

December 2019

Greetings Brethren:

What a true blessing it was to be able to assemble in God's presence and worship Him during the Feast of Tabernacles and Last Great Day. Did you have fun? Were you relaxed? After the planning, preparation, and probably stressful times right before the Feast, did you find yourself at peace, being removed from the turmoil of the world? As chaotic and uncertain as these times are, was it not nice to take a break from whatever issues or problems exist, and experience a time of true peace, unity and joy? These things do not just randomly happen. They are not things that a group of people can make on their own and by their own efforts. They are spiritual gifts and are manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

How real was it to you that the Creator of the universe was in your presence? This Being, who knew you by name before the foundation of the world, desired for you to enjoy the companionship of your brothers and sisters in the Faith and to grow closer to Him. Did you think that His mighty angels were encamped at each of the designated places and shielded you from the desired attacks of Satan and those demons who are ever willing to distract you, to frustrate you, and to destroy you?

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:6–8).

Are the memories of the Feast still fresh in your mind? Do you recall the fun activities, spiritual conversations, and good times that you had? These are all part of the blessings that come from proper observance of God's Holy Days. But the time comes fast when these days end and we return home. The reality of daily life begins again as the long, cold days of winter set in and given that the Spring Holy Days will not be observed for many months. So what do we do? The answer to that will provide insight to the question, "Do we still love the Truth more than anything else?" Does that sound ridiculous to you? Why would we even need to ask that question? By the fact that we planned, prepared for and attended the Feast of Tabernacles, as well as all of God's Holy Days this past year, does not that indicate the answer to be "yes"? With the difficulties, trials and unknown circumstances we have been facing, and the effort we have been exerting to live by the Faith Once Delivered, does not that mean the answer is an automatic "yes"?

No, it does not necessarily mean "yes." It very well may be the case that the answer is "yes," but it does not guarantee it. Do we carry on, take the lessons learned and continue to grow spiritually? Or, do we settle back into our pre-Feast routines and eventually forget? That is something we all must evaluate and be mindful of.

The life of the called is not a life of ease. There are many blessings and rewards, but there are also many difficulties and trials. We must constantly fight to stay close to God and overcome our carnal natures. We must fight to continue to think like God, and to make effort to be more like Him. How often? Every day! It is a fight we face every day:

Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:7–8).

As long as you have a carnal mind, your automatic and natural responses will be opposite to God's mind. He made it that way so that we must fight against it. That battle is much easier said than done. We may think we are making the necessary progress because we are living a way of life that the uncalled say is foolish. But, we also may be going through the motions on certain things which reveals a different orientation. *We say we are focused spiritually, but our lives indicate we are too focused physically and not effecting the required change of mind.*

Initial Love

Think back to the time of your initial calling when this new thing called the Truth made complete sense to you. You were reading and hearing things that you had never seen or heard before, and it was wonderful! Complex questions that the world's greatest philosophers and intellectuals cannot grasp became so clear to you. Why were you born? How do you worship and please God in order to inherit eternal life? What does it mean to overcome the self? The answers seemed so simple!

Simple, because God was opening your mind to spiritual Truth. You responded by wanting to learn more and so began your conversion process. You read, studied, listened to sermons and constantly thought about the Truth. You may even have begun to drive far distances to meet with brethren on the Sabbath. The sacrifices and daily effort made were huge. Did this statement by King David apply to you at the time of your calling, and reflect the tremendous effort you were making to learn the Truth and to change your life?

O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day (Acts 2:28).

Change

Life was good and exciting. You may have experienced many blessings that fueled your desire to learn and grow. And while certain obstacles and difficulties arose, the excitement and enthusiasm you had for the Truth overrode those problems. You may not have liked every aspect of the Truth, but there was enough of what you did understand and value that drove you to learn more, and to want to change your view on what you did not like. Would you say that you had an initial love for the Truth? Was it your priority?

This was a time when you made effort, were always wanting to do the right thing, and were very conscious to avoid doing the wrong thing. When you realized an error, you felt your conscience pricked immediately. As awkward as it was, maybe that was to simply stop saying "Merry Christmas" when a neighbor or co-worker said it to you. Maybe it was to ask questions about how to properly observe the Sabbath. Overall, your desire was to do things that are pleasing in God's sight.

But many of us have seen some of our brothers and sisters in the Faith begin the same way. They exerted effort and appeared to be dedicated, but at some point in time they changed and departed from the Faith Once Delivered. That change may have taken place just months after their outward dedication to the Truth, or possibly after decades of faithful service and sacrifice. Unfortunately, for some reason that initial love either disappeared, or became overshadowed by a love of something else.

And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended (Mark 4:16–17).

We see this and ask why. Why would they discard this priceless gift that we hold so dear? Why would they want the things of the world more than God? What temporary thing has so much more value than the eternal things of God? We can ask these questions because we see the visible manifestation of a potentially deadly change. A change that could, if not repented of, result in a loss of salvation. We see, by their actions, that they lost their love of the Truth and departed.

But for us, brethren, there is a different, potentially deadly change we may be making and not even see it. We may be falling into a similar category as those that have departed, all the while remaining in a physical organization and continuing to observe commanded doctrines such as the Sabbath, paying of tithes, and avoiding unclean foods.

Our potential change is the subtle change of mind and attitude back to our natural, carnal orientation. It is serious, brethren, because it does have implications for our salvation. Let us assume you are faithfully attending the weekly Sabbath and annual Holy Days, tithing, eating according to God's health laws, avoiding worldly holidays, and frequently doing some sort of spiritual study such as listening to sermons, Bible studies or reading *Monthly Letters*. You are making some effort to control your thoughts and actions. These things demonstrate that you still love the Truth the most, right? But, what change could be happening that is potentially deadly and indicates your love for the Truth may be fading, or becoming secondary to something else? To start, reflect on the everyday you. Not just the fact that you adhere to the major doctrines, not just the fact that you are struggling through trials and difficult circumstances, but include the everyday, little things you do for a complete picture.

When it comes to people you interact with, society around you, the trials and difficulties you are facing, what is your attitude and what are your actions? The reason is that your responses to these things demonstrate the level of your love for the Truth versus love for other things. As you mature spiritually, simple physical obedience to the doctrines is not enough. As you mature spiritually you need to be adding the mind of God. Your attitude toward, and reactions to, these things demonstrate your love of the Truth. The following are not the only indicators of our level of love for the Truth, but they are major areas we all encounter. We will fall short. If we are looking, we will see areas where our actions, thoughts, emotions and attitudes are not right. At that point, we need to ask God to help us change our attitudes from our natural, carnal minds to His spiritual mind. Is that not conversion? The changing of our minds. The development of righteous character.

People and Society

Now that we are home and going about our regular lives, we are interacting with people and faced with the input of society. We are no longer "on our best behavior" as we were amongst brethren during the Feast. If we are at school, we will be interacting with other students and teachers. If we are at work, we will be interacting with co-workers. If we are fulfilling certain family responsibilities, we may be taking our children to school and extra-curricular activities which require us to interact with other parents. If we have unconverted mates, we may need to socialize with their friends. In any case, we are back to interacting with people that have a different way of life than we do.

They think about things differently. And how can they not? Their minds have not been opened to spiritual Truth and they simply live according to their carnal minds. Their interests and humor should be different than those who are called. What music do they listen to? What TV shows and movies do they watch? How much are they into sports and can recite every statistic about a player or a team? Do they spend hours on fantasy football leagues, or similar activities? If you were at a social gathering and any of these topics arose, would you be able to carry on a conversation just as well as anyone else? If you watch the same TV shows and movies, listen to the same music, or spend your free time focused on the same things as they do, you will be able to fit right in. In these situations, can you honestly say that is you? Or, do you start to feel uncomfortable after a little while because you do not have much to add to the conversation, and eventually you do not have anything more to say? You feel out of place and do not fit in. To some degree that will be the case if your interests and time spent really are that different from theirs.

Well, if you do fit in like the rest of them, what does that say about your love for the Truth? Because to love the Truth is to live the Truth, ALL the time, and to keep it as the number one priority in your life. Not just following the doctrines physically by habit or routine, but by your thinking and your mind as well. The denial of Jesus Christ is not just stating that He does not exist or is not our Savior. The denial of Jesus Christ occurs when we do not live the Truth spiritually as given to us.

Is your time and energy focused too much on the ways, or things, of the world? Note also that focusing on the things of the world is not limited to the physical things the average person strives for: like having a fancy car, a glamorous house, a high-paying job, status in the community, and various sorts of entertainment. It includes your mind. If you allow yourself to constantly think and react naturally, automatically, according to your natural mind, you still are focusing on the world. If you talk and act like everyone else, you still are focusing on the world as a priority. What does that say about you and your love for the Truth? If you love the Truth you will be living it and continually growing in it. And, if living it, will you not be different than those that do not, and cannot, live their lives according to the Truth? Following is an excerpt from a sermon given by Mr. Raymond Cole titled, "Acknowledgment," which explains it very well.

Before we assume anything, I want us to get all the information. So, number one, we are going to talk about the actual acknowledgment of God in our ways—not as specifics, but as a generalized pursuit of our lives. You see, when I live a certain way, by that very life pattern, I am acknowledging something. . . . But what if, now, our demeanor—that is, our response in life, the manner in which we live—is so negligibly different from outsiders that

people can't even see any difference? Then, are you a light? You see, oftentimes people behave in the same way. A lot do with respect to various responsibilities in life. . . . And so, in many, many areas, we live lives that aren't revelatory at all. *We're just one of the group.* One of the, I guess, greatest slurs, or indictments, that could ever be given to you is, "Well, I would never have known that you were such and such." If you've ever had that thrown back at you and say, "I just found out that you do this and this and this, and you believe in this way of life—I would never have known it." Somebody is saying that you are not a light at all, then. *You're just one of them.* They ought to be able when they see you—the manner in which you react, the way you handle situations—they ought to say there is something different about that individual. They don't respond normally. They don't react to given situations the way the average human being would. They don't verbalize the way many people would. They have a kind of control in their lives. They see within you evidence—evidence of that character that God has promised. . . . *It does say that you are living a way of life that the average person doesn't live.*" (Mr. Raymond Cole, March 10, 1984, "Acknowledgment,") [emphasis added]

If we love the Truth more than anything else, we will be striving to live it and avoiding things contrary to it. If we are living it, over time we will become quite different than those in the world. Our interests in entertainment (music, movies, sports) will change and be different than the average person's. Our humor (jokes we tell and listen to, subject matter of TV and movies) will be different than the average person's and we will reject the filthy language and innuendo in most forms of entertainment today. The way we talk to our neighbors, co-workers and classmates (in word choice and subject matter) will be different than the average person. Was it not part of why the Feast was so special, because we were with people of like mind?

In any of these areas, are you just like your neighbor, co-worker or unconverted family member? Do they see you as being the same as them? If so, then how can you say that you still love the Truth more than anything else? You may love the concept of the Truth, or elements of it, but by your daily life you are demonstrating that you love the ways of the world more. You may be adhering to certain physical requirements, but in mind you are demonstrating a love of the world—or the carnal mind—more than God's mind.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1 John 2:15).

Over time, has the zeal and enthusiasm you had at the time of your initial call faded? Are you still excited about the Truth and make the time to learn more? If you do, you probably always seem to have a long "to-do" list for everyday things. Or, do you just get around to spiritual time once everything else gets done? If you were to make a log, and record the amount of time you spend each week in Bible study, prayer and meditation, how much would it be? Try it for one week. Based on your life, circumstances and God-given responsibilities, does that amount of time reflect the dedication that you say you have? If you love the Truth more than anything else, is it evident in the numbers? Life is stressful, busy, and we all have many physical obligations that we must fulfill. Many are godly responsibilities, so the balance and quantity will be different for every person. What is your quantity of spiritual time? In any way can you see yourself slowly drifting and becoming more like the people in the world? If so, can you really say that you still love the Truth the most? It is either the most, or not. There is no acceptable, equal combination.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24).

The danger for us is to know the Truth, follow basic physical requirements, but by actions, thoughts and conversations appear just like anyone else in the world. Is that you? Are you just like anyone else in the world? Simply knowing the Truth and observing the rules, physically, does not mean you love it more than anything else.

Trials and Tribulations

If you are chosen by God and working to develop righteous character, you will face difficulties. It is one of the primary avenues for developing righteous character. But it is not just going through difficulties that is important, it is our attitudes. And, have our attitudes changed over time? All may have been fine at the beginning of a trial or difficulty. But what about now?

We are exhorted by the Apostle Paul:

Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:14–15).

What do many people do when they are faced with severe difficulties? Some will sink into depression. Some will get angry. Some will lash out at others. Some will lose their faith in God. Some will run away from their problems through various forms of addiction. Some will take charge of their lives and do whatever it takes to get to the desired result. These are all natural, common things the average person may do because it is how the natural mind reacts to challenges.

By contrast, how do we react when faced with difficulties? In reality, some degree of any of the above categories may apply because our minds are automatically reacting and we are fighting for control of them. How do you feel when you lose a job, cannot find one, or have one that does not provide sufficient income to pay the bills? How do you feel when you are isolated from brethren and have no friends with which to fellowship? How do you feel when you have a persistent health problem that just does not seem to end? How do you feel when living with an unconverted mate causes you to push the boundary of Sabbath observance or socializing with people you normally would not? How do you feel when you want, and ask God for, something that in general is acceptable in His eyes, yet you feel is being withheld from you? How do you feel when other people do not treat you the way they should?

If you are faced with any of these circumstances, what is your attitude or what are your actions? Even though you do not have what you want, or are not in the situation that you want, do you have peace of mind and are you accepting of your situation? Do you recall that God is lovingly molding you for purpose, and thank Him for it? Or, are you frustrated by the fact that if you were not called and did not have to sacrifice to live this life, you think you probably would have those things you want and desire? Are you simply waiting for this trial to be over so that you can get back to enjoying life? If you do, might your priority really be you, your feelings, and not God?

We all face frustrations and doubts. We are human. But through it all, what is our priority? Are we demonstrating that we love God more than anything else, still? Do we love Him and trust Him? While in the midst of distress and uncertainty, do we thank Him for helping us to develop righteous character? After the weeks, months, years or decades of struggling, are we starting to fade away from the spiritual zeal we once had? Is whatever burden we carry too much to handle, causing us to lose the zeal and love for the Truth we once had? Are we starting to take matters into our own hands because God will not deliver what we have been asking for?

If we have grown weary and our time is increasingly diverted to things of the world, can we honestly say that we still love the Truth the most? If we have grown weary of waiting for something and thought, "Haven't I been waiting long enough?," and then make things

happen ourselves, do we still love the Truth the most? God will often put us in, or allow us to stay in, certain situations to see how we react. So how are we reacting? Even though the situation may be stressful, uncertain, or overwhelming, what has been our reaction to, and thoughts about, the situation. Do we still love the Truth the most and are we thankful to God? Or, are we in a constant state of frustration, agitation, doubt or fear, and are we biding our time until the issue passes? Again, are we desiring our comfort more than God's will?

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27).

Shortly before the arrest, trial, scourging and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, He said that He was leaving His peace. What peace? Knowing that He was about to be brutalized physically and abandoned by His loved ones, mocked and criticized by those who eventually may qualify to be part of the Family of God, how could He have, and be leaving, peace? Peace existed because His priority was the will of the Father. Peace existed regardless of the physical surroundings because of His spiritual focus.

So where is your peace? If you still love the Truth more than anything else, will you not have that peace also? Will not that trait of the Holy Spirit be evident in you? That does not mean that stress, uncertainty, doubt, frustration and a host of other emotions will not appear. They will, because it is the *natural you* responding, often with the encouragement of Satan. But through it all, and over time, are you demonstrating an increasing amount of peace of mind? Or, are you constantly reacting like anyone else in the world, according to the natural mind?

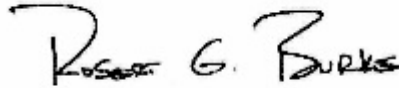
For whatever circumstance we are in, whatever trial exists, whatever difficulty we face, how are we responding? Is it important, and does it reflect our love of the Truth?

But, if God has opened *our* eyes—set them in sharp, clear focus—permitted us to comprehend, through His precious Spirit, what the world is not able, yet, to see, we need to remember this is DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE—for God will hold us accountable for what we do with it! (Herbert W. Armstrong, "Heart to Heart Talk With the Editor," *The Plain Truth*, August 1961, p. 25)

God will hold us each accountable. So what are we really doing with it? Is it our priority? By the way we interact with people, and respond to society around us, is it evident that the Truth, this Way of Life, is more important than anything else? By the way we are responding to trials and difficulties, is it evident that the Truth is priority number one? If we still love the Truth more than anything else, the answer will be "yes."

God has called you and given you the opportunity to be part of His Family. Everything He is doing, and allowing, in our lives is for the creation of righteous character in us. He is doing His part. Are we doing our parts by keeping Him and His ways as the priority in our lives?

Your servant in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert G. Burke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent initial "R".

Robert G. Burke