have been deceived by the evil one, they could have been persuaded by those in authority, they could be concerned for their own security. There were various other factors that could have affected them in making that choice.

Yes, it was wrong, it was sinful, but it was possible to help them if they were willing to repent.

Of course, when the Lord Jesus prayed for their forgiveness, it could only take place if they were repentant. Without repentance, there will be no forgiveness.

So the Lord Jesus, in the midst of great suffering, showed love for mankind. And so we see that this was learnt and transmitted to His disciples.

Stephen, who was filled with the Holy Spirit, who loved God, was being stoned to death because he spoke what was right – he rebuked sin and the people who were moving in the wrong direction. They were so angry with him they rushed at him, they stoned him to death.

And so we are told in **Acts 7: 59-60**,

Acts 7: 59-60

59 They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!"

60 Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.

The people stoned him to death. It was obviously sinful, wrong, negative. And here, Stephen recognized it and he said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" It was sin but he was calling upon the Lord to be gracious towards them.

He himself was suffering great pain, being stoned to death. It was a very painful death. But in the midst of his being stoned to death, he prayed for these people who were stoning him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" and he died soon after this. He had learnt from the Lord Jesus to love others, to care for them, to help them even as the Lord Jesus has loved us.

The apostle Paul, when he was called Saul of Tarsus, saw Stephen dying, being stoned to death. He was one of those who agreed to his being stoned to death and it is likely that the apostle Paul appreciated much the example of Stephen's life in the years ahead.

The apostle Paul learnt from the Lord Jesus, but he also learnt from the example of Stephen. And we see the apostle Paul was very angry with the false apostles, he took his stand against them, but at the same time, we see that he did not bear a grudge against those who deserted him in his time of need.

He still cared for them; he was not revengeful. Those who deserted him, he still cared for their well-being. **2 Timothy 4: 16**, he said:

2 Timothy 4: 16

At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me; may it not be counted against them.

We notice that the words of the apostle Paul and the words of Stephen were very similar to what the Lord Jesus said on the cross. "may it not be counted against them", basically in the direction, "Father, forgive them". He recognized that it was wrong on their part. They were not loyal, they were not faithful, they did not do what was right; they deserted him in his time of need. But he did not bear a grudge against them. He still wished for their well-being.

So when the Lord Jesus told His disciples that they should obey this new commandment, in His life, He showed them what this meant. He expected them to take it seriously.

If they were to transmit the gospel to the people, then they must learn to live out the meaning of the message of the gospel.

If we do not develop moral quality of being, then the goal and the transmission of the gospel will not be achieved.

The goal of the gospel is to help others to be holy, righteous and good like God. The transmission of the gospel, to be effective, must come from a heart of true love and compassion and concern for what is good. If we do not do that, then our labour may truly be in vain.

1 Corinthians 13: 1-3

- 1 If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.
- 2 If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.
- 3 And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

If we speak with the tongues of men and of angels, it can be very impressive. Many people are impressed by such expressions. It is miraculous; it is something exciting, very unusual; it may give a sense of power and awe.

But the apostle Paul says, "If I... do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." It is just making noise. There is nothing of true value that comes through.

"If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing".

So here he says, even if we have all these abilities: we can prophesy, we know the mysteries and we know many things, we have faith... to remove mountains, but if we do not have divine love developed in our being, then Paul says, "I am nothing."

So this refers to the being - "I am nothing." The quality is not there. There is no real worth and value in the being. Even though we may be able to do all these things, they are of no value in terms of the moral quality of our being. It is of no use - "I am nothing."

"And if I give all my possessions to feed *the poor*, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing". Giving our possessions to feed *the poor*, surrendering the body to be burned may be expressions of service - helping others, testifying for God: service, spiritual service.

But he says, "if I... do not have love, it profits me nothing". So, not only would it be "I am nothing", but "All these things that I do will also profit me nothing." That is to say, "All my labour, all that I have done will be of no value. I have achieved nothing, I have gained nothing. There is no value and no worth in what I have done. If all these things that I do do not come from a heart of love, if there is no love from God, there is no reality that is transmitted, then that is of no value. It profits me nothing."

This issue is very important for us to take serious heed because it has to do with the most important mission that we have: to bring the gospel to the whole world. And what is that gospel? We have to show to others what is the message of the gospel. So when the life is contrary to the message of the gospel, it will hinder the proclamation of the gospel. We may want to contribute, we may want to help other people recognize who God is and the importance of that message, but if we do not properly take heed to the meaning of the message of the gospel, then we will do harm.

Acts 5: 1-5

- 1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,
- 2 and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet.
- 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back *some* of the price of the land?"
- 4 "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."
- 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it.

Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, discussed; they planned a course of action. What was it?

They sold a piece of land and they told the apostles, "This is the price of the land. We are giving everything to you so that it can be used to help other Christians." But it was not true. They kept back a portion of the price of the land. They wanted to give the impression that they had given everything from the sale of the land.

Why would they want to do that? From all that we can see in the context, the most reasonable explanation would be they wanted to impress others that they were self-giving, they were giving much. They wanted honour, recognition. Barnabas had done that and it was appreciated. It is possible they saw that and they wanted to be recognized in the same way. But they were lying, and they were lying for selfish reasons in order to gain honour.

But in so doing, they dishonoured God. They gave a wrong idea of the message of the gospel. They were at the centre of the beginnings of the message of the gospel being preached. This was in the early stage of the gospel being transmitted. It was important for the people then and subsequently to recognize the importance of our lives in association with the transmission of the gospel.

We all know that in reality, Christians today are doing many things far worse than this. Many Christians are doing many things contrary to what ought to be. They also say things that they should not say, for selfish gain. But they are still alive today. God did not pass judgment on these people in the same way as He did for Ananias and Sapphira. Let us not think that because God passed judgment in that way, they were more sinful than other people. On the day of judgment, it will become clear. The degree of sin and the meaning of sin in each person's life will become clear.

But in this context, what is clear is that God wanted to impress upon the people the seriousness of the issue. The apostle Peter passed judgment on behalf of God, and Ananias and Sapphira died a physical death. We all know that physical death does not always mean judgment from God. But in this context, it was an expression of judgment from God. In this situation, it is very helpful for God to do it this way because then, the message comes through clearly: We are told, "as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it." For the message of the gospel to be taken seriously, they had to recognize what it meant.

We cannot say, "I follow the Lord Jesus" lightheartedly without really meaning it. It is a very serious matter. And even if God does not punish us in this way, it does not mean that He takes it lightly. He regards it as a serious matter.

However, if we are humble and contrite, if we are willing to learn, then God is forgiving, He is gracious, He is compassionate. He understands that we do fail. He knows that there are many difficulties and pressures and obstacles in this world, and He knows that we can falter and fail because of selfish reasons.

But the important thing is: are we willing to confess, to seek His forgiveness?

If so, then the Lord Jesus, who has come to help those who are sick, will heal us. He is the great Physician who has come to call those who are sick, to heal those who are sick. But if we think that we are not sick even when we have sinned against the Lord, then we do not need a physician.

But spiritual sickness in the context of what the Lord Jesus is talking about is very different from physical sickness. A physical sickness can come about even when we have not done anything wrong. Of course, it can come about when we have done things that are not right. But even if we do not do what is wrong, we can still fall sick. And sickness in the body is just a physical problem in the body that results from something going wrong in the system.

But when the Lord Jesus talked about His coming to heal the sick, He is talking about spiritual sickness that is the result of our choice. It is a moral issue and in that context, it needs repentance before there can be forgiveness.

So when Ananias and Sapphira were judged in this way, the message came through to the people and fear came over all who heard of it. They recognized that if you want to follow the Lord Jesus, you must take it seriously and you must mean what you say, you must live by it. Then the reality will be developed in your life.

I want now to concentrate on how a life of quality and devotion to God will illustrate effectively the message of the gospel and help us to appreciate what it means. It will be effective in transmitting the message of the gospel.

Mark 14: 3-9

- 3 While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining *at the table*, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; *and* she broke the vial and poured it over His head.
- 4 But some were indignantly *remarking* to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted?"
- 5 "For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and *the money* given to the poor." And they were scolding her.
- 6 But Jesus said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me.
- 7 "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me.
- 8 "She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial.
- 9 "Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

This is a passage that contains many very meaningful spiritual realities. But today, I want to concentrate on one aspect of it and that has to do with what the Lord Jesus said in **verse 9**: "Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her."

When the Lord Jesus says, "Truly I say to you", generally, you can say He was seeking to emphasize what He was going to say: it is something of particular importance He wanted the hearers to pay special close attention. "Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her." This is a very special expression relating to what a person has done.

The Lord Jesus linked what this woman had done with the preaching of the gospel.

Why was that so? Why did He put it in this way?

Is it that this woman had done something extremely important, valuable, very, very precious to God, surpassing all others?

I do not think that that is what He was trying to communicate, but it is true that there was quality, significant quality, in what the woman had done.

As I see in the context, the Lord Jesus associated the gospel with “what this woman has done” because what she did helped to express the meaning of the gospel: The way she conducted herself, the attitude with which she responded to the situation, the direction of what she was seeking to do, they spoke of the message of the gospel.

The purpose of the gospel is to help us to come to know who God is, to come to know how we have strayed, how we should turn away from the self-life to learn to focus on God, to follow the path of righteousness, to love Him, to live for Him, to walk in His ways, to be identified with Him and to express our love and devotion to Him. The message of the gospel helps us to appreciate God’s love and kindness to us and how we are so deeply grateful to Him and we want to honour Him in our lives.

All these various aspects come through in this event.

Let us consider: What is the central aspect?

The central aspect that comes through, I see, is in the direction of a meaningful identification with the Lord and an undistracted devotion to the Lord. It gives us a picture of that, not just in the outward forms of things but also from the heart of this woman, this reality is transmitted.

This is in contrast with what very often happens in the lives of believers, where we can be very preoccupied with ourselves and we can be so easily distracted by the things in the world.

We see in this situation that what this woman did was identified with the Lord Jesus in terms of His central mission: the death on the cross. The Lord Jesus said, "She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial." We do not know to what extent this woman understood this, to what extent she appreciated the meaning of the cross. But what she did was in that direction. There was this aspect that the Lord Jesus recognized and He highlighted it: "she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial." The burial took place after the cross. He was going to die on the cross.

While His disciples could not quite understand the meaning of His dying on the cross – His disciples were still occupied with arguing who was the greatest – this woman was preoccupied with the Lord.

She was very concerned about what was going to happen to Him: His death, His burial. It is quite possible that this woman might have been with the Lord Jesus in various situations. Perhaps, she could have also contributed to His physical needs and she could have heard some aspects of what the Lord Jesus had said about His death.

Whatever it is, we see that the Lord appreciated it. The Lord recognized that it was something meaningful. There was a oneness of heart, something that the Lord Jesus could say, "Good! This is something that is meaningful to Me."

This was in contrast to the others who were observing. They were indignant and they were saying to one another, "Why has this perfume been wasted?" Yes, various of them had concerns for the poor, to help the poor. But they did not appreciate the moral and spiritual meaning and direction of what she was doing and they were scolding her.

On the other hand, the Lord Jesus was very appreciative and He said, "Let her alone; why do you bother her? You should not be scolding her. She has done a good deed to Me. What she has done is a good deed to Me. You may be preoccupied with helping the poor, but do you understand what is going on in My life? Do you understand what is the mission I come for? Do you appreciate what it means to be devoted to Me?"

This woman appreciated that and we see in this situation, what she did was an active expression of her love and devotion to the Lord. It was something that came from a heart of love and devotion. And it is very likely that it was also an expression of deep gratitude. She had received help from the Lord and she was very grateful. She wanted to express that love and devotion to the Lord by pouring this perfume on Him.

We also see that she was very focused in what she was doing. While many of us may say we love the Lord and we do many things; from time to time, we remember Him; yet, very often, we can be very easily distracted by the things around us and by many temporal responsibilities. But in this situation, we see that this lady was very focused on the Lord. What she did was directed at the Lord. It was as if she was not aware of the people around and she was not afraid of what they might think and what they might say. She wanted the Lord to know that her heart was with Him.

Of course, we also know that while there is the importance of a deep love for the Lord, we also need wisdom in terms of how we express it in various situations of life. But in this situation, we do not see that she had done anything amiss. There was nothing wrong because the Lord Jesus indicated she had done a good deed and He went on to explain, "For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me."

The Lord Jesus was seeking to help them understand: “Helping the poor is a right thing and you should care for the poor. And you can always help the poor. The poor, there will always be. But do you understand the importance of this critical juncture in My life?”

It was a very important time and the Lord Jesus was going through a time where there would be great spiritual pressure, stress and pain. This is recorded in **Mark 14** – soon after that would be the crucifixion. We are told it was two days before the Passover, so it was just before His crucifixion, and this woman anointed Him in preparation for His death and His burial.

One of the important aspects of the message of the gospel has to do with our focus in life. What do we concentrate on, what are we preoccupied with, what are we concerned about?

We know that Martha was also one who loved the Lord. She wanted to honour Him, to serve Him and to help others. But Martha was distracted by her serving. She was not focused on listening to what the Lord had to say when she was with Mary her sister. While Mary was sitting, listening to the Lord, focused on Him, Martha was affected by her various responsibilities.

We know that the Lord wants us to fulfil our earthly responsibilities: We must be responsible in the things that we ought to do. But it is very important for us to understand that we need to maintain the focus on the Lord no matter what our responsibilities may be.

In the midst of our many responsibilities, our focus must never shift from the Lord.

He is our Lord. We belong to Him, we love Him. Will we always express our gratitude to Him, our love for Him in the things that we do and in the way in which we do it?

If we present our bodies as a living... sacrifice to Him, then it must mean that. That is the direction of our lives. That is the way we ought to live. Whatever we do, it should have this direction.

And we see that she was prepared to give up what was very costly for the Lord. We are told that she came... with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume. Very costly. It could be sold for... three hundred denarii, which could be equivalent to about three hundred days of wages for people. And she was prepared to pour this on the Lord Jesus.

The others considered, and they regarded that this was a waste, but to her, it was something very meaningful as an expression that the Lord Jesus was important and she wanted to give whatever was most precious that she had to Him to express her devotion.

It was an expression of self-giving which is another very major aspect of the message of the gospel. God wants to transform us from self-seeking, self-centred people to self-giving people who love what is good, who are genuinely concerned for the well-being of others, who are preoccupied with God and what He wants to accomplish.

And she was prepared to do what she could. The Lord Jesus said, "She has done what she could". Yes, there may be many other things she could not do, but this is what she could do. And she was prepared to do what she could meaningfully do.

Many of us may think, "I can do very little. I cannot serve God in this or that way that others can." That is a wrong way of looking at life. All of us can do what we could. And the Lord would appreciate that.

In the context of true love for Him, are we prepared to give all that we have and to do all that we could as He guides us and directs us?

And so we see that in seeking to be faithful to the Lord, she was not concerned about the wrong opinions and criticisms of others.

That was because her values had been set right.

Many people are very affected by the opinions of others, comments and criticisms and praises. But for her, her concentration was the Lord. What would the Lord say? Would the Lord be pleased with her? If the Lord were pleased with her, then it did not matter if others were displeased.

And in that context, we can see that she would have been very, very happy because the Lord was glad, the Lord appreciated what she did.

So because of her focus on the Lord, because of her right values, she was not distracted by the situation or by the people.

We can say therefore, that this whole incident is a beautiful expression of the message of the gospel as it takes effect in a person's life and transforms a person to one who deeply and truly loves the Lord.

This quality of undistracted devotion to the Lord on the basis of what is truly good and meaningful and right is very central in what God wants to bring about in our lives.

And here, we can see that in the Scriptures, the apostle Paul was very conscious of this, not only in his own life – we can see the intensity with which he lived his life, focusing on what was meaningful to God – he also sought to impress this upon the people.

And in particular, he wrote to the Corinthians in very strong terms.

1 Corinthians 7: 29-35

- 29 But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none;
30 and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess;
31 and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away.
32 But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord;
33 but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,
34 and *his interests* are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.
35 This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord.

The primary issue that the apostle Paul wanted to communicate in this passage is undistracted devotion to the Lord.

If we do not read this passage carefully, we may come away with the wrong understanding.

Some people may interpret this passage to mean one who is unmarried is more spiritual, more focused on the Lord, concentrates more on the spiritual; the one who is married is distracted and just wants to please wife or husband and cannot properly focus on the Lord, because the apostle Paul wrote in this way: “one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife,” then he says, “The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.”

So the apostle Paul seems to be making statements that this is what happens: When you are married, you will become like that.

But obviously, that is not what he is saying, because he said, “But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none”.

So if you live your life as though you have none, then you do not come under this category. Those who are married, if they are able to live their lives as though they are not married, then they will not be distracted in this way.

What the apostle Paul is trying to say is: “If you are married, the danger of being distracted is very great. It is very easy to be distracted.”

People who may be very earnest, eager, fervent for the Lord before they are married can very readily become preoccupied in their marriage, preoccupied with each other and therefore, lose their focus on the Lord. It can happen very easily.

But it is not true to say that those who are unmarried are more focused on the Lord. There are so many who are single who are absorbed in the world, who are just interested in what they can get out of this world.

So obviously, the apostle Paul is not saying that. He is telling us: “Be careful. If you want to get married, consider carefully. Will it draw you away from the Lord? Are you preoccupied with each other or are you focused on the Lord?”

What he is trying to say is that whether married or unmarried, we are to live our lives with undistracted devotion to the Lord. That is the emphasis of this whole passage.

But at the same time, he tells us there are things in this world that can draw us away from being undistracted in our devotion to the Lord.

And one of these major areas is marriage. Even for people who are positive in their attitudes of heart, they can be easily affected by this.

So we should look at this passage from **verse 29** and see how the apostle Paul emphasized very strongly the principle of “as though”.

“Those who have wives should be as though they had none... those who weep, as though they did not weep... those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice... those who buy, as though they did not possess... those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away”.

So, what he is telling us is that our focus should be on the Lord and on what is of eternal value; this world is passing away. So if you are preoccupied with the things of this world – marrying, giving in marriage; buying, selling; enjoying the things of this world – then you have missed out on the most important aspect of life.

And at the heart of the message of the gospel is to tell us not to be preoccupied with the things of this world but to concentrate on the things of eternity, that which is of eternal value – and that lies in the moral and spiritual realm. Set your minds or set your hearts on the things above, not on the things of the earth.

The apostle Paul is not saying it is wrong to get married, it is wrong to weep, it is wrong to rejoice, it is wrong to buy, it is wrong to use the world. He is not saying that.

He is saying we must not be distracted by these things. We must not be so absorbed in these things that they draw us away from our focus on the Lord.

Therefore, we must live our lives as though all these things are not there. Even in the midst of being involved in all these, it is as if they are not there.

Even when we weep because of certain things that happen in this world, we are not overwhelmed by these things. Our heart is still with the Lord, we are still rejoicing in Him.

Even though we rejoice at some of the things that are happening in this world that are positive, yet our real rejoicing is always in the eternal, that which is of eternal value, not just of the passing things of this world.

So the apostle Paul says, "This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and *to secure* undistracted devotion to the Lord."

Sometimes, we may think: "If I do not do this, if I do not do that, I can then concentrate on the Lord. I do not go to work; I do not go for various of these things in the world; I just concentrate every day - read the Scriptures, pray - concentrate on the Lord..."

Well, there are some people who may do that, like Anna spending many years in fastings and prayers, and it can be appropriate for them.

But in general, God wants us to bring this light to all the world, wherever we are.

Whether it be in the home, at our place of work, in society in general, God wants this light to shine before men. And for it to shine before men, we need to be involved with the people in this world. We need to do the things that many of the people do in this world, but our spirit must be different from theirs.

People of this world pursue the things of this world. They regard these things as so important to them. They spend their time, labour, energy to pursue all this.

But for us, it must not be that way. These are passing things. We should live our lives as though they are not there.

What are we concerned about? The Lord and what is in His heart. Throughout our lives, in all the things that we do, that should be our focus. We are grateful to Him, we love Him, we are devoted to Him, we belong to Him and that is what we concentrate on.

So if we live our lives like that – our heart focused on the Lord and on eternal issues – then the message of the gospel will be beautifully illustrated in the way you live your life: a life transformed by the power of God, a life that has benefited from the grace of God, a life that has changed from one of self-centredness to one of self-giving.

That is the message of the gospel.

And if in that situation, we help people to understand what the Lord Jesus has done for us on the cross, they will begin to appreciate: “So, I understand. This is the message of the gospel – and it is real. It is not just a club that you join, it is not just a society you belong to, it is not just an ideology that you subscribe to, but it is a life, it is a transformation, it is a living reality and it has a certainty, a hope for the future, for eternity.”

So God wants us to become ambassadors for Christ, not just with a title but a living expression that we belong to Him and that our lives will manifest His character.

And so we must appreciate that the message of the gospel does not end when someone says, “I am sorry. I have sinned, I need forgiveness. I come to the Lord, I receive the Lord Jesus as my Saviour. Now, I can go to heaven.” It does not end there.

It continues – a path of transformation, increasing development of quality of our being, deeper identification with the Lord, a more meaningful friendship with Him where God can trust us and entrust to us what is important to Him.

This is the message that we should also bring to people, so that they understand. We are not just asking them to say, “I am sorry. I repent, I receive Christ, I am going to heaven.”

It is a whole lifetime and throughout eternity.

And so the apostle Paul told the Galatians: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you”.

The apostle Paul was not satisfied with many people turning to the Lord as a result of his preaching. Many Galatians responded, many Corinthians responded, but the apostle Paul was very grieved, he was very sad, he was very concerned.

And he said his labour could be in vain. If they did not deal with the flesh, if they did not deal with the self-life, if they were not transformed, then his labour could be in vain. He was “in labor... again... until Christ is formed in you”.

When Christ is formed in us – Christ... the hope of glory – then there will be glory in our being, the light will shine and people will see Christ in the way we live our lives.

And that is where the message of the gospel will come through with effectiveness, with power and with beauty.

Let us, as we come before the Lord, ask Him to help us to appreciate the importance of our lives illustrating the message of the gospel and our lives transmitting the message of the gospel.

Let us thank God that in spite of all our deficiencies and failures, He can still work through us, He can still speak through us to help others, but let us not be satisfied with that.

Let us seek to transmit that reality because we love Him, because we are faithful to Him, because we have chosen to follow Him and to be faithful to Him.

Let us ask the Lord to help us to deepen in our love for Him and to learn to be more strongly focused on Him, whatever we may be going through, whatever may happen to us.