



Communion

Not walking in the futility of your mind

Tim Maurice

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Among the many things the Lord has been saying to us in this season, He is saying very clearly that He wants us to be converted from being carnal Christians to being spiritual so that we can be life-givers.

Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest. When we first touch His cross and the Lord meets us, He pulls us out of the miry clay and tells us we now belong to Him (Psalm 40: 2). As we respond in faith to Him, all the ministry of His life is from Him towards us, and that is absolutely necessary because at that point we need to be saved. We need to be rescued. But before we can then give His life to anyone else we also need to be converted.

Our conversion is an ongoing process

Being converted means turning completely from one thing to another. Today, we're going to look at this turning of conversion and see that it is possible for us to receive the saving life of God, and get very excited about it, but

not see the transition He wants us to make from being carnal to being spiritual. As our Great High Priest, He priests His life to us *and* He wants us to be converted to become spiritual people like Him, giving and ministering His life, not just coming to church in a constant state of need - always praying, worshipping and relating to other people from the basis of our self-centred need.

Paul described to the Corinthians what his own transition from needing to giving looked like, telling them, 'I die daily.' (1 Corinthians 15:31). He had joined the eternal priesthood of Christ as a priest with Him of the New Covenant, and we must do the same to become ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

This conversion from carnal to spiritual living was such a difficult thing to understand for the first century Jews, Greeks and others to whom the disciples preached because their hearers had the religious view that the Christian life was in believing the *proposition* of Christianity.

Many of us grew up with just such a vicarious, understanding of the Gospel: that is, accept the Gospel proposition, say the words, and you're saved; you're a Christian. Beyond that, all we thought we had to do was follow our denomination's emphasis, whether speaking in tongues, doing good works, advocating social change or whatever else might have been promoted. But this kind of self-propelled gospel has no power in it, and becomes, in the end, the enemy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we believe that the Gospel is all vicarious, that Jesus suffered and died for our sins so that we don't have to, and we come to church always looking for our own healing, there will be no life produced in us.

Without conversion there is only futility

What, then, does it mean to be changed from carnal to spiritual living? Paul was constantly addressing Christians who were living carnally - whether the Galatians, the Corinthians or the Ephesians to whom Paul had delivered the whole council of God (Acts 20:17). After moving on from Ephesus to other regions, Paul wrote to the Ephesians, praying that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). This enlightening is what we *all* need, because we have a problem. Having received grace from God and feeling we're saved and are living as Christians, we are unable to see or change the fact that we are continuing to walk in the same futility of mind in which we walked before we heard the Gospel. We *add* the Gospel to our lives so that it becomes in us no gospel at all. This is what Paul warned the Ephesians *not* to do:

"...So, this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk in the futility of their mind"
(Ephesians 4:17)

Paul was exhorting them in true testimony, for this was how *he* had been brought to truly meet the Lord. In the context of his teaching about the body of Christ building itself up in love, with every member, every joint supplying (Ephesians 4:16), he was addressing the way they were still walking, urging them to stop walking in the futility of a fallen mind, as those who are in the world walk.

Futility came with the fall

What *is* this futility of the fallen mind? The fallen mind began the moment Adam and Eve chose their own way and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Their eyes were opened (Genesis 3:1-7), but only to another 'reality' that was completely fallen. Up until this point, they had walked in fellowship with Yahweh and been fed by His life and enlightened by His light. In fellowship with Him they were strengthened.

They had not yet been perfected, but they were not corrupting. Yet as soon as they ate the fruit, their eyes were opened to a 'reality' that stripped away the reality that the Lord God had shown them. Their fallen sight was now of a dying universe, a dangerous world in and from which they needed to protect themselves; a world in which they were naked and felt condemned, ashamed and inadequate. Sin had entered them, changing their sight and their thinking from reality to futility.

God subjected them to futility, and although He did so in hope (Romans 8:20), it was nevertheless futility. They fell into the belief that somehow, in their own capacity, they could still find and know God. They believed that somewhere in themselves, in what they could see, in what their senses could touch, in what their intellect could uncover or in what their abilities could achieve, they could overcome the elements and bend creation to their will.

This futility of belief drives *our* thinking and our minds, too. It is as natural to us as breathing.

Futility in us all

When these things entered the mind and heart of man, man's sight became what God calls blindness. Spiritual blindness and spiritual death, locking man into futile beliefs that are utterly incapable of delivering; darkened minds that cannot save themselves and are incapable of arriving at the truth; minds that have no capacity whatsoever to find out the way of God yet do not perceive the absolute vanity of their trying to do so and the certainty of failure at every attempt. That is futility! It doesn't matter how many times or how hard we try, it can't be done, yet our natural minds innately believe it *can* be done.

If we merely put the Gospel on top of our natural, fallen minds, we won't be able to stop thinking in this futile way. Just because we believe that Jesus died for our sins, have we stopped all belief that what *we* think of something or someone is the paramount measure? When we believed, did we stop taking offense at anything or anyone? Did we stop treating our own issues as the biggest issues in life? In the world? Did we immediately stop pursuing our version of success and goodness? Our own survival? We didn't stop all that, did we? We feel the pressures of *all* these things.

How, then, do we deal with the futility of our minds? We know that 'pie in the sky when you die' is not going to help us. Neither is 'just hanging on in there', resigned to the belief that things aren't going to get any better in this life but after we die, if we go to heaven, everything will be perfect. That's *not* the Gospel - it's futility of mind.

Let me ask you, are you living life and coming to church, week in and week out, feeling and knowing that you're not changing? Would that

not be futile, keeping on unfruitfully walking the same way and doing and trying the same things because that's what you first received or grew up with? Most of us Christians, really, still do things the way we first received them in our experience and training. Even praying. Many people think that the one thing *everyone* knows how to do is pray, but that is not actually the case. As the Scripture says:

"...we do not know how to pray as we should"
(Romans 8:26).

Praying and walking by the Spirit

We actually *don't* know how to pray! We need to pray in the Spirit, and to do so, we need to learn. Who can we learn from? Well, we have Three who can teach us - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - and they are the best Ones in the world to learn from! We can learn from them in the secret place of prayer from one another as we walk together in fellowship (Psalm 91:1, Matthew 6:6).

It is possible to pray in ways that are utterly ineffectual - demanding that God meet our needs; looking to God to shore us up when we're not coping; deciding for ourselves what good things God should do, believing that whatever *we* think is good must be good and that He will therefore give us the 'good' we ask for. There are all kinds of ways we can pray, but many, if not most of our prayers come naturally from our anxieties.

Peter tells us, and absolutely means it, that our prayers can be hindered (1 Peter 3:7). If we pray from our own carnality, our prayers will not be answered. That might seem a bit tough if we've accepted Christ and come to Him. The problem is, we're still trapped in this futility of mind because of the blindness of our heart.

"[the gentiles are] darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God"

because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness [or blindness] of their heart;” (Ephesians 4:18)

Just as Paul entreated the Ephesians, so the Lord is entreating us: ‘Don't be trapped that way! Don't live that way!’ God wants to *deal* with this in us, for we were not necessarily delivered from blindness of heart the moment we prayed the sinner’s prayer. No doubt we were delivered from *some* blindness, but not from the complete futility of mind that Paul is talking about. How do we know that this is so? Because we run into the futility of our minds all the time! We get frustrated; we become offended; we get angry; we can't cope; we're disappointed; we expect things to be as we think they should be. Our expectations are among the more obvious signs that we're not walking by the Spirit but are being led by our flesh and are therefore living in a futile manner. We need to be set free from this very carnal way of living!

Paul wrote to the Galatians:

“...if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;” (Galatians 6:1).

Paul knew that those who are carnal cannot restore anyone, since man’s flesh cannot priest God’s life. We cannot priest something we do not have! We are not made ministers of His life merely by believing a proposition, learning a religious ceremony, saying a few words and reading our Bibles.

God is mercifully coming to us, showing us the carnality of our Christian living and calling out to us, ‘Let Me deliver you from that futility so you can be set free to be a priest before Me!’

Paul describes two different creations: an old and a new (2 Corinthians 5:17), and two lives: the

life of the first living soul Adam and the life of the last life-giving Spirit, Christ.

“The first man Adam became a living soul. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” (1 Corinthians 15:45).

The first man, a living soul, can create beautiful things. He can make music, write poetry, paint pictures. If he’s really smart, he can develop and run a moderately functional society. But whatever his natural capabilities, he cannot become a life-giving spirit. He cannot bring himself to birth by his own understanding. That is an impossibility for him.

The futility we often fall into is that we hear the word of God and then go home and try to work out with our minds how to apply it to our lives. I'm not saying it's futile to think about the word of God! I hope *everyone* thinks about the word we hear each week, because this is our spiritual food for the week ahead. But *I am* saying that trying to think our way to obedience tends only to produce anxiety. The word of God can only be applied in our lives as we pray by the Spirit, with a patience and perseverance that goes further than a few minutes' prayer a day.

Joining the prayer of Christ

Each of us must wait upon the Lord and find a fellowship in prayer with Him, a fellowship that takes us past our perceived and immediate needs. Finding this is like pushing through heavy undergrowth to get onto an open plain where we can begin to see distinct figures, things, and issues; where we can see what the Lord is pointing to; what He's pointing *us* to. When we pray in the Spirit, our hearts are quietened before the Lord and He begins to speak. We stop imposing our own perspective and seeking our own view of what is needed, moving from, ‘Please do this; please

do that; I need this; they need that' to a place of fellowship with Christ, where His travail becomes our travail and what is on His heart is shared with our heart.

As you join Christ's prayer, He prays in you for other people. He gives you His heart and prayer for people and situations. This is not a religious exercise in which you become an all-wise benefactor who knows what others need or should do, or how you will help them. Rather, as you pray with the Lord for them, you are joining His desire and purpose for them in the circumstances they are going through. Wonderfully, as you join His prayer, you will also find that He addresses things in your own life.

When people under pressure wonder, 'Why is this happening?', we can answer truly, 'I don't know, but God does.' The full answer to all the matters of life for all of us is found in Him. But how often and how quickly we revert to the futility of our own minds by trying to have the answer in ourselves! 'Well, I think this or that; I reckon you need to do such and such a thing', and so on and so forth and on and on we go - the old man making his judgements and speaking his futility.

Paul has a lot to say about this in his letter to the Ephesians. He exhorts us not to live this way, which leads to sin.

"...and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness." (Ephesians 4:19)

The reason we get drawn back into elements of sin is that when we are partaking of the world, thinking it is life, our eyes are darkened. Thinking and operating the way the world does, we get drawn into corruption very quickly.

"...But you did not learn Christ this way, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus..." (Ephesians 4:20-21).

Where are taught by Christ? Primarily, in prayer. Although He teaches us through our lives, He also teaches us very specifically through prayer. We can hear His voice speaking personally to our heart and teaching us when we meet with Him in the Secret Place of prayer.

Paul continues:

"...[you have been taught] that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit" (Ephesians 4:22).

Our former manner of life, the old self that is corrupting and must be laid aside, is not just the pantheon of things we think are bad. It includes the futility of our minds. This is the way God sees it, and we need to see it the way He does.

God defines our sin

We are not to rationalise everything we do. The old self is being corrupted because the lusts of our flesh deceive us. Paul knew this, writing:

"For sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me" (Romans 7:11).

So, what might they be, these deceitful lusts of *your* flesh? Well, you won't even know until you pray in the Spirit; until you've begun to really touch the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Then* God will show you. He may also lead you to know through the different circumstances He tailors for you, and through the messengers He sends to you. He will put His finger on a lustful desire and lovingly say,

‘There! Right there.’ You may find yourself rearing up in anger or reaction at the sight of it; you may revert to a vicarious gospel to justify yourself and bury it. ‘*Everyone* sins, so don’t worry about it!’ But God will be calling to you, ‘Stand fast now. I am going to work on you. Can you see what is in you? Will you see it, specifically, just as I am showing you, so that I can heal you and deliver you from this futile way of thinking?’

Please understand! We *cannot* work out our futile thinking, not can we deliver ourselves from it. It is by the Spirit we are delivered. That is why the Scripture tells us:

“...if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness;” (Galatians 6:1).

A man who is caught in a trespass, who doesn’t know what he is doing, needs those who are spiritual to walk with him. If those who are carnal are let loose on him, piling Scripture verses on him and telling him what to do, it will achieve nothing. Trying to absolve or excuse him with claims of the blood of Jesus will not help him either. The Lord’s restoration of him, and us, does not lie in making people feel better. His plan is that we be restored, healed and recovered in the inner man. Do you believe that? If you don’t, then the gospel you believe is a futile gospel.

Why do we fast and pray? Is it not to join the fellowship of Christ’s offering, participating in His faith?

“Therefore, we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

The inner man is being renewed to what God wants to see renewed in us so that we can priest the life of God to somebody else. Hallelujah! That is the Gospel, and it delivers.

God wants to deliver every one of us from the futility of our mind. That is the point Paul was making to the Ephesians:

1:18 “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened...”

3:15-16; 4:23 “[I ask the Father that] He would grant you...to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man...[and] renewed in the spirit of your mind,”

He makes the same point in Romans:

“...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2)

We need to have our eyes opened by the Spirit; we need to be illuminated by the Spirit so that we can join the faith of God towards us, and the faith of God towards other people. Joined to His faith we won’t be wondering any more what we should be doing. We’ll be doing it, because we’ll be walking by the Spirit.

“...be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” (Ephesians 4: 23-24)

It is *our* action, in faith, to put off the old man. And by putting off the old man we are being renewed in the spirit of our mind (Romans 12:1). This is *so* important! If we don’t put this off, the futility of our mind will *always* take over and put the Gospel under it. If Satan can’t cause us to disbelieve in Christ, he will just put the life and light of Christ in us under a dark blanket so that no one ever sees it and we just become religious, always frustrated and not making any progress.

Receiving and speaking truth

Are you frustrated today? If so, I guarantee you are touching futility. What is God saying to

you? He is getting very specific with us, and every one of us must be very specific with the Lord about what He is saying. To hear what He will say to you, you will need to go and pray.

“Therefore, laying aside falsehood, speak truth each one of you with his neighbour.” (Ephesians 4:25)

What is speaking the truth? Is it never telling a lie? I hope none of us lies, but that is not the kind of truth the Scripture means. The truth is what *God* has said. The truth we are to speak to our neighbour is what God has said about them. The truth about you and me is what God has spoken about you and me. Speaking the truth is more than not lying - it is speaking *spiritual* truth. It is walking by the Spirit and seeing matters as God sees them - as they truly are. If someone behaves rudely, the truth is not what *I* think (that they were rude and therefore they need to go and apologize and change their behaviour). The truth is the way God sees the matter, and He sees the heart. Without His sight, all we have is the law and all we preach is the law and the condemnation of the law, consigning people we think have behaved *very* badly to the road to hell.

Of course, people do go to hell, and by the fear of hell we may persuade some men to be saved. But we do not minister the law to engender fear of consequences. We preach Christ crucified, and portrayed as crucified in the bodies of believers. Hallelujah! That is the Gospel.

In the Body of Christ we are members of one another (Ephesians 4:25). There should be no deceit between us at all. ‘Playing games’, manipulating and controlling one another is false. It is deceit. If you are cross with someone, you had better go and deal with it before it hardens into a true offense and really gets energised.

“...Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity.” (Ephesians 4:27-28)

The Christian life is about becoming a life-giver.

“He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labour, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need.” (Ephesians 4:28)

Becoming a life-giver is about speaking the truth and priesting the life of Christ to others.

“Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” (Ephesians 4:29-30)

You are not going to get away with grieving the Holy Spirit by walking around in pretence and hypocrisy, for that would be speaking against the word of God that is coming to us. Rather, put that behaviour off:

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger, clamour and slander be put away from you, along with all malice, and be kind to one another...” (Ephesians 4:31)

When in doubt, be kind!

“... [and be] tender hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God as beloved children.” (Ephesians 4:32, 5:1)

The Lord is speaking

The Lord is speaking to us individually and as a corporate body of believers, to see us converted from our carnality so that each of us makes a fundamental shift across from living in futility to walking and being led by the

Spirit. Alternatively, you will be constantly and fundamentally led by your flesh, in which case, you will go around and around in circles, perpetually encountering the same problems. That is a sure sign of futility, isn't it? You think your problem has gone, but two months later, three months later, six months later, there it is again.

God wants to deliver us from the things that beset us. Can we humble ourselves and begin to be a people who are truly praying by the Spirit? For this is where we begin. All initiative springs out of prayer in the Spirit, out of the fellowship of prayer with Him. Then the initiative comes from God and is not of ourselves. He will address the matters in our lives, and then although we are not yet perfect or complete, each of us, being led by the Spirit, can be a life-giver; a priest of His life and one who can minister His reconciliation.

Are you a reconciler, or do you think that reconciliation is either everyone saying sorry to you, according to your demands, or is you running around saying sorry to everyone else? Neither of those is reconciliation; neither is helpful. Rather, the Lord is helping us walk in the way of true reconciliation as we join the fellowship of Christ's offering. This is His provision for us. When we join *His* sufferings in the daily sufferings that we go through, we can walk spiritually, be delivered from futility and be healed.

However, if we *don't* join Him, we'll remain stuck in futility. You can be as religious as you like but still in futility. You can put a lot of religious stuff around yourself: go to Bible College; dress up in apparent humility; do all kinds of good-looking things and stand on solid-looking theological ground but all the while you will remain stuck in futility and justifying your condition rather than being delivered from it.

In one sense, we are *all* like that, yet in another sense we are not because we are being delivered by the Gospel that meets us where we are today. And today, the Lord is saying to us: 'I don't want you to live like this anymore!' Praise God!

We can be so thankful for the mercy of God. We do not see the areas of our own blindness, not do we know what or where they are before He shows us. But He *is* showing us, and He does not condemn us!

One of the problems we Christians have is a tendency to downgrade our sin but upgrade our response to it to condemnation. We make our sin seem less bad than it really is, and we condemn ourselves for it even though God does not, as if heaping condemnation on ourselves is a kind of penance. But that is a device of the enemy. The real Christian says: 'My sin *is* so bad, but I'm not condemned, because I have a Saviour.'

Can we open our eyes and be real about these things? Can you? Your sin *is* bad. So bad you had better go to war over the issue the Lord is showing you. Don't play it down as if it's not really that bad. Don't downgrade it to something everyone struggles with. Upgrade it to the truth that God wants you delivered from it. Thank God! He has a plan for every one of us that will deliver us. He will deliver you if you will receive His faith and participate with Him. Will you?

Thank the Lord for the Gospel! It is the power of God to salvation for every person who believes (Romans 1:16).

Can we respond to the Lord's word today? Can we join Him in prayer? The Lord loves us so much that He doesn't want us to be left in the condition we are in and that we so easily tolerate in ourselves. He wants to deliver us from the things that have bound us to futility for so long.