

Chapter 27

I've never thought of that before

Long ago and far away there was a Greek mathematician named Archimedes who had a moment of inspiration when taking a bath. Although his bathtub would be different from ours, he sometimes filled it too full so it overflowed when he got in, and he (or more likely a slave) had to clean up the floor before anyone slipped and fell. One bright day as he lay there soaking and thinking, he had a flash of illumination. He was so excited that he leapt out, forgetting his towel, and with a great and memorable cry he ran through the streets calling out, 'Eureka!' which is Greek for 'I have found it!', or as we might say today, 'Got it!'.

What he had realised was that a body immersed in a fluid (like Archimedes in his bathwater) is subject to an upward force equal in magnitude to the weight of the fluid it displaces (like the messy overflow when he sat in the water). He would have been amazed to know that this mathematical equation would for evermore be known as 'Archimedes' principle', and that for centuries, mathematicians and physics teachers would try very hard to get it into the heads of their pupils. The students had probably never thought about it before either and even after these lessons, however many puddles on the bathroom floor they made, would probably never cry 'Eureka!' We do not always think things through.

Most of us have probably had 'Got it!' moments. One of mine came in the middle of an examination, clarifying another principle of physics that I had never before understood. At the time, it was important to pass that test before continuing as a medical student and I was grateful for the inspiration, even at the last minute.

New life new lifestyle

One important illumination comes when we realise that the Lord Jesus Christ was not just a remarkable figure in history. To take a closer look at the meaning of his life, death, resurrection and ascension is to

recognise the selfless outpouring of his love and to realise that it had been for all time and all people, including you and me. Some have gratefully asked him to become Lord of their lives and want to show responsive love to him by changed attitudes and behaviour. Yet old habits of thought and deed are slow to die away until more 'Eureka!' moments come with a fresh understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit. He is the very Spirit of Jesus whose long-term aim is to make us more like him as he grows his fruit in us and helps us to find the special gifts on offer to each committed believer.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote to encourage the young church to live this new kind of life. The whole letter has so much in it to lift our spirits. He begins with the reminder that the Holy Spirit lives within us and, as we co-operate, the same power as raised Jesus from the dead will transform our lives.¹ Once we were aliens, out of God's family and under the reign of self-rule, but we have been welcomed into a different kingdom, founded and governed by the Lord himself.^{2,3} We now live to inspire praise for his glory.⁴

Living to the glory of God

When we were students, a friend of mine came to faith in Christ as her Saviour. As she started to read her Bible she often came across that word 'glory' and asked me, 'What is glory? What does it mean?'. We knew what a glorious sunset looked like, and could enjoy a glorious piece of music. A dictionary would offer many extra shades of meaning, but the overall picture is of something or someone having such splendour as to inspire wonder and praise. Living to the glory of God is to live in such a way that our lives please, praise and give total credit to him. It does not make us better than other people to live that way because we know all too well that we are among the 'all' who have sinned and come so far short of God's glory.⁵ It has only been by admitting our past failure and accepting the love and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ that we start on the changes he wants to work in us, through his Spirit. It is all of God's grace, namely his generous favour, so all thanks and honour go to our Lord as his work goes on in us. We make it our goal to please him,⁶ to give him pleasure in our restored relationship, as we will find pleasure in discovering a new lifestyle.

A changed attitude

Looking back to Paul's letter to the Ephesians, it is from the middle of the third chapter onwards that he gives practical advice about ways in which we should live in response to the 'wide, long, high and deep' love of Christ for us, that is so far beyond our understanding. He reminds us of what we considered in chapter 25 that, as newly gifted members of the earthly body of the resurrected Christ, we are intended to work together just as the parts of our physical bodies do when we are in good health. This will often mean that members of his body learn to hold a different attitude from the body of popular opinion, so acting as a Christian counter-culture.⁷

Like any other form of learning, we may only gradually come to recognise the great extent to which we need to be renewed in our thinking. This is where it helps to be able to discuss and pray about these things with others in the same kind of work, who also desire to represent their Lord in the workplace. (This is as much a place of worship as anywhere else, for true worship is the offering of our whole selves in his service.) In student or professional life, it is all too easy to take as the norm what we learn from our teachers, or to accept certain practices because everyone else accepts them. Yet with minds renewed by the Holy Spirit we are made more alert to ways in which our loyalty to Christ's teaching will be expressed through very different attitudes and behaviour.

In medical practice, for example, our views can become very different from those of our teachers or colleagues, as when considering abortion, euthanasia, genetic manipulation or even protracted but futile intensive care. We may find ourselves drawn to specialties found unexciting by others such as differing addictions, or chronic disability of mind or body. Some may aim to work overseas or serve the poor nearer home. There will be many areas when the belief that we are all made in the image of God gives us such a different outlook from that held by those who have never met, or already rejected, this idea. We need to think and study more deeply to be ready when asked to give an intelligent explanation of our ideals and ethics, our aims, attitude and practice. Thankfully we also learn to send up SOS prayers and find that the Spirit of God helps us with the answers.

Guarding the tongue

Both Jesus and James in turn emphasised the need to tame our tongues.^{8,9} In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul gives a detailed list of areas where Christian behaviour can stand out as being different.¹⁰ It is popular to speak of being 'economical with the truth', but Paul would probably call this plain *falsehood* or lying. Truth may best be broken in stages, as when breaking really bad news, but it should always be told in love, so very different from 'telling a few basic home truths' or 'giving it to him straight'. In this letter, Paul warns about *unwholesome talk*, including *bitterness, rage, anger, quarrelling* and *slander*. Each of us will know our own weak points. Gossip is a very favourite activity in many workplaces and even in church circles. A spicy bit of news grows spicier with the telling. It can become *malicious*, too, something else to avoid. Paul's mention of unwholesome talk would also include *obscenity, foolish talk, or swearing*. All these are to be 'put off' when we have 'put on' the new self and thankfully the Holy Spirit will help us to see and to drop any such bad habits, perhaps helped by a friend prepared to 'speak the truth in love'.

It is very easy for people out of their own culture to pick up words, stories or local ways that they do not really understand but accept as normal because others use them so freely. Bad language is like measles, easily picked up by the unprotected. A Christian Hungarian doctor became very fluent in the use of both good and bad English phrases and needed to have some of them interpreted as his form of verbal immunisation! God's name is so frequently misused by the general public, the media or in different languages that it is easy to forget that this breaks a commandment.¹¹ Paul also cites the need to *forgive* one another, and this will sometimes involve *apologising* (again, lovingly) when we have caused offence. It is better to clear the air than to nurse a grudge and spoil a relationship.

A tired doctor was woken up to go and see a baby in the middle of the night but considered the call to have been unnecessary, and said so. She could see that the night Sister was offended, and after going back to bed felt the Holy Spirit prompting her to go and apologise before

Sister went off duty. Later in the day, she was so glad that she had done so. As she had left the ward and before the belated apology, another doctor overheard the remark, 'What else can you expect of those Bible-bashers!' Hospital staff are among those who love to gossip, so he took some pleasure in repeating the comment to the offender. It was a relief that an apology might not have been part of what was expected but it was also a reminder to pray for control of her lips, even when tired.

Not stealing and *working hard* come into Paul's list of the different attitudes that are expected of Christians. The first needs a tender conscience (are pens, paper or phone calls really 'on the house?'). The second is difficult for the unemployed, although when in a paid job it would be stealing not to be a conscientious worker. On the other hand, it is easy for doctors and other professionals to overfill the diary with non-essentials, even to enjoy looking busy, but to rob the family of time together. A good chairman will ensure that 'meetings' are not unnecessarily long and chatty. Paul's list ends with the need to avoid personal *immorality, impurity, greed, obscenity, foolish talk* or *coarse joking* and *drunkenness*. The first two on this list can tempt people of mixed gender who are expected to spend long hours away from home as part of the job. Sometimes the long hours are solely undertaken for extra pay, not only to meet pressing needs. It can be all too easy to pick up other people's bad language or enjoy smutty stories (better to keep stocked up with clean ones!), or overindulge at the bar after work. What a minefield awaits anyone who allows attention to wander and feet to stray!

We are again grateful that the best mine detector is the Holy Spirit, who will help us to walk prayerfully in step with him, sensitive to his warnings and ever grateful for his help. When dealing with things that offend us or make us uneasy we need to act with firm politeness. Fellowship with others will help us not to dwell on our difficulties but to keep a song in our hearts, 'always giving thanks to the Father for everything'. Other Christians in the same kind of work could enlighten and encourage each other, seeking together to honour our Lord. That is our truest goal, not merely keeping a list of rules, and in time we will not even want to do things that we are here warned to avoid.¹²

Should we be tempted to step off the right paths and tread on an emotional or spiritual landmine, we must remember that turning back to him, broken and ashamed, will be to find that he still loves us overwhelmingly enough to forgive us and put us together again.¹³

Finding fellowship with others

It is an enormous benefit to be able to meet others who share the same faith in the Lord Jesus and urge each other to keep going straight. It is also a command that we should do so.¹⁴ In some cultures where the open gathering together of God's people is not allowed, believers still try to meet in secret. Those in a freer world should be grateful for open access to places where we can hear the word of God read and preached, praising him together in spiritual songs of various kinds. To be over-critical, or to say, 'I can worship God anywhere – I don't need church, especially that one,' misses opportunities for inspiration, fellowship and further instruction that many others long for. Where there is choice, we should look for loyalty to the word of God as a priority, and a missionary spirit. We hope to share the love of Jesus wherever we are, in attitude and the way we act, for love is the first attribute of the fruit of his Spirit.

It can be harder to find other believers in the workplace but it can be so strengthening to do so. Doctors love to 'talk shop' and fellow-Christians are likely to hold similar views on medical ethics, and to show a more respectful attitude than some for even the most off-putting patients. To hear someone hum or whistle a Christian song or mention a book or church can alert us, or to notice a significant badge or tie, or a head bowed in thanksgiving before a meal. All these can act as signals, given and received, for the like-minded. More public identification such as advertising an openly Christian meeting, formal or informal, can of course arouse unsympathetic interest and name-calling ('Bible-bashers!') but also draws in others, often from overseas, who will welcome more personal fellowship.

Careful use of money

Jesus spoke a lot about money. Total commitment to God must include giving him our pockets and purses. At first sight this can look more

like a cost than a benefit and a few may say, 'God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment'¹⁵ so that must include my money, to enjoy as I please', rather than 'as he pleases'. This is a matter for each to decide individually, but careful reading of the Bible tells us that giving support to others is part of giving ourselves to the Lord.¹⁶

I know someone who delights to tell how God supplied all he needed when he had offered himself for special training on a minimal grant. Another wrote from India to say that a small sum sent by airmail had arrived on the very morning that the exact amount had been needed. A group of young people hoped to leave for a Christian camp later that day, but had not been able to raise the fee. Then at the last minute the gift arrived, precisely meeting their expenses and enabling them to go. Our Father may keep us waiting up to the last minute but such evidence of his care encourages both giver and receiver to stay strong in faith.

I once saw a news story of refugees in their thousands, fleeing from a destructive army to an already overcrowded camp, yet the local people welcomed and fed them as much as their poor resources allowed. Richer people can speak of compassion fatigue, but this is put to shame by stories and pictures of starving men, women and children dying by the roadside, or arriving at a feeding station to find supplies running out. It is heartening to read of relief teams, such as Tearfund, fuelled by Christian compassion and providing emergency relief. After that, to avoid cash falling into the wrong hands they aim to teach poor people better ways of managing their own affairs.

The smaller the income, the more costly it can be to give – yet the poorest people are often the most generous. I recall a church service in South Africa where the congregation, although far from rich, literally danced up to the front to give their offerings and did so again when they heard that the gifts already given had not met the current need. Paul encourages sacrificial generosity by reminding us of the costly self-giving of the Lord Jesus Christ 'that you through his poverty might be rich'.¹⁷ Wanting to share the love of Jesus, lover of justice and mercy, is to shift our focus from a 'me-centred' lifestyle to help those who could well have felt forgotten. They may meet God's love

in action through our gifts, whether financial or as assistance in person. A little prayerful research will lead us to people or organisations most likely to benefit from our various offers.

Appreciation of the natural world

There can be no doubt that Jesus walked for miles in the countryside, and many of his parables and illustrations came from his observation of nature (the flowers of the field, bird life), rural activities (sowers of seed, ploughmen) and the weather. He well knew that the natural world is among the 'all things' that our creator has given us to enjoy and care for.

A young city dweller had not had any such interests before she became a follower of Jesus. Another person, having had a first rare sight of a badger on a lovely summer evening, was so delighted that she said, 'I wish there was someone to say "Thank you" to!' – and, of course, there is!

Many of the Psalms, such as Psalm 66, are songs of praise for all the wonderful works of the Lord. He detailed some of them himself when at last addressing suffering Job.¹⁸ Publications of various kinds tell of the wonderful interdependence of different flowers and animals, insects and birds, if they are to survive. Sadly, the thoughtless or greedy acts of humanity have already threatened some of them with extinction. Taking timber from forests that give homes to chimpanzees, for example, is threatening them with extinction. Long ago, Paul spoke of how creation is groaning to be liberated from decay¹⁹ and there is a growing awareness that such decay is accelerating. More education and action are needed to halt the process. One Christian who has received a personal challenge about how we are mistreating God's beautiful world is David Bookless. As a result, he and his family decided to keep a strict watch on their own use of resources and also aimed to increase other people's awareness of environmental issues. The earth is the Lord's, but we share responsibility for looking after it.

Single-mindedness

Loyalty to godly principles will affect private as well as public choices. God's word warns against making alliances with those who hold no

allegiance to him.²⁰ The reference Paul makes to an unequal yoke is a vivid one, referring to the days when two oxen would be joined by a bar across their shoulders as they pulled a plough. By combining their strength the yoke improves their efficiency, but if one pulls away from the other the very thing that should have doubled their output becomes a big problem.

This can apply in business partnerships, but is particularly relevant in marriage, where a promising relationship may have to end if it is clear that the prospective partner has very different goals in life. Such choices can be painful for both parties but when handed over to God he is able to use disappointment in ways probably seen best some time later.

Too much to ask?

In case this seems like an impossibly long checklist to be solemnly worked through, everything on it is something that the Holy Spirit will gradually work in us as we accept his gentle guidance. There may be an occasional sudden illumination ('Eureka!'), but more often it will be a new sensitivity to something not much thought about before. Becoming like Jesus is a lifetime process and because his service is perfect freedom we are not intended to go about with a frown, desperately afraid of putting a foot wrong. Instead we have the great assurance that we are in this together with him and it is his power that will work in us, helping us 'to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose'.²¹ As we co-operate with his Spirit, he will, in time, change us into what he wants us to be. Remember that joy, not despair, is placed second in the list of his Spirit's fruit.²²

For further thought

- Have you had many 'Eureka!' moments?
- Was there anything in this chapter that gave you such a moment?
- What do you plan to do about it?

Further resources

- Bookless D. *Planetwise: Dare to care for God's world.* Nottingham: Inter-varsity Press, 2008

References

1. Ephesians 1:13-14
2. Ephesians 2:19
3. Ephesians 4:19-24
4. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14
5. Romans 3:23-24
6. 2 Corinthians 5:9
7. Ephesians 4:22-32
8. Matthew 15:18-20
9. James 3:8-10
10. Ephesians 4:25-32, 5:3-21
11. Exodus 20:7
12. Hebrews 8:10b-12
13. 1 John 1:8-9
14. Hebrews 10:24-25
15. 1 Timothy 6:17-19
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17. Corinthians 8:9
18. Job 40:15-24; 41:1-34
19. Romans 8:20-22
20. 2 Corinthians 6:14
21. Philippians 2:13
22. Galatians 5:22