

No
compromise



No compromise

by Brian Johnston



1. Is obedience really too hard?

As a man walked home one day, he found a wallet someone had lost in the street. He picked it up and searched it for identification in order to be able to contact its owner. But he only found three dollars and a crumpled letter that looked as if it had been in there for years. The envelope was worn, and the return address was almost the only thing that remained legible. Then he saw the date: 1924. The letter had been written almost sixty years earlier! It was a girl's handwriting to someone whose name appeared to be Michael, whom it seemed she was never to see again, because her mother had said their friendship was to stop. She was writing to say that she would still always love him, and signed off as Hannah.

It was a beautiful letter, but there was no way to identify the owner of the wallet, except for the name Michael. But there was one lead – for Hannah had put a return address! The telephone exchange confirmed there was a phone listing for that address on the envelope, and the supervisor said as a courtesy, she'd call the number, and explain the

situation. The woman on the other end of the line said they'd bought their house from a family who did have a daughter named Hannah – but that was thirty years ago. But then she added that they'd kept in touch and she happened to know that Hannah had placed her mother in a certain nursing home some years ago. Well, this in turn led to another 'phonecall (this time to the nursing home), during which it was explained that the old lady had passed away some years ago – but the home did have a 'phone number for where the daughter might be living. Phoning that number next, revealed the fact that Hannah herself was now living in a nursing home! And so it was that the finder of the wallet finally came to call the nursing home in which Hannah was supposed to be living – to be told "Yes, Hannah is staying with us." It was by now already 10 p.m., but he asked if



he could come to see her. The night nurse and a guard greeted him at the door, and they went up to the third floor of the large building. In the day room, the nurse introduced the finder of the wallet to Hannah. She was a sweet, silver-haired old lady with a warm smile and a twinkle in her eyes. He told her about finding the wallet and showed her the letter. The second she saw it, she took a deep breath and said, "This letter was the last contact I ever had with Michael. I loved him very much. But I was only sixteen at the time and mother felt I was too young." "Yes," she continued, "Michael Goldstein was a wonderful person. If you should find him, tell him I think of him often. And ..." she hesitated for a moment, "... I never did marry. I guess no one ever matched up to Michael ..."

When the security guard enquired how his visit to Hannah had been, the man, now on his way out, explained the whole story about how it had really all been about trying to locate the owner of a wallet he'd found. He produced the wallet, and when the guard saw it, he immediately said, "Hey, wait a minute! That's Mr. Goldstein's wallet. I'd know it anywhere with that bright red lacing. He's always losing it. I must have found it in the halls at least three times already. He's one of the old-timers on the

eighth floor. That's Mike Goldstein's wallet for sure. He probably lost it on one of his walks."

And so a hurried visit was immediately paid to the day room on the eighth floor! The same nurse went over to Mr. Goldstein who put his hand in his back pocket and confirmed his wallet was missing, and that the one being offered to him, was indeed his. The finder of the wallet then admitted that he'd read the letter – explaining he had done so in the hope of finding out who owned the wallet – and then he added: "Not only did I read it, but I think I know where Hannah is." The old man smiled and asked, "Could you tell me where she is? I was so in love with that girl that when that letter came, my life seemed to end. I never married. I guess I've always loved her."

Soon the elevator was making its way down from the eighth to the third floor. The hallways were darkened, but one or two night lights lit the way to the day room, where Hannah was still watching television alone. The nurse walked over to her. "Hannah," she said softly, pointing to Michael, who was waiting in the doorway. "Do you know this man?" She adjusted her glasses, looked for a moment, but didn't say a word. Michael said softly, almost in a whisper, "Hannah, it's Michael.

Do you remember me?" She gasped. "Michael! I don't believe it! Michael! It's you! My Michael!" He walked slowly toward her, and they embraced. About three weeks later, they were married – with all the people at the nursing home joining in the celebration. They were given their own room, and a seventy-six-year-old bride and a seventy-nine-year-old groom acted like the two teenagers they'd been when they were forced to part sixty years before. (THE WALLET by Arnold Fine, Readers Digest, 1985).

Think of it. A young man loved his girl so much that he stayed faithful to her and remained single his whole life long because he couldn't love another woman the same way. And a teenage woman remained true to her first love, even as she obeyed her parents' wishes.

By contrast, the apostle John wrote to some Christians who had left their first love (Revelation 2:4). And James wrote to Christians who had failed to remain faithful to the Lord, but who had become friends of the world instead (James 4:1-5).

One day long ago, God asked the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah (ch.35), to visit a small group of people called the Rechabites, to invite them to the temple and, in a side room there, to offer them

wine to drink. Jeremiah makes the arrangements and brings them in. He brings out a tray of glasses filled with wine, just as God had instructed him. But then, most likely, he noticed a sense of discomfort among his guests. "I'm sorry," says the leader of the group. "Didn't you know that we don't drink wine and haven't done so for generations? One of our ancestors, a devout man, commanded us never to drink wine. To this day, we never drink wine."

Perhaps Jeremiah was then puzzled as to why God had asked him to do this. Then, in effect, God explained: "I just wanted you to see a living example of how it's possible even for an earthly father to command obedience that lasts for generations. But I've spoken to my people again and again, but they've not obeyed me – but just kept on making excuses for not serving me."

A human being can be determined enough to follow an earthly leader. By the sheer power of the human will, and by rigid discipline, a man can observe a really tough set of rules. **What then does that say about Christians, who – despite the 'regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5) still live unfaithful, disobedient lives?**

It's hard to understand how we can compare so unfavourably with unbelievers in this regard. Until, that is, we go back to look again at what James really says in its entirety. He asks:

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:1-4).

It's hard to think of this being the behaviour of believers. But it was. Believers become special targets of the Adversary, and he uses our own lust to bring us down (James 1:14,15). These were believers whose 'flesh' or sinful nature was out of control. And James goes on to tell them (v.5) that the Bible's always reminding us that our human spirit, as influenced by our fallen (flesh) nature, tends only to envy and lust – and that's what's behind the fact that we're never satisfied: with the grass on the other side always seeming to be

greener than where we're standing. When we find that happening, it's because our flesh, our fallen, sinful nature, is exerting a greater influence on us than God's Holy Spirit is exerting on us. The remedy is found in the uncompromising words of the Lord Jesus Christ when he said:

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23).

Notice the uncompromising self-effacing; self-denying; self-sacrificing message of those words ... but, yes, crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24) makes possible our living and walking by the Spirit – praying also that we may be *strengthened with power through His Spirit* in our inner being (Ephesians 3:16) ... to the end that we'll discover that God really ... *is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we [currently do] ask or think, according to the power that [already] works within us.* (Ephesians 3:20)

Let's ask for more of God's power that's already at work within us so that, by living according to the Spirit and not according to the flesh (Romans 8), we'll be able to obey and stay faithful, never leaving our first love.

2. A shocking case of mistaken identity

On April 26 in 2006 tragedy struck Taylor University in Upland, Indiana in the US. Students and staff were travelling back to campus in a college van when an out of control truck hit them head-on. Four students and a staff member died instantly. Funerals were held and the bereaved families mourned their losses.

The VanRyn family received word that their daughter, Laura, though seriously injured and in a coma, had survived the crash – the only student to do so. The entire family rushed to the hospital and kept watch day and night over their daughter. The crash had badly injured and disfigured her.

As the days went by, Laura began to open her eyes and gradually she began to speak. Her family rejoiced at the progress she was making. But then she started to say some really strange things. Her boyfriend felt confused and started asking questions. But they reassured themselves that the strange things she was saying were all due to her head

injuries. But when they called her by name she kept shaking her head, and saying her name was not Laura, but Whitney. Oddly enough there had been a Whitney in the van, but she'd been one of those killed outright at the scene of the crash. Her family had already buried her. Why did Laura keep referring to herself as Whitney?

Then, after comparing dental records, officials uncovered a huge blunder. Someone at the scene had wrongly identified the lone student survivor as Laura. In fact, Laura VanRyn was dead. The young woman in the rehabilitation centre was not Laura, but Whitney Cerak.

Laura's family revealed that they'd suspected that the patient in the hospital was not their daughter for several days before they'd informed officials. Soon after the accident, the Van Ryns had in fact noticed several indications that Whitney was not Laura – such as discovering the difference in Whitney Cerak's teeth and her navel piercing (which Laura Van Ryn did not have), and then of course

Whitney Cerak later stated that her name was Whitney, not Laura, after coming out of her coma. Laura's parents revealed that family friends eventually had expressed concerns that the woman they were caring for was not their daughter. The father said Whitney had accused them of being 'false parents'. Finally, when Whitney told Laura's sister the name of her parents, Newell and Colleen, it was then finally that Laura's parents notified officials of the tragic mistake – more than a month after the accident. They explained their actions by stating that they were convinced by medical personnel that Whitney really was their daughter, but also that emotional distress had kept them from realizing the truth sooner.

The coroner had failed to positively identify all the victims, and soon announced his retirement. The incident made international headlines as a shocking case of mistaken identity between two of the victims. Laura Van Ryn, who died on the scene, was mistaken for the surviving Whitney Cerak. This was due to Whitney Cerak being in a coma for a couple of weeks, a minor resemblance between the two women, swelling to Whitney's face, and the fact that her family had been reluctant to personally identify the body. Whitney's (actually Laura's) funeral had been

conducted with a closed casket, and the mistake was not discovered until Whitney identified herself after waking up from a coma a month later.

We can only imagine the shifting emotions between the two families involved. One family thought their daughter was dead but found out that she was actually alive; while the other family, having initially rejoiced at the survival of their daughter, later discovered that she'd actually died at the crash scene.

A mistake like this traumatizes, not least because we derive our identity from relationships. Without them, I cannot be me. But, who am I? Before we put our faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour, we were previously identified with Adam, the first human whom God created. We were, as the Bible says, 'in Adam'. Adam, of course, as the Bible's first book reveals, sinned by disobeying God, his creator. He then became the head of a race of sinful human beings to which we all belonged by natural birth. It's as if God viewed us as sinning in and with Adam, the first man.

That's unfair, you might think. But only if the story ended there. We thank God, the Bible is the story of two men, the second being Jesus Christ, God's Son sent from heaven. He became also truly human, and was

without any personal sin. He offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins when he died on the cross. All those who are joined to him by faith, by a new spiritual birth, are viewed by God as also dying with Christ to the penalty of sin.

The cross of Christ divides between two races of humans: sinners, headed up by Adam; and believers made right with God, and headed up by Christ. This is the only 'racism' that has any validity, because we all belong to the one human race, we are all of one blood. When we come and stand at the cross by faith God takes us out of Adam and places us in Christ.

This effectively happens at our conversion, but the basis for it was laid at the cross. There, in the purposes of God, we were taken from a position of being 'in Adam' and given a new position of being 'in Christ'. We actually become a different person, with a different identity. New thinking; new ambitions; new standards; a new quality of relationships and of behaviour should flow from that real fact.

But do they? Or are people confused as to our true identity?

How can a crash victim's mistaken ID be quickly discovered, but we can spend far longer in worldly company without our Christian ID being discovered?

The Apostle Paul gave the answer when he implied how Christians all too easily become 'conformed to the world' (Romans 12:2). What this means is that the outward appearance of our lifestyle looks a lot like that of the non-Christians living around us. What Paul actually said was: *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* (Romans 12:2)

So, the remedy's there as well as the problem. Into one of our churches recently walked a gipsy Christian – that's a believer belonging to a Roma community. He didn't watch TV, wasn't in touch with the news, but knew all the old hymns, and was very enthusiastic about the Bible and his faith. He wasn't conformed to this world at all. His Christian identity was clear. John Bunyan – who wrote the classic, *Pilgrim's Progress* – also wrote about people like that, he said: "I heard, but ... they were far above, out of my reach. Their talk was about a new birth, the work of God on their hearts ... how God had visited their souls with His love in the Lord Jesus, and with what words and promises they had been refreshed, comforted, and supported against the temptations of the devil ... and methought they spake as if joy did make them speak; they spake with such pleasantness of

Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world, as if they were people that dwelt alone, and were not to be reckoned among their neighbours" (John Bunyan in *Grace Abounding*).

By contrast, how long do people need to be in our company before they discover our true identity? Sure, Bunyan's language there was old-fashioned, and we don't want to appear odd, giving the impression that the Christian message lacks relevance. But if we over-emphasize the value of our street-cred, we lose our message. Christianity isn't meant to be 'cool'. Our Lord taught us to expect that the world will hate us – if it doesn't we're probably not living right. And you know, again we can find an Old Testament example of the same issue: a time when people were unsure whose side David was on, and whether he truly belonged any more among the people of God.

... David arose and fled that day from Saul, and went to Achish king of Gath. But the servants of Achish said to him, "Is this not David the king of the land? Did they not sing of this one as they danced, saying, 'Saul has slain his thousands, And David his ten thousands?'" David took these words to heart and greatly

feared Achish king of Gath. So he disguised his sanity before them, and acted insanelly in their hands, and scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his saliva run down into his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man behaving as a madman. Why do you bring him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this one to act the madman in my presence? Shall this one come into my house?" (1 Samuel 21:10-15)

David found it convenient to disguise his true identity by acting the part of the madman. Whenever we feel intimidated by the worldly company we are in, we can act like we're one of them – but surely that's madness on our part too? Let's come back to sober-mindedness. *And ... not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Romans 12:2). The transforming mentioned is like the word for Christ's own transfiguration: it's a change that comes from within: one which reveals our true identity. This is so different from the type of conforming that's typical of the Devil: which is an outer change that conceals the true identity within. Is your true identity clear?

3. What's your price?

Once in an in-flight magazine there was a feature on ethics. It began with a provocative story which, without doubt, was designed to get the reader's attention – and probably usually succeeded.

The writer described a man on board an aeroplane who propositioned the woman sitting next to him for one million dollars. In other words, he asked this stranger if she would be prepared to sleep with him if he paid her a million dollars. The woman was scandalized that this total stranger would dare to make such an offer. But she pursued the conversation and gradually began to entertain the possibility of how she could so easily become a millionaire.

It wasn't too long before they set the time, the terms, and the conditions. Then just before they were to leave the airplane, the man confessed, saying: "I have to admit that I'd don't really have a million dollars – would just 10 do?"

On the verge of smacking him across the face for such an insult, the woman snapped back, "What do you think I am?"

"That's already been established," he replied. "Now we're just haggling over the price."

Do our principles also have a price limit?

James Patterson and Peter Kim wrote a book entitled *The Day America Told the Truth*. In it they asked the question, "What are you willing to do for \$10,000,000?" They polled a number of Americans to see if they would agree to any of the following in return for receiving \$10,000,000. Here's what they found:

25% would abandon their entire family for 10 million dollars.

25% would abandon their church for 10 million dollars.

23% would become prostitutes for a week or more in exchange for 10 million dollars.

16% would leave their spouses for 10 million dollars.

10% would withhold testimony and let a murderer go



free for 10 million dollars.

7% would murder a stranger for 10 million dollars.

3% would put their children up for adoption for 10 million dollars.

Can you believe that? Two-thirds of all Americans polled would agree to at least one of the conditions for \$10,000,000. What would you be willing to do for \$10,000,000? Hopefully, you'd be among the one-third who would refuse to sell their integrity!

There's a man whom we meet in the Bible who definitely comes into that category. His name is Naboth, and his story is found in 1 Kings 21.

Now it came about after these things that Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard which was in Jezreel beside the palace of Ahab king of Samaria. Ahab spoke to Naboth, saying, "Give me your vineyard, that I may have it for a vegetable garden because it is close beside my house, and I will give you a better vineyard than it in its place; if you like, I will give you the price of it in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid me that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers." So Ahab came into his house sullen and vexed because of the word which Naboth the Jezreelite had spoken to him; for he said, "I will not give you the

inheritance of my fathers." And he lay down on his bed and turned away his face and ate no food. But Jezebel his wife came to him and said to him, "How is it that your spirit is so sullen that you are not eating food?" So he said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if it pleases you, I will give you a vineyard in its place.' But he said, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" (1 Kings 21:1-6)

It was a case of no sale at any price for Naboth. The point we're making is not about sentiment; it's about principle. **How can people like Naboth refuse to compromise at any price, and yet we're sometimes prepared to sell the truth?** I

ask you: "What price are your convictions?" Some people's career takes over their lives; success is like an addiction. Peer pressure puts us under tremendous strain to sell out and compromise Christian standards.

A similar old story out of India has a different twist. It tells of a wealthy man who came into a small village to buy it. Hut by hut, shack by shack, he bought every square inch of the village, except for what belonged to one old man, who refused to sell his hut in the centre of the village. The rich man doubled his offer, not once, but twice, but still the old man refused to sell, saying

he would not sell at any price. The rich man tried to find something the old man would take in exchange for his old hut, but every effort failed. The rest of the village belonged to the rich man, but he couldn't own the old man's hut whatever he tried. Whenever the greedy landowner was showing off his estate to his friends, as they passed through the centre of the village, the old man who'd refused to sell out to him, would step out from his doorway and say to the village-owner's guests: "Don't let him tell you he owns it all, he doesn't own this part of it! This hut right in the middle belongs to me."

Looking at our life from another angle: you may know the Saviour, and you may have been baptized, be a regular at the church services, teaching a Sunday school class, etc., but when you worship God you still hear the taunt of our enemy the Devil saying to you, "Don't forget, there's a bit of you that still belongs to me!" It's sad if our Christian principles have a selling price; and it's also tragic if we won't turn from worldly behaviour at any cost!

The Roman persecution of Christians began during the reign of Nero and persisted until Christianity was recognized as a legitimate religion by the Emperor Constantine some 250 years later. Christians were

denounced as enemies of men and the gods and therefore subject to the severest tortures. Conviction didn't lead inevitably to execution. Pardon would be granted if the Christian threw a few grains of incense on the altar of the pagan god. If this offer was refused, more severe measures such as scourging or other tortures were implemented. If these failed, the victim was led to the circus or amphitheatre and subjected to a horrible death for the amusement of the crowd.

Perpetua was a young woman of noble birth. She was twenty-two, a wife, a mother of a young son and a Christian. In the city of Carthage in North Africa on March 7 of the year 203 she was put to death for her religious convictions. Her story comes to us from three eyewitness accounts written shortly after her death.

Perpetua was one of five Christians condemned to death in the arena. Perpetua's father was a pagan and often came to the prison (many times with her son in his arms) – he came to plead with his daughter to renounce her religion and save her life – but all to no avail. It appears that we have on record a transcript of a conversation she had with her father while she waited for her death.

"When I was in the hands of the persecutors, my father in his tender solicitude tried hard to pervert me from the faith. "My father," I said, "You see this pitcher. Can we call it by any other name than what it is?"

"No," he replied. "Nor can I call myself by any other name than that of Christian." "Daughter," he said, "Have pity on my gray hairs ... Do not give me over to disgrace. Behold [your] brothers, [your] mother, and [your] aunt: behold [your] child who cannot live without [you]. Do not destroy us all." My father, kiss[ed] my hands, and thr[ew] himself at my feet. And I wept because of my father, for he alone of all my family would not rejoice in my martyrdom. So I comforted him, saying: "In this trial what God determines will take place. We are not in our own keeping, but in God's." So he left me – weeping bitterly."

On March 7, Perpetua and her four companions were led to the arena where the crowd demanded they should be scourged. Then a boar, a bear and a leopard were set loose on the men; while the women were attacked by a wild bull. Wounded, Perpetua was then put to the sword. She didn't sell out. She held fast to her convictions, and became an inspiring example of integrity.

When king David's son, Absalom rebelled against him, David commanded his generals to spare his son's life in the inevitable battle. Absalom's forces were defeated, and Absalom himself fled, but soon found himself trapped. One soldier loyal to David saw him and reported his whereabouts to one of the generals, a man called Joab ...

Then Joab said to the man who had told him, "Now behold, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? And I would have given you ten pieces of silver and a belt." The man said to Joab, "Even if I should receive a thousand pieces of silver in my hand, I would not put out my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king charged you and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Protect for me the young man Absalom!'" (2 Samuel 18:11-12)

Not for 10 nor even a 1000 pieces of silver would that man have disobeyed his king's command. What about us? I'm privileged to know some Christians who've passed this test magnificently. But, what about us? Would we dare to disobey one of our Lord's commands if someone offered us \$10 million?

4. A love that's real

I remember hearing about a time when a room full of people was asked what the most important question was. Finally, one man thoughtfully replied: "The most important thing to know is the answer to the question: Am I loved?" He explained his thinking like this: if the answer was 'no,' then none of life's accomplishments really mattered; but if the answer was 'yes' – meaning we knew we were loved – then we could endure great ordeals and hardships. There's a lot of truth in that. We've been designed with a capacity to give and receive love: to be in a web of supportive relationships. It's when a man's progress at the office comes at the expense of his family life that he discovers – often sadly too late – that relationships matter more than achievements.

On that tragic day, the 11th of September, 2001, there are many records of the last 'phone transmissions from people in the doomed twin towers or from those captive in the planes that were being flown as lethal weapons into those towers in that sickening act of terrorism. None of these final messages

enquired about the size of one's bank balance or if promotion was imminent. Three words spoken in every message were: "I love you."

As I travel, I often get asked the question: 'Why did God allow sin to enter his perfect creation?' My answer invariably is that God could certainly have avoided it had he so chosen. He could have created an assembly line of beings who were incapable of making wrong moral choices: a robotic race that could do nothing but love him. And so they would love God for ever, simply because they had no other choice. But how meaningful would that be? The man quoted earlier about knowing we're loved as being the most important thing wasn't thinking about a forced kind of love. Love is all about choices. People need to know the love they experience is real – as the following story illustrates.

Six minutes to six, said the great round clock over the information booth in



Grand Central Station. The tall young Army lieutenant, who had just come from the direction of the tracks, lifted his sunburned face, and narrowed his eyes to note the exact time. His heart was pounding with a beat that shocked him because he couldn't control it. In six minutes, he would see the woman who had filled such a special place in his life for the past thirteen months, the woman he'd never seen, yet whose written words had sustained him.

Five minutes to six. He placed himself as close as he could to the information booth. Lieutenant Blandford remembered one night in particular, in the worst of the fighting, when his plane had been caught in the midst of a pack of enemy aircraft. He'd even seen the grinning face of one of the enemy pilots. In one of his letters, he'd confessed to the woman he was now waiting to meet that he often felt fear, and only a few days before this battle, he had received her answer: "Of course you fear ... all brave men do. Didn't King David know fear? That's why he wrote the 23rd Psalm. Next time you doubt yourself, I want you to hear my voice reciting to you: 'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.'" And he had remembered; he'd heard her

imagined voice, and it had renewed his strength and skill. Now he was going to hear her real voice.

Four minutes to six. His face grew sharp. Under the immense, starred roof, people were walking fast, like threads of colour being woven into a grey web. A girl passed close to him, and Lieutenant Blandford reacted. She was wearing a red flower in her suit lapel, but it was a crimson sweet pea, not the little red rose they had agreed upon as a means of identification. Besides, this girl was too young, about 18, whereas Hollis Meynell had frankly told him she was 30. "Well, what of it?" he had answered. "I'm 32." He was really only 29.

Three minutes to six. His mind went back to that book – that one book out of the hundreds of Army library books sent to the Florida training camp. 'Of Human Bondage', it was; and throughout the book were notes in a woman's writing. He'd always hated that writing-in-habit, but these remarks were different. He'd never believed that a woman could see into a man's heart so tenderly, so understandingly. Her name was on the bookplate: Hollis Meynell. He'd got hold of a New York City telephone book and found her address. He'd written; she had answered. Next day he'd been

shipped out, but they'd gone on writing.

Two minutes to six. For thirteen months, she had faithfully replied, and more than replied. When his letters didn't arrive she wrote anyway, and now he believed he loved her, and she loved him. But she'd refused all his pleas to send him her photograph. She'd explained: "If your feeling for me has any reality, any honest basis, what I look like won't matter. Suppose I'm beautiful. I'd always be haunted by the feeling that you had been taking a chance on just that, and that kind of love would disgust me. Suppose I'm plain (and you must admit that this is more likely), then I'd always fear that you were going on writing to me only because you were lonely and had no one else. No, don't ask for my picture. When you come to New York, you'll see me and then you'll make your decision. Remember, both of us are free to stop or to go on after that – whichever we choose ..."

One minute to six – Lieutenant Blandford's heart leaped higher than his plane had ever done. A young woman was coming toward him. Her figure was long and slim; her blond hair lay back in curls from delicate ears. Her eyes were blue as flowers, in her pale green suit, she was like springtime come alive. He moved toward her, entirely forgetting to

notice that she was wearing no rose, and as he moved, a small, provocative smile curved her lips. "Going my way, soldier?" she murmured. Uncontrollably, he made one step closer to her. Then he saw Hollis Meynell.

She was standing almost directly behind the girl, a woman well past 40, her greying hair tucked under a worn hat. She was more than plump; her thick-ankled feet were thrust into low-heeled shoes. But she wore a red rose in the rumpled lapel of her brown coat. The girl in the green suit was walking quickly away. Blandford felt as though he were being split in two, so keen was his desire to follow the girl, yet so deep was his longing for the woman whose spirit had truly companioned and upheld his own; and there she stood. Her pale, plump face was gentle and sensible; he could see that now. Her grey eyes had a warm, kindly twinkle. Lieutenant Blandford did not hesitate. His fingers gripped the small worn, blue leather copy of 'Of Human Bondage', which was to identify him to her. This wouldn't be love, but it would be something precious, something perhaps even rarer than love – a friendship for which he'd been and must ever be grateful. He squared his broad shoulders, saluted and held the book out toward the woman, although even while he spoke he felt

shocked by the bitterness of his disappointment. "I'm Lieutenant John Blandford, and you – you are Miss Meynell. I'm so glad you could meet me. May ... may I take you to dinner?" The woman's face broadened in a tolerant smile. "I don't know what this is all about, son," she answered. "That young lady in the green suit – the one who just went by – begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you asked me to go out with you, I should tell you that she's waiting for you in that big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test. I've got two boys serving with the US armed forces myself, so I didn't mind to oblige you."

God's love for us is real, God's actions at the cross prove that. **But what about our love in response? Even as Christians, our love for the Lord might not even match the calibre of John Blandford's love for Miss Meynell.** And it matters to the Lord. Three times he probes the depth and sincerity of the love of his followers in the space of a few verses in John 14:

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." (John 14:15)

The old hymn says 'trust and obey for it's the only way ...' It's the sure way of showing our love for the Lord. If we don't live true to the Word of God, then the

love we profess for the Lord is suspect. And this is a theme the Lord returns to again in verse 21 when he says ...

"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him."

The rewards of loving the Lord are mentioned. They are: to be loved by the Father in a special way and to receive an enhanced disclosure of the Lord himself. In John 16:27, the Lord again says: the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me. So often here the Father's love for us is bound to our love for the Lord. For the third time in the space of a few verses in John 14, the Lord speaks like this when he says ...

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him." (John 14:23)

Again, love for the Lord is evidenced by obeying the Word, the things we find in the Bible. Far from despising faithfully following God's Word in all that it plainly teaches us – as if it was some technical thing rather than anything spiritual – this is, in fact, the plainest revealed way of showing true heart devotion to

Christ. Perhaps the Lord's challenge to us today is the same simple but profound challenge which he put three times to Peter: when he asked: "Do you love me? Do you truly love me?" When we choose to obey, and to

live biblically, we prove that our love for the Lord is real – and that matters to him – it matters to him very much indeed as the repeated emphasis of John chapter 14 shows.

5. Doing right when no one is watching

Bobby Jones (1902-1971) was a lawyer and amateur golfer. He was also the first to achieve the Grand Slam – meaning he won the four major tournaments in a single year. From 1923 through to 1930 he won thirteen championships in those four annual tournaments – a record, in fact, that was to remain unequalled until Jack Nicklaus broke it in 1973.

But while this clearly proves his golfing skills; it doesn't tell us much at all about the man. There was something even more impressive – and that was his integrity. This was once demonstrated in a national championship. Bobby Jones drove his ball into the woods, and when preparing to play the ball, accidentally nudged it. Although no one saw him move the ball, he penalized himself one stroke, which caused him to lose the game by that same slenderest of margins – by a single stroke. When someone later got to hear about what had happened and praised him for his integrity, he was quite dismissive about it and said, "You might as

well praise a man for not robbing a bank."

That's a very revealing answer. It was as clear-cut as that in his mind. Right was right; and wrong was wrong – no matter what. The scale of the wrong made no difference; nor did it matter whether or not anyone was watching. Integrity is about living by our principles – even when no-one else is watching. It's about doing what is right rather than what we can get away with.

But the question I'd like us to think about is this: **how can others outside of any known intimacy with Christ exhibit such impressive integrity while we struggle?**

Like us, some of the earliest Christians struggled with the issue. The end of Acts chapter 4 and beginning of chapter 5 opens a window for us into what was going on in the first local church of



God in Jerusalem.

... there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 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. 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? 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." And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. Now there elapsed an

interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. (Acts 4:34-5:11)

Ananias and Sapphira were not the persons they pretended to be. We have integrity when we're the good person we appear to be. It's the opposite of hypocrisy. As Socrates (469-399 BC) said, "The greatest way to live with honour in this world is to be what we pretend to be." So integrity is about not projecting a better image of ourselves than is deserved – which is what Ananias and Sapphira were doing.

Integrity, as we've illustrated already, is when the thoughts of our heart are consistent in every way with the actions of our

hands or the words of our lips. Psalm 17 is a psalm of David, where he wrote:

*Hear a just cause, O LORD,
give heed to my cry;
Give ear to my prayer, which
is not from deceitful lips ...
Let my judgment [or decision]
come forth from Your
presence ...
You have tried my heart;
You have visited me by night;
You have tested me and You
find nothing;
I have purposed that my
mouth will not transgress.
... by the word of Your lips I
have kept from the paths of
the violent.
My steps have held fast to
Your paths.
My feet have not slipped ...
(Psalm 17:1-5)*

Here, David is conscious of his own integrity before God while surrounded by enemies. He's asking God to hear his righteous cause, to hear to his prayer. This is the honest prayer of a genuinely righteous man, and so its effectiveness is guaranteed.

A life of integrity before God doesn't just materialize all by itself. David had resolved not to sin, and was determined to keep himself separate from the ways of the world, the ways of those who destroy. His life, he says,

had been modelled on God's Word. And because David's words here are found among God's inspired writings, we can be totally sure this is an accurate assessment of himself and not just empty boasting or him simply being generous with himself.

I came across a modern example of that when I discovered an article commemorating the birthday of evangelist Billy Graham. Religious News Service writer, Randall Balmer, wrote of Graham's integrity saying that in Graham's lifetime there have been many other evangelists who have fallen because of various moral indiscretions. But throughout a long career there had never been a serious charge of financial, sexual, or any other kind of wrong-doing levelled against Graham. By all accounts this was a state of affairs that was not simply left to materialize. Early in his career Graham gathered his associates into a hotel room to discuss how they might avoid some of the pitfalls that had, sadly, claimed the reputation of other evangelists. Graham resolved never to exaggerate attendance figures at their meetings, to accept only fixed salaries, and set up elaborate precautions to protect themselves from sexual temptation or even the appearance of anything improper. The writer then

suggested that in an age that has seen evangelists fall in all manner of spectacular scandals, Graham's greatest legacy may be his integrity.

As that illustrates, integrity really does take conscious – even planned – effort. In another of his psalms, Psalm 101, David says:

*I will give heed to the blameless way.
When will You come to me?
I will walk within my house in the integrity of my heart.
I will set no worthless thing before my eyes;
I hate the work of those who fall away;
It shall not fasten its grip on me.
A perverse heart shall depart from me;
I will know no evil. (Psalm 101:2-4)*

Like Bobby Jones, with whose story we opened this chapter, the man who did not cheat in the smallest degree when no one was looking, so David says that within his house, when no-one else was looking, he was determined to tolerate no evil in his heart. With an act of his will, he says, 'I will set no worthless thing before my eyes ... I will know no evil.' In these days when the internet brings the

whole world – including potentially a whole world of evil – into our homes and into the privacy of our bedrooms, these words are really worth emphasizing again: 'I will set no worthless thing before my eyes.' What we do when we're alone is the testing ground of our integrity.

David says there, in that psalm, that he hates the work of those who fall away. How interesting here that the work of those who fall away, the work of apostasy, is shown to have the loss of integrity as its root. Failure in the Christian life is like a slow puncture. Falling away doesn't happen suddenly. It begins some time before with a loss of integrity. More positively, as we plan to maintain our integrity – for example by setting no worthless thing before our eyes – we're actually planning to avoid the work of apostasy, or falling away. With sheer determination David says, 'it shall not fasten its grip on me.' David was known in the Bible for the integrity of his heart (Psalm 78:72) – which is shown here to be the opposite of a perverse heart. Our response to the Bible is not only to be intellectual and emotional, but volitional as well. We are to imitate David when he says: 'I will know no evil.'

6. Resisting the Devil

In 1974, a rich heiress by the name of Patty Hearst was kidnapped by a radical group known as the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). There were several negotiation attempts for her release but they all failed. Then it seemed like the next thing we knew was that she was assisting her captors two months later in a bank robbery! She was arrested, and put on trial. During her trial, her defence was that she'd been suffering from what was called Stockholm Syndrome – a condition in which victims become so dependent on their captors that they even become sympathetic to them. Her defence failed however, and Hearst was convicted and sentenced to prison.

We're so easily persuaded by our captor to do his will. Our would-be captor is the Devil (if we allow him). He oppresses us and tries to devour us. But too often we don't even resist, but willingly take part in his evil schemes! It's like a spiritual Stockholm syndrome. When I was reminded of Patty Hearst, I got to thinking about 2 Timothy 2:26 where Paul wrote to Timothy,

Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:22-26)

Do you see what I mean about the Devil taking us captive, and then – all too readily, it seems – we fulfil his agenda, not the Lord's? We can shake our head in disbelief about the actions of someone like Patty Hearst who sided with her captors, but we often fail to see that we do the same. The Devil takes us captive,



and we end up doing his will!

The instructions we've read were those which the apostle Paul gave to Timothy if he was going to be a true servant of Jesus Christ - or as it's put here: the Lord's bond-servant. The role of being the Lord's bond-servant is open to any one of us who puts doing the Lord's will at the forefront of his or her life.

In order to do that, there are things we must run away from. Paul describes them as youthful lusts and avoiding being quarrelsome. And if these are things to run away from, there are also things we're to run after - like righteousness, faith, love and peace, while worshipping with a pure heart. Then there's the kindness, gentleness and patience which is especially necessary when teaching others to know the will of God more carefully - and all the time side-stepping time-wasting debates.

These things can be said in a few words, but living up to them is challenging, isn't it? It's tough even to know sometimes when it's worth continuing a debate. Defending our faith is one thing - and we've got to be prepared to do it. But many engage in debate with us who are not true searchers after truth. They love the sport of debate, but they don't love the truth. In a mountain village in the Far East I

recently met a man like that. He denied Jesus was more than a man. He kept trying to make a big deal out of the fact that the Bible doesn't record Jesus as saying directly, "I am God." After pointing out he was making God a liar by disbelieving the Bible's clear testimony in verses like Titus 2:13 where Jesus is described as 'our great God and Saviour', I had to leave him with the challenge of whether he'd ever in his life said: "I am human." The fact that he hadn't didn't disprove his obvious humanity, of course. But then we have to turn from those who refuse to love the truth, for to continue to answer them simply gives them multiplied reasons for misinterpretation. The servant of the Lord will always experience opposition. It stems from our Adversary the Devil who also tries to directly trap or ensnare us in his schemes. We have to confess he's quite successful. He knows as long as we stay close to God he has no power over us, so he tries to:

- 1) Keep us busy with non-essentials.
- 2) Tempt us to overspend and go into debt.
- 3) Make us work long hours to maintain empty lifestyles.
- 4) Discourage us from spending family time, for when homes

disintegrate there's no refuge from work.

5) Over-stimulate our minds with television and computers so that we can't hear God speaking to us.

6) Fill our coffee tables with newspapers and magazines so we've no time for Bible reading.

7) Flood our mail boxes with promotions and get-rich-quick schemes; to keep us chasing material things.

8) Put glamorous models on television and on magazine covers to keep us focused on outward appearances; that way we'll be dissatisfied with ourselves and our partners.

9) Make sure married couples are too exhausted for physical intimacy; that way we'll be tempted to look elsewhere.

10) Make us over-committed to 'good' causes to the extent we don't have any time for 'eternal' ones.

11) Make us self-sufficient. Keep us so busy working in our own strength that we'll never know the joy of God's power working through us. (W4T 2/12/10)

In any one of these ways, we can be co-opted by the Devil to do his will. He did it with Peter and he did it with Ananias and

Sapphira. With Peter, the Devil got him to concentrate on human, worldly matters. With Ananias and Sapphira, it was a case of exploiting their greed and desire to be seen to be more spiritual than they really were.

We can all too easily fall into the same traps. As our captor, the Devil easily persuades us to do his will.

Too often we don't even resist, but willingly take part in his evil schemes!

As we said when we reviewed the story of Patty Hearst, it's like a spiritual Stockholm syndrome – the term given to the psychological phenomenon when people who've been taken hostage end up switching sides. Bob Dylan once sang a song: 'You gotta serve somebody' and he was right. The Apostle Paul puts it like this in Romans chapter 6:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to

someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:12-18)

Before we came to know Christ, we were slaves to sin. As Jesus said (John 8:34), anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. Even after we're saved, we still sin. In fact, the Apostle John tells us that to say otherwise is to make God a liar (1 John 1:10). There's no sinless perfection this side of heaven. But, by relying on the power of God's indwelling Spirit, there's no longer any reason for sin to dominate our lives as it once did before we came to know Christ. Under the Law, people couldn't gain the mastery over sin in their lives, but we're not under Law, but under grace. This makes a vital practical difference. By the grace of God we can present ourselves to God for his service. We can use our minds and hands to do his will and to advance his purposes in our lives.

We've got to serve somebody. It's a stark choice. Either we're obedient slaves to sinful practices or obedient slaves to righteous living. As baptized followers of Christ – which is the whole context of Romans 6 – it's clear that we should be committed to doing what's right at every opportunity. Paul talks in verse 17 about the form or pattern of teaching. This, of course, is what's known biblically as the Apostles' teaching, which Paul and the other apostles taught as from the Lord himself. The idea here is that this body of Christian doctrine acts like a mould to shape our lives in service for the Lord Jesus. It's not just information for our heads: it's presented here as the way of righteousness (see 2 Peter 2:21). It's precisely obedience to the pattern of biblical teaching set out by the apostles of Christ which defines righteous living. When you pour water in a glass and freeze it, the now frozen water takes the shape of the glass. Just as the water was presented to the glass, we're presented to the pattern of New Testament teaching so that our lives are truly shaped by it to do what's right.

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