

Everywhere You Go There's a Zacchaeus Up a Tree

Small-Town Faith and Words of Wisdom

Roger Campbell

Edited by Timothy Campbell



Everywhere You Go There's a Zacchaeus Up a Tree: Small-Town Faith and Words of Wisdom from Roger Campbell's Newspaper Columns

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Introduction

Roger Campbell was a man of many words, a man of *his* word, and above all, a man of *the* Word. His lifelong, daily search of the Scriptures informed his thoughts, his actions—and his words.

As one of Roger's four children, I can gladly attest to the importance of his love for the Lord and his love of words. Our family meals around the kitchen table were seasoned with wordplay, sometimes hilariously so. Family devotion time and Dad's original bedtime stories were special parts of our growing-up years and will always be treasured reminiscences. Of course, we heard him preach three times a week as well, and this I credit more than anything else for my own love of words. His sermons spoke.

In addition to those sermons, Roger Campbell authored and edited many books and gospel tracts, broadcast hundreds of radio programs, and wrote countless poems and sacred song lyrics.

In the 1980s, he began writing a column that eventually would be read in well over one hundred newspapers in the United States and Canada. And now, thanks to the Internet, these columns can be found, read, and applied worldwide.

Every Wednesday, Dad was faced with the responsibility of delivering something thoughtful and faith-building that would, hopefully, make a difference in the lives of his readers—something that could enable them to trade their fears for faith, their sorrows for songs, and their doubts for certainties.

Readers and editors have written often to say that many of Dad's columns arrived just in time to help them through difficult experiences. Some have requested a collection of columns to help them through just such seasons of stress. Others simply want to enjoy Dad's wholesome, winsome wit and wisdom. This volume has prayerfully been undertaken in response to those requests.

Roger Campbell's great passion was what he called his "Adventures in Sharing My Faith." Many were the times he was heard urging others to join the adventure, saying, "Whether at the post office or the bank, a restaurant or the supermarket checkout lane, everywhere you go, there's a woman at the well and a Zacchaeus up a tree!"

Timothy Campbell

Five to Help You Thrive

A woman of faith placed the following sign over her kitchen sink: DIVINE WORSHIP CONDUCTED HERE THREE TIMES DAILY. To her, the mundane had become miraculous, and all her daily work, worship.

Sound far-fetched? Perhaps, but by applying five simple principles it's possible.

1. *Rise thankfully.* “Are you having a good day?” I asked a bank teller. “This morning I was able to place my feet on the floor,” she replied, breaking into a smile. I couldn't help but smile back! Each morning when we rise, we *choose* to either be grateful or grumpy, pouting over yesterday's problems or praising God that we're alive and able to live another day.

2. *Pray expectantly.* Since many who pray don't truly expect answers to their prayers, they keep fretting over their problems even after they've talked to God. According to the Bible, we can pray and believe and receive—or pray and doubt and go without (James 1:6–7).

3. *Speak kindly.* Kind words flow from kind hearts. Knowing this, the psalmist prayed for the words of his mouth and the meditations of his heart to both be acceptable to God (Ps. 19:14).

4. *Forgive quickly.* It is by God's grace that we've been saved, and nothing is more characteristic of God than forgiveness. If He can forgive us instantaneously, then we can forgive others quickly.

5. *Work worshipfully.* Some work only to make a living; others find real meaning in their work by making it an experience in worship. One of the greatest discoveries in life is learning that our walk with God is not limited to one day a week or one place that seems “worshipful.”

The next time a friend extends a hand, saying “Give me five,” recall these “Five to Help You Thrive” and keep applying them to your life.

Put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

(Eph. 4:24)

Leaving That Old Baggage Behind

Satchel Paige, the baseball diamond philosopher of another era, gained national recognition with his rules for successful living. The most frequently quoted of these was “Don’t look back. Something may be gaining on you.”

Paul the apostle agreed, saying he had decided to forget things of the past that might hold him back, choosing instead to reach forward to the challenges before him. He wanted to make the most of his future and knew this would be impossible if he allowed past mistakes to monopolize his mind and emotions.

We can forget what God has forgiven.

Forgiveness erases all guilt, assuring a clean slate for all our tomorrows, placing the past forever behind us and turning away all accusing fingers, hopefully including our own. Why should we live with guilt over past sins when we have asked the Lord to forgive them? He has promised to forgive those who confess their sins to Him (1 John 1:9) and this should settle the question.

Leaving our failings behind requires faith. We don’t know what the future holds, but we can know the One who holds the future. This kind of confidence in God will enable us to break free from regrets about the past and focus on the opportunities the future is sure to bring.

Many waste their lives looking back and ever longing for an instant replay of the past so they can make adjustments. They’d like to rewind and restart life to get a better education, enter a different field of business or employment, marry a different wife or husband, even refuse to move to the area where they now find themselves.

Looking back weighs us down with guilt and despair.

Looking up to the forgiving One enables us to leave that old bad baggage behind.

Forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward . . . (Phil. 3:13)

The Greatest Time of Your Life

Why not resolve to make these your greatest days? They can be!

But for this to be true, you may have to change your definition of greatness.

Unless you resist the culture's call, you'll find yourself being influenced by those who associate greatness with getting. If this happens, your waking hours will revolve around what you can accumulate. Your main purpose in life will be to gather as much money and property as possible; you'll spend yet another year as a junk collector.

A man I was counseling had just discovered he had a terminal illness and shared his feelings about life with me. "It's been deceiving," he said.

This successful businessman had spent his entire life in getting and now had little time to enjoy his wealth. He had carefully kept his life for himself, but lost it. There had been no time set aside to worship God and precious little to enjoy his family. Now he had only a short time left to live and there was no way to call back those wasted years. The real purpose of life had eluded him.

The one who spends his or her life gathering temporary trophies to impress others will ultimately be disappointed. Focusing on gaining wealth and popularity to the exclusion of the real and lasting values of life produces inward poverty. It is the giver who gains, the investor who draws interest, the person of faith who moves mountains.

Not all the blessings of giving are received in this life. A message on a weathered old gravestone in an English cemetery says, "What I spent, I had. What I saved, I lost. What I gave, I have." Wise ones give their hearts to God and their hands to serving others. Embracing these great goals could make these your greatest days.

"He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." (Matt.

10:39)

Forgive the One You Love

“I can never forgive her.”

Those harsh words came from a man who was so angry at his wife that he thought their marriage was over.

Once he had spoken to her in a romance language. Now his speech was vitriolic, bitter, loveless—a collective climate that pervades too many homes. No wonder marriage breakups have become one of our most prevalent problems.

What is the cure for this epidemic?

Forgiveness.

But how can we forgive when we have been hurt so deeply by wounding words, attitudes, or acts of those we love? Power to forgive comes from realizing that we have been forgiven. And both our own forgiveness and the ability to forgive others are results of responding to God’s love.

“I just *can’t* forgive her,” the wounded husband repeated, as I searched for words that would rescue this marriage.

“No, you can’t,” I finally answered, “unless you are willing to forgive as you have been forgiven.” Since God has forgiven *us*, we can forgive others.

Forgiveness erases all guilt, assuring a clean slate for the future. It places the past behind us forever and turns away all accusing fingers.

Yet you may not *feel* forgiven. The magnitude of your sin looms large night and day. You confess the same sin again and again, yet it meets you when you awake in the morning and is often your final thought at night. You would give all you own to go back and relive one regrettable hour, but that is impossible.

What can you do? Believe the promises of the Bible concerning forgiveness. Someone has said, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.”

And the one you love isn’t perfect—just in need of your forgiveness.

Allow God’s love to take away the pain you’re both feeling.

Forgive—as you have been forgiven.

“Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” (Matt. 6:12)

What You and George Washington Have in Common

On April 21, 1891, a three-day auction began to sell a remarkable collection of George Washington relics. Among these items was a letter from the former president to his brother, John, dated July 18, 1755, in which he described his survival of a hail of French musket fire in battle.

Imagine John Washington's reaction when he read the following in his brother's letter: "I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses were shot under me, yet I escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me."

Obviously, George Washington was spared for good reasons. The American Revolution was ahead, and he was to play a major role in it. For one thing, he would be the praying leader at Valley Forge; at war's end, as president, he was called "father" of the newborn infant republic. He was spared because he had important work to do.

So do you.

Each of us has been miraculously spared from death many times. We who are alive have all escaped while death has been leveling others about us. Some of these narrow escapes are programmed into our memories. Some we don't even know about.

During his presidency, George Washington wrote that it would pain him to believe that Americans would fail to consider the power of the God "who alone is able to protect them."

We have all been protected from dangers that could have taken our lives. How should we then live? The psalmist said it well: "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

It is always wise to seek God's will, and do it!

The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for the LORD upholds him. (Ps. 37:23–24)

When You Think God Is Against You

“All things are against me.”

Those were the words of the patriarch Jacob, and considering what he'd been through, his faithless lament is understandable. Joseph, his son, had disappeared years earlier, and this grieving father was convinced he had been killed by a wild animal.

Another son, Simeon, was being held hostage in Egypt, where he had gone with his brothers for food to sustain their families through the famine that was devastating their homeland. Now some high Egyptian official was demanding that Jacob send his youngest son, Benjamin, on the next trip for food in order to secure Simeon's release.

What else could go wrong?

Perhaps that's how you feel today.

All you feared has come upon you, and Jacob's calamity strikes close to home. But of course this distressed father was wrong; all things *weren't* against him. Actually, the opposite was true. In short order, he'd see long-lost Joseph again and benefit from the wisdom in Joseph's statement of brotherly forgiveness: “You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good . . . to save many people alive” (Gen. 50:20).

During my teens, I discovered Romans 8:28, a New Testament echo of Joseph's words. “You've chosen a difficult verse to live by,” said my pastor. And I couldn't imagine what he was talking about. It seemed easy to accept that God loved me and would arrange the events in my life to my advantage. Later, after living through times that tested my faith, I saw this was not as easy as it seemed. True, but not easy.

A pastor once visited a farmer and saw a sign on his weathervane that said, “God Is Love.” “Do you mean that God's love is as changeable as the weather?” asked the pastor. “No,” replied the farmer, “I mean God loves me no matter which way the wind blows.”

We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom. 8:28)

Little Things Matter a Lot

Stepping up to the counter of an outdoor restaurant in California, I ordered a glass of milk. When the server brought my order, her casual comment took me by surprise: “You might want to taste this first; we’re not too sure about it.”

How could she be so relaxed about offering me a glass of milk she had doubts about?

“If you’re not sure about it, I don’t want it,” I replied.

Not to be denied her sale and still at ease about the whole matter, the waitress picked up the glass, took a sip, and this time confidently set it before me. “It’s fine,” she said.

It wasn’t fine enough for me, even after her taste test. Why? Because I was directly affected. And some things we take lightly may matter a lot to others because they are affected in real or perceived ways that may not occur to us.

The members of the church at Corinth had a problem. Food that had been offered to idols was available to the public at reduced prices. But would that bargain be too costly in other ways?

Paul, their friend and faith-builder, settled the matter for them. “We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one,” he wrote (1 Cor. 8:4). But then he explained that not everyone understood the real issue, so it would be better to abstain from eating this cut-rate food for the sake of believers whose conscience is weak (vv. 9–13).

A man I know still winces at the pain and disappointment he felt when, as a teen, he heard an angry leader of his church using profanity. The damning deacon was unaware of the lasting wounds he was inflicting on the boy standing nearby.

Being careful costs. But believers who are willing to pay the price in little things will avoid wounding tender hearts and their consistent examples may turn others to God.

Beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.

(1 Cor. 8:9)

Great Gifts for Our Children

Since my daily radio broadcast, books, and weekly newspaper column penetrate prison walls, I frequently receive letters from prisoners. One of these was so moving it has remained unforgettable.

The writer, a twenty-seven-year-old convict, told of spending many years behind bars for a variety of offenses. Writing from solitary confinement because of trouble he had caused in the prison, he admitted reading one of my books only because there was nothing else available. His story was a heartbreaker.

Like many chronic offenders, this troubled young writer had grown up the child of alcoholic parents. By the time he reached seventh grade, he was hooked on alcohol and other drugs, and dropped out of school.

“My mom and dad really had bad drinking problems,” he wrote. “In 1971, Mom shot Dad point-blank in the chest; that was the last time I cried.” His tearless cry for help still haunts me.

While this inmate’s plight may seem extreme, it demonstrates how vital it is that parents provide examples of trusting God in tough times instead of blaming each other when things go wrong. Kindness, not conflict, builds faith among family members.

According to the Bible, the love-climate of every marriage should illustrate the love of God for us. Our children should be able to learn about God’s love for them by seeing the affection of their parents for each other (Eph. 5:22–33). Anger destroys love. Encouragement amplifies it.

I once heard a man tell my father he was going to ruin me by his frequent praise of my work on the farm. But Dad was no dummy. He knew the more praise I received, the harder I worked. Families that build one another up are continually creating memories that make the past pleasant and the future hopeful.

Let’s not wait for birthdays or Christmas to give our children the best gifts of all: memories of affection instead of anger, praise instead of put-downs . . . *every day.*

“How much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!”

(Matt. 7:11)

The Seven Last Words

The children of a woman nearing the end of life were gathered around her hospital bed, listening to her final, faint whispers. Standing with them, I sensed their sorrow and the significance of the moment as each strained to hear their mother's last words.

While last words of loved ones are often treasured and remembered by family members, none are as well-known as those seven last "words" of Jesus on the cross:

1. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."
2. "Today you will be with Me in Paradise."
3. "Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother!"
4. "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"
5. "I thirst."
6. "It is finished."
7. "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."

The first of these passion pronouncements reveals that forgiveness is available and teaches us that we can forgive all who wrong us.

The second "word" from the cross offered comfort to a dying criminal who chose faith while others doubted.

The third word, spoken to Mary and John, reminds us of the importance of family.

The fourth word from the cross may be the most mysterious. It spoke of Jesus's separation from God on our behalf, that we might never be separated from Him. It described the agony of One forsaken, that those who believe might *never* be forsaken.

The fifth word revealed the humanity of Christ. He understands our pain and gives us grace to endure it.

Many leave life with their tasks unfinished, but the sixth word from the cross announced our Lord had completed His work of redemption.

The seventh word, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit," expressed absolute assurance that the One being crucified knew where He was going after death.

So can we! Though some may doubt our confidence of eternal life through faith alone, the One on the cross gave the last word on it.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

What I've Discovered About My Wife

Smack in the middle of the twentieth century, it was not uncommon for newlyweds to be nineteen. Allow me, if you will, to take you on a walk with me down Memory Lane to the house of my bride-to-be, way back in 1950.

Standing in the driveway at her parents' home, I chose a few small stones and tossed them gently against her upstairs bedroom window.

"Want to get married next Saturday?" I called when she peered sleepily down on me.

"I'll be right down," she answered, now sounding wide awake.

What a week that was!

We contacted our minister, reserved the church, sent out invitations and the following Saturday had a church full of guests at our wedding and reception.

This "church wedding in a week" should have tipped me off to the adventurous nature of the beautiful young woman I was marrying, but I still had a lot to learn about her. Half a century (and then some) later, I'm still making discoveries.

I've discovered my wife is a woman of great faith.

Each morning finds Pauline alone with her Bible, reading and praying. She's continually translating the concepts of faith she's been absorbing into her daily life, and this has enabled her to courageously make decisions that some would think too risky.

When the time came for me to leave my job in sales and accept a small church at one-third the salary, Pauline was ready to trust that God would provide for us. This meant moving from our new home to an old, rented farmhouse, but to her this was just part of the adventure she had signed up for on the day we exchanged our vows, promising to build our marriage on love for each other and faith in God.

I've also discovered my wife can be trusted to do what she believes is best for our family. The writer of Proverbs says the husband of a virtuous woman can safely trust in her, adding, "She does him good and not evil all the days of her life" (Prov. 31:12). And I've discovered that in making important family decisions, she is usually right. This has been the case so many times that I've often found myself saying, "You're right again! Why does this surprise me?"

"It's a heavy burden to bear," she sighs. And another Proverb comes to mind: "She opens her mouth with wisdom, and on her tongue is the law of kindness" (v. 26).

I've discovered my wife has an eye for beauty. Flowers, landscapes, paintings, and color combinations were nice to notice but not all that important to me. Pauline has opened my eyes to the beauty around us and continually adds her special touch to it.

After all these years with my bride, I've learned that a woman's beauty deepens with time. So one day I told her so in the following lines:

When you stand before a mirror, tracing time's art,
Look closely and you will see the beauty that binds you to my heart.

He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor with the LORD. (Prov. 18:22)

The Call No One Wants to Get

When the phone rang in the wee hours of the morning, I sensed it might be the call no one wants to receive.

I was right. My sister was calling to tell me our mother, who would soon have been ninety-five, had died, a tough call to get at any time for any family.

Mother was born in 1903 in the house on the farm her family had owned since before the Civil War. She weighed only three pounds but survived and outlived all the members of her immediate family, as well as many younger nieces and nephews. When she was three, her mother died from complications following the measles, so she was raised by her father and grandmother, who instilled in her the ability to always look for the best in people.

If you like to gossip, you wouldn't have enjoyed spending time with my mother. She was an expert at changing the subject when the faults of others came up. In the juiciest part of your slander, she'd likely walk to a window and say, "Isn't it a beautiful day?"

I can remember at a very young age, hearing my mother quote her favorite Bible verse: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" This faith-builder, and others like it in her well-worn Bible, enabled her to trust instead of tremble when in difficult circumstances.

Mother wasn't perfect, but she was convinced she had a perfect Friend who would always be with her. She had placed her faith in Him and found Him faithful in all the experiences of her long life.

No one wants to get a call telling of the death of a loved one, but a life of faith in the One who is faithful changes the tone of those unwanted calls from despair to hope.

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

Try the Simple Solutions First

A woman once told me that a statement of mine had changed her marriage. Years before, she had heard me say at a Sweethearts' Banquet, "You may be asking if you are getting enough out of your marriage, when that is not the question. You should be asking if your husband or wife is getting all he or she should be getting out of your marriage."

This may seem like kindergarten counseling, but my simple statement turned a marriage around, making these two people aware that love is more interested in giving than receiving.

Our Lord once took a child in His arms and explained the meaning of faith to the crowd gathered around Him. What could be simpler than the trust of a child in the arms of one who loves him?

On another occasion, a religious leader came to Him seeking a personal walk with God and eternal life. The answer given this master of theology was so simple that it has become the most familiar verse in the Bible, the one taught to children and printed on road signs for those who have only a fleeting moment to read and understand. What problems are you facing that may have simple solutions?

Are you often cross? Be kind.

Are you filled with anxiety? Pray and expect the best.

Are you lonely? Visit someone who needs a friend.

Are you given to faultfinding? Try counting your blessings.

Are you troubled by doubts? Read the Bible, the source of faith.

Are there conflicts in your home or where you work? Forgive those who are causing them, and focus on their strengths rather than their faults.

Try the simple solutions first. They're time tested—and free.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

The Good News About Temptation

Yielding to temptation can be costly. A moment of weakness may bring years of regret. It is dangerous to take temptation lightly.

Moses led his people out of their slavery in Egypt to freedom. He endured their complaining and criticism of his leadership. He prayed for them when their destruction seemed imminent. But an outburst of temper kept him from leading them into the Promised Land.

One of the encouraging things about temptation is its universal sameness. Each and every temptation that comes our way has been experienced by someone else. The setting may not be the same, but the basics of temptation are unchanging.

Samson and David were overcome by sexual lust, but Joseph resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife, even though he knew that doing so would get him into serious trouble. Peter yielded to the pressure of the crowd at Jesus's trial and denied his Lord three times, but John stood fearlessly at the cross and accepted the responsibility of caring for Mary when asked to do so. What good news!

Neither trials nor temptations can move beyond the limits placed on them by the faithful One who loves us. The famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher said, "No physician ever weighed out medicine to his patients with half so much care and exactness as God weighs out to us every trial. Not one grain too much does He ever permit to be put on the scale."

Have you found yourself saying, "I just can't resist this temptation"? Do you think you lack the strength to break a bondage that has been dragging you down and placing your future in jeopardy?

Not true! When tempted, we are all without excuse. And we *can* overcome!

Stop thinking like a loser. You can win!

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but . . . will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. (1 Cor. 10:13)

Develop a Blind Eye and a Deaf Ear

In his book *Lectures to My Students*, C. H. Spurgeon wrote, “I have one blind eye and one deaf ear, and they are the best ear and eye that I have.” This trainer of ministers was simply passing on the advice of Solomon written long before him: “Do not take to heart everything people say” (Eccl. 7:21).

When I hear someone say, “I’m always the last to know about trouble in my church,” I know I’m in wise company.

Some things are better left unseen and unheard.

Paying too much attention to negatives can cause one to become an expert at faultfinding. And if you build your life on faults, expect earthquakes.

Chronic complainers seldom see this solemn truth: Their constant griping is actually directed toward God. To complain about our circumstances is to complain about Him, since He directs or allows all the events that come into our lives.

Why not become blind and deaf to all voices and events that drag you down?

- Hear birds instead of sirens.
- Hear laughter instead of complaining.
- Look for rainbows instead of dark clouds.
- See the beauty of snowflakes instead of complaining about the depth of the snow.
- Remember the encouragements of yesterday and make them work for you today.

A man I once met in a Detroit hospital left an impression on me that remains: his attitude demonstrated that the faith he possessed was genuine. He seemed blind and deaf to the faults of others, and the two words he spoke to me as we parted have returned to refresh me again and again.

“Be encouraged!” he said.

What good words!

Perhaps someone you will meet today needs to experience their life-changing power.

If there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things. (Phil. 4:8)

Go Ahead—Brighten Somebody’s Day!

Paul the apostle considered himself to be in debt to everybody (Rom. 1:14). Others had shared their faith with him, so now he felt obligated to return the favor by telling everyone he met about his Lord. He was neither fearful nor ashamed to invite others to trust the One who had made him a missionary.

Some dear friends once sent the following anonymous quote to me:

This is the beginning of a new day. God has given me this day to use as I will. I can waste it—or use it for good, but what I do today is important, because I am exchanging a day of my life for it! When tomorrow comes, this day will be gone forever, leaving in its place something that I have traded for it. I want it to be gain and not loss, good and not evil, success and not failure, in order that I shall not regret the price I have paid for it.

This enlarger of vision and responsibility has changed my thinking about things I used to consider time wasters or interrupters of my plans. Now I see them as opportunities to lift the discouraged and help people trade their fears for faith.

Long or slow moving lines in stores have become fertile fields in which to sow seeds of encouragement in the minds of people who are hurting, pointing them to the One who loves and comforts those in distress. Even telemarketers have become prospects for peace with God rather than irritants who interrupt my day.

A once popular old hymn said, “Brighten the corner where you are.” There are many dark corners in life, and they’re often occupied by people longing for light. Each of us has the responsibility to bring them the good news of God’s love.

After all, like Paul, we’re in debt to everybody.

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you . . . (Rom. 1:14–15)

Do It Now!

Arriving at the rural church where I was to be the speaker for a weeklong conference. I was immediately impressed. The parking lot was nearly full, and even there the congregation's enthusiastic singing could be heard. Clearly, something good was happening in this unlikely place.

Since I was to stay at the parsonage for the week, I saw this as an opportunity to observe the pastor and discover what he had been doing that attracted such large crowds to his church.

My search was short. I found the successful pastor's secret the first day.

This country preacher told me these three words, "Do it now!" were key ingredients in his ministry, and that very day I observed his speedy solution to a potential problem in the congregation. Learning that one of his members had offended another, he hurried to the home of the wounded one and became a peacemaker, not allowing the offense to go unnoticed and unreconciled even one day. Before nightfall he had cared for a problem that could have divided his church.

Paul urged those in the Corinthian church to act immediately concerning personal faith and eternal life. He could see no reason for postponing such an important decision (2 Cor. 6:2).

Maintaining good relationships is evidently more important to God than giving offerings. Jesus told His disciples that they should be reconciled to others before making donations at the temple (Matt. 5:23–24).

Once, while in a group of praying people, I heard a woman ask for forgiveness for enjoying periods of depression. Do you secretly enjoy your negative attention-getters, or are you tired of bondage? If you long to be free, seriously seek freedom.

Exchange your fears for faith.

Forgive an adversary.

Share your faith with one who lives without hope.

You know what needs to be done.

Do it now!

Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2)

Your Song Can Return

I love all four seasons and am grateful to have them fully in Michigan. Still, I admit that by March I'm eager for Solomon's poetic portrayal of spring: "The winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land" (Song 2:11–12).

Spring is an annual celebration of creation and resurrection. And at this time of the year, all nature joins in saying, "God is alive, so no matter how dark and cold it gets, the sun will soon break through the clouds, announcing the arrival of spring."

While being interviewed on a call-in radio program, I was surprised to hear the voice of a Missouri woman who had written to me nearly ten years earlier seeking help during a time of trouble. Now, after all these years, she had turned on her radio and, upon hearing the interview, called to tell me she was doing very well in spite of her past problems. She wanted me to know that her song had returned.

Spring insists that cold dark days only endure for a season.

New life and light are waiting in the wings to take the stage.

Our Lord often appealed to lessons in nature to demonstrate His love, speaking of birds that neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns but are fed by their heavenly Father. And His unforgettable parable about God clothing the lilies of the field has comforted many during tough economic times.

All trouble is temporary.

Better days are ahead.

Dark days only last for a season, so refuse to be dominated by darkness.

Remember that God loves you, and spring past your storm to a song.

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." (Matt. 6:28–29)

Enjoy Every Good Day

Standing in line at the post office on an almost balmy spring day, I opened a conversation with the man in front of me, commenting on how fast the line was moving, somewhat of a minor miracle. “Yes,” he agreed, “there are three working at the counter today, and that makes a difference.”

Now that we were off to a positive start, I added a comment about the nice weather, hoping it might lead to talking about God’s goodness to us.

“It’s a beautiful day!” he replied. “But I dread what’s ahead.”

What about my postal partner’s pessimistic view that sunshine must always be followed by clouds and storms? Does God have us on a weather tether that demands our being jerked back to cold reality after every pleasant day?

Not at all!

Certainly clouds and even storms come along from time to time, but their presence shouldn’t be interpreted as paybacks for blessings we’ve received.

God is good and He loves us, but this doesn’t mean we’ll be kept from all storms. Our Lord warned His disciples that trouble is a part of life. But tough times are not to be seen as periods of punishment for blessings received.

Consider the experience of Jesus’s disciples during a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee. Strong winds piled waves high, and it appeared the boat was in danger of going down. There was, however, a purpose in this time of peril. The storm and its miraculous end increased the faith of the disciples, enabling them to build the faith of others (Matt. 8:23–27). And there is no evidence that the storm came because they had enjoyed smooth seas, quiet breezes, and sunshine the day before.

Reject such negative thinking.

The blessings God sends today won’t require the sky to fall tomorrow.

“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

(John 16:33)

Let's Widen the Wonder of Worship

What's the principal cause of dissension in churches today?

Styles of worship, especially relating to music.

The order of worship in most churches used to be marked by a predictable sameness: an opening hymn or doxology followed perhaps by some announcements, then more hymn singing, Bible readings, prayer, an offering, and a sermon, sometimes followed by an altar call and a benediction.

Newer views of worship have, however, caused conflict in many churches. Since most hymnals consist of songs that do not meet the current worship test, they've been consigned to closets and replaced with praise choruses, the lyrics for which usually appear on screens or church walls. An unhappy church member told me recently, "All the singing at our church is off the wall."

The resentment expressed by this peeved parishioner's pun is the downside to a movement toward more focused and heartfelt musical worship. Has the church ever gone through abrupt changes in worship and conflict over music styles before?

Yes.

At one time, church congregations sang only psalms or songs taken from other biblical texts. Moves to change this met strong opposition but were finally successful, ushering in the era of composing and singing what we now call the "great hymns of the faith."

Making worship and music styles acceptable to all ages and preferences requires love and mutual understanding, but achieving harmony in a church is worth the effort.

People who love one another can learn to appreciate a broader range of lyrics, beat and volume. A study on the use of worship music in the Bible may enable a congregation to be of one accord.

More than a century ago, Charles Spurgeon established parameters for music in his church that would end most worship wars today: "No chorus is too loud, no orchestra too large, no Psalm too lofty for praising the Lord."

Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy. (Ps. 33:3)

The Secret of Contentment

While researching and writing a book on crime and justice, I was surprised to learn that two-thirds of those in prison had full-time jobs at the time of their arrests. These people, now barred from the simple pleasure of walking down the street, had not been the victims of unemployment or bad economic conditions; they had lost their freedom because they had not been content with what they had and were willing to break the law to get more.

Contentment comes from appreciating what we have rather than longing for more.

To covet is to focus on what we want rather than on what we have.

“Thou shalt not covet,” says one of the Ten Commandments. But coveting has become one of the more respectable sins, one we hear little about from pulpits.

King David’s lack of contentment at home caused him to covet beautiful Bathsheba while Uriah, her husband, was away fighting for his country. Soon the king and the soldier’s wife were involved in adultery, and the infamous plot to get rid of Uriah was hatched, a development that resulted in great guilt and emotional pain for the coveting king (Ps. 32).

Covetousness is at the root of most crime and many marriage breakups. No wonder the Bible speaks out so strongly against it. Contentment that springs from a thankful heart is a powerful force for good, affecting every area of life. Contented people possess peace—and become peacemakers.

The secret of contentment makes one thankful for the necessities of life. When we strip away the frills of our present, pampered lifestyles, we’re down to the basics, the things that really matter. Having the essentials ought to make us immune to self-pity and covetousness. Paul the apostle said it well: “Having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:8 KJV).

“Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.” (Luke 12:15)

The Contradiction of Lukewarm Love

Upon arriving at a New York church as the speaker for a weeklong conference, I was both impressed and concerned. The buildings were impressive: a large colonial complex including a sizeable sanctuary, many classrooms in which to conduct a strong educational program, and a fine gymnasium to accommodate an active youth ministry; but I sensed these outward things housed but a shell of what had once existed in this former place of fiery faith. A conversation with the pastor confirmed my conclusion.

What went wrong?

During their time of prosperity, the congregation had become complacent about things that really matter. Their seeming success changed their focus from faith to finery, from people to programs. Their love for God and people cooled; became lukewarm. And this contradiction of love brought about their downfall.

In his book *Soul Food*, the nineteenth-century evangelist G. D. Watson wrote,

One of the worst features of lukewarmness is that it steals on the soul in such quiet, respectable ways. If the horrible thing had horns and hoofs, and a smack of criminality in it, it would alarm the soul; but as a rule, lukewarmness of spirit is so decent and well behaved, that it chloroforms its victim and kills him without a scream of terror. This is what makes it so awfully fatal. While open sin slays in hundreds, nice, respectable lukewarmness slays in tens of thousands.

Churches are to be constantly reaching and caring for those who are struggling. Love for the wounded among us must never be lukewarm. When love cools toward those in distress, it is but lukewarm for the One who came to seek and save the least among us.

And then there are those without faith, without hope. These especially must be objects of our concern. To be lukewarm in love toward them is to be unlike our Lord and is the greatest contradiction of all.

What's the spiritual temperature of your church?

“Because you are lukewarm . . . I will vomit you out of My mouth.” (Rev. 3:16)