

Fundamentals of Belief
#17D: Offices in God's Kingdom

Edited Sermon Transcript
Jon W. Brisby; 7-13-2002

Getting right into the message this afternoon, brethren, we're going to continue on this series on the Fundamentals of Belief of the Church of God, The Eternal. As you are aware, we left off last time in the middle of covering fundamental number seventeen. This is now the fourth sermon in coverage of this very comprehensive principle that Mr. Armstrong originally wrote, fundamental number seventeen. As you recall, the first twenty of our fundamentals are the very fundamentals that Mr. Armstrong wrote decades ago at the beginning of the Radio Church of God. We have augmented those with six additional fundamentals, which are also part of the original teaching, and yet were not emphasized as much back in those early years. They have gained significant meaning because of circumstances in the last twenty-five years within the Church and the way that God's Truth has been perverted. We do intend to get through all of those. I don't know how long it's going to take me to get through all twenty-six. We're on number seventeen right now, and this has been about a two-year project in sermons. I can tell you that some of those last fundamentals are going to take a number of sermons for each one, so get ready for the long haul. I'm going to be on this for at least another year or more, probably.

Let's read through number seventeen again and get caught up:

We believe God's purpose is the creation of high spiritual character, and therefore the very object of redemption is to rescue mankind from SIN (transgressing the fundamental spiritual law), and its resulting degradation, misery and unhappiness; and that the object of the present dispensation is to fit those whom God now calls, with their consent, thru a life of trial and test and overcoming sin, growing in grace and knowledge to possess the KINGDOM and to become kings and priests reigning with Christ after His return. . . .

That's the first part—the first half—of number seventeen. It has another whole paragraph, which I'm going to hold for now because we're going to come back to that in just a little while. I'm going to pick up some concepts there. But what we've covered so far in the first three sermons, brethren, is the concept that the very endeavor of this Christian experience is the creation of spiritual character. We went through and showed you that although Mr. Armstrong used the word "character," which is not found anywhere in the Bible, it is absolutely substantiated in the principle that the Bible calls "righteousness." What is righteousness? It is not only knowing the Truth—not only knowing the difference between truth and error, right and wrong—but being able to apply that Truth and to choose the right. Righteousness is more than knowing what the Truth is. Many have been called to understand the Truth, and many have not acted upon it. Righteousness is acting upon that Truth, making it a part of our lives and choosing the right over the wrong. It's precisely the concept that Mr. Armstrong summarized when he used the term "character"—knowing the difference between right and wrong, and choosing the right.

We saw that we are, as called Christians, in a process of redemption—being redeemed out of the state in which we were made with these natural, carnal minds that are rebellious against the ways of God. As He told Cain, it was his responsibility to rule over that carnal nature, and so that is precisely the calling that we have been given. We must recognize what we are by nature, and then use the very power of God's Holy Spirit in this process of overcoming. And it must be with our consent; we have to be willing participants—we have to choose life over death—and then God gives us the tools in order to accomplish it. So, we've gone through all of those principles.

Now, last time, I focused even more than I had intended to on this principle of growing in grace and knowledge—a principle that has been so misused and perverted, even by many of our former brethren over the last quarter century. It's the idea that "growing in grace and knowledge" means that we take what we were once taught, and then change it and begin to do something else. For forty years, under the ministry of Mr. Armstrong, we kept a Monday Pentecost; and yet in 1974, we appealed to the wisdom of human scholars, who are all deceived and never understood the Truth, for a means to improve on what God gave us originally. And so, the Church changed it to Sunday; and three months later, they perverted the very doctrine of divorce and remarriage to allow divorce. It was never allowed before. And then everything went from there throughout the next several years—corruption of the principle of the nature of man, divine healing, which was rejected—until we finally saw the total collapse and destruction of that doctrinal foundation, even by the mid-1980's. And then we saw

the wheels come completely off of it in the mid-1990's. Our parent organization does not even keep the Sabbath or make any pretense of acknowledging the Sabbath anymore. That all began, brethren, because they set the precedent back in 1974 that we could use our own human capacity of interpretation in order to improve upon what God gave by divine revelation. That set the stage for every corruption and destruction that we saw happen. It was all prophesied, brethren. We've been through it many, many times.

So, we went through the proper application of what it really means to grow in grace and knowledge. It doesn't mean to change the foundation that God revealed. It means to overcome; it means to grow in depth of understanding, in meaning and application of those very fundamental principles that we had from the beginning.

Next, our fundamental says, ". . . growing in grace and knowledge to possess the KINGDOM and to become kings and priests reigning with Christ after His return." This, now, focuses on what we look forward to as a reward. That's one of the parts we want to focus on today. I've summarized this entire fundamental with three overall concepts: redemption, reward, and faith. Faith is the focus of the second part of the fundamental that I haven't read yet today. It's going to be the main topic for the sermon that I give next time on this fundamental. We've gone through, then, the major principles on redemption and the redemptive process that is taking place right now. Now we want to look at the reward aspect. Why would we be willing to subject ourselves to this process of overcoming—even through trial, tribulation and difficulty in life? Why would we go through the pain and the difficulty of overcoming sin if there wasn't something out there that we look forward to? Yes, ". . . growing in grace and knowledge to possess the KINGDOM and to become kings and priests reigning with Christ after His return." That is precisely what God has offered. In fact, brethren, that is the reason you were born—the only reason that you and I are upon this earth, drawing breath. God put us here for a reason. All of humanity was created with it in mind, that they would become sons of God in the very God Family, ruling with the Father and the Son for all eternity. That's why you are alive.

Notice Matthew 25 and verse 32:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my

Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Christ speaking, ". . . inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." There is someone, my dear brethren, who is going to inherit that Kingdom. They are going to fulfill the very purpose for which they were created, and they are going to share all eternity in that God Family. That is why we are alive. That's why we were put here. Very often, I've heard this concept from certain ones who write in or call: "Well, you see, I don't want to obey God because I expect a reward in the future; I just want to obey God because I love Him so much and I want to do what's right." What do you think about that concept? Most who speak that are actually very sincere. The problem is, you see, they have adopted these concepts from other worldly churches where they've been in the past that are all focused on the "here and now"—that the purpose of our existence is to be good people, to be good Christians, here, now, in these lives. They know very little about what's coming afterwards. Oh yes, they have a concept of an afterlife in heaven, but it all gets very muddled after that. And so, the focus very often becomes the fact that to really be honorable in the eyes of God, we should want to serve God just for the sake of showing our love for God, even if we never receive anything as a reward in the future. That sounds really good and that sounds really nice. But guess what? It's not what God wants us to focus on at all.

Let's notice a couple of scriptures that show you that God is the One who authored the hope of salvation, and He wants us to focus on that reward that He is offering. Matthew 6:33. Does God say, "Obey Me just for the sake of drawing close to Me right now in the flesh, and that's your reward"? No, what does He tell us to focus on? "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness . . ." Now, Christ seems to be admonishing us to set our sights on something glorious in the future, something that He has prepared for the faithful. Is it wrong to want a reward? Absolutely not. You will find throughout the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, that God has put a carrot out there in front of humanity.

I used to get that a lot when I worked in the insurance claims business, running large operations with several hundred employees. I used all manner of incentive programs to try to increase productivity and the quality of the work. The employees recognized it, and I remember some who didn't want to prove that they could do more. They would prefer that everybody in the office just sit on their productivity level, assuming that management—once they found out that the employees could

achieve more—would expect it all the time. And so, we would come up with very ingenious incentive programs, and certain people would try to squash those and say, "Don't respond. Don't let them tempt you into doing more." Yet most employees couldn't resist because the carrot was just too enticing. If management behaves properly, if they reward their employees and don't abuse them, then the company can achieve very positive results and the employees can also be rewarded. If it's done with wisdom, there is a way to meet all of those needs. I have found, in my personal experience, the absolute validity of a good incentive program. Well, guess what? God is the author of the ultimate incentive program. He gave humanity the incentive of immortality—life eternal in a glorious family relationship of peace, harmony and power. It is far beyond our capacity to remotely comprehend.

What did God focus ancient Israel on? "Obey me for the sake of obeying me"? No, "Obey me that you may inherit the Promised Land, that you may have all of these good things—a land flowing with milk and honey." He focused them on a goal, a reward; and that very Promised Land of Israel was a type of the Millennial reign of Jesus Christ, which we, as spiritual Israel, look forward to and contemplate. God is the author of the carrot system of management—putting the carrot out there, that we who are called in our appropriate times have something that we can look forward to, that will make this excruciating process of character development and overcoming—redemption—worthwhile. It's something, through trial and tribulation, brethren, that you can keep your eyes focused on and know that it is worth whatever sacrifice we need to make in the flesh.

". . . seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness . . ." There is the word "righteousness" again. Not just the Truth, but the ability to apply the Truth and to act upon it with fruits, even as the Apostle James said.

1 Corinthians 15 and verse 19, which goes hand in hand with this concept. What did the Apostle Paul say, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, about those who have nothing to look forward to other than what is offered in this life? "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." If our only goal is to draw close to Christ and to the Father now, while we live on the earth, Paul says, ". . . we are of all men most miserable." Paul understood that humanity should have the hope of eternal life. We should desire a reward. We should be setting our sights on something greater and more valuable than what we have now.

Matthew 11 and verse 11:

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven [That's the Kingdom we're speaking of.] is greater than he.

Here, Jesus Christ showed that, yes, the people of the day had an awesome respect for the ministry and the power manifested by John the Baptist as a servant of God. They thought, "Certainly, he is the epitome", and yet Christ used the opportunity to show that what He has prepared for those who will receive the reward of the Kingdom of God is so much more to look forward to. The power that is going to be given, the authority, the glory, to those who are born into the very God Family, is going to be head and shoulders above that which was manifested by John the Baptist in the flesh.

. . . notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

What violence are we talking about? Is this a bad thing? ". . . the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence . . ." Are we talking about a war, like that war that happened eons ago when Lucifer rebelled against God? No, we're talking about a different war. ". . . the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." We're speaking, brethren, of the tenacity of those called to crucify the self, even as Jesus Christ was willing to be crucified and to give Himself totally. Who are the violent, and what are they being violent against? We're talking about the called of God who have accepted that calling, become baptized, who have received the down payment of the Holy Spirit, and now have set about the task of overcoming the natural, carnal nature and putting on Jesus Christ. Crucifying the self—that's the violence—killing the natural mind and allowing Jesus Christ to live more fully within us.

". . . the violent take it by force." It means that those who are going to inherit the Kingdom of God are going to have to apply effort. There's going to have to be a will, a desire, to possess that Kingdom. It's going to take a tenacity within us, brethren, that says we're not going to let anything stop us from receiving the inheritance that God has offered. God has given us the opportunity. We could never have it if not for His calling. We absolutely depend upon the grace of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to wipe away our past sins. We come before Him and we ask for that

forgiveness. There's no way that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. And there's no way that He is going to give that Kingdom to those who do not love it enough to put Him absolutely first. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God. That is our commission, and yes, it is those who are willing to crucify the self, to strongly work at overcoming, who prove they love the Law of God more than anything else—it is those and only those—who are going to be in that Kingdom. What is it that you and I, brethren, are going to have to endure, either between now and the end of our lives, or at the return of Jesus Christ, whichever comes first? What kind of things might we have to endure in order to prove that we really love God more than anything else, including our own lives? It is those and only those who will prove that which God requires in order to give that priceless gift. ". . . the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force." Yes, God wants us to focus on the glory of that Kingdom that He is offering. That is the great reward at the end of that redemptive process, that which we have been talking about now for the last several weeks.

1 Corinthians 6 and verse 9: "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" It doesn't say, "Those who don't know the Truth won't inherit the Kingdom of God." There's probably going to be a number of people who actually know the Truth of God who may not be there. Why? Because they were not willing to apply it. They were not willing to crucify the self that they might have the Kingdom. "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?" It means those who are not acting upon the Truth that they were given.

Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Everything that God has given us points to that Kingdom as a reward. That's where He wants our minds focused, the opportunity to fulfill our very reason for being. You see, brethren, if you and I die in this flesh and do not receive an office in that God Family, we will have failed. We will have failed to fulfill our purpose for existence. We were not created to exist only as fleshly human beings for a period of seventy, eighty, ninety, or one hundred years. We were created for the purpose of joining the very God Family. If we fail to achieve that purpose—that end—then our life and our existence will be a failure.

Acts 14 and verse 21:

And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

The apostles were focusing the people in the first-century Church upon the hope and the glory of that Kingdom, that which God has offered to humanity. ". . . that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God." That's why it's called a straight and narrow gate, and few there be that find it. It's a hard and troublous way. The only reason that any human being would ever be willing to sacrifice the things required is if they value that reward at the end of the road. If that reward is so valuable and so priceless in your mind, more important than anything else, then you're in a position to do the things necessary in your life now in order to be there. We're weak, frail human beings, and we fall so easily from that which we know is right, which is why we need the blood of Jesus Christ every single day when we go before Him in our prayers to ask for forgiveness for those sins. As long as we're fighting, as long as we're not justifying those sins, as long as we're not practicing those things as a way of life, then He is ever willing to forgive and to continue to give us the power we need through the Holy Spirit to keep that fight going, to move forward.

What about, now, when our fundamental says, ". . . to possess the KINGDOM and to become kings and priests reigning with Christ after His return . . ." Well, where's our proof that the very hope of being in the Kingdom involves offices of responsibility as kings and priests? Well, let's notice it in Revelation 1 and verse 5: "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead . . ." You see, He's called the first. He wouldn't be the first if there was nothing that was going to follow. Even as Christ has received, so will many others receive behind Him.

And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

That's why you were created, brethren, because God wants to give you offices in that family government—priests and kings.

Revelation 5 and verse 7: "And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne." We're speaking now of a time in future prophecy when the Father is going to finally say it's time. No one knows that time right now except the Father. But there's a day coming when He's going to say it's time, and He's going to hand that Book to the Son. Jesus Christ, who has qualified perfectly for that office of King and High Priest, is going to take possession of His throne on this earth. This is when it all is set in motion.

And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne [referring to the Father]. And when he had taken the book, the four [more appropriately translated, living creatures] and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints. [I'm going to come back to that later.] And they sung a new song . . .

Now, here are these angelic beings serving at the very throne of God, and they're singing a song. And they're singing a song whose lyrics refer to you. They're not singing about themselves; they're singing on behalf of those who have been created and planned for the purpose of salvation and receiving glorious offices in God's Family. Notice what these angels are singing at God's very throne.

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us [That's you, brethren.] unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

Think about that. These glorious angelic beings were created to be servants. They were never given the opportunity that you've been given. God didn't create the angelic host with the potential of being in the God Family. No, He created them as ministering spirits. He created them as an entire class of immortal spirit beings to serve the God Family, but you have been created for the purpose of joining that Family and sharing the power and the glory of the Father and the Son for all eternity. And here are these angelic beings, these servants, who serve that God Family, and they're singing this song on your behalf at the very throne of God.

. . . hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.

That is the hope of those who fulfill their calling. But receipt of that Kingdom, brethren, requires that we accept the very plan that God has set in motion, that plan of redemption that we've been talking about. We have to understand it; we have to agree with it. We have to be willing to put it into action in our lives.

Notice Matthew 21 and verse 42:

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner . . .

You see, that's the way human beings are. God made human beings with an incredible capacity for understanding, to acquire knowledge and wisdom, and yet only to a certain degree because He has not allowed them to understand spiritual things. So, man, on his own, has achieved all kinds of glorious things. We look to our icons of the buildings and technology and the things that man has created and performed over the centuries and the millennia, and we say, "How wonderful! How glorious those things are!" But it really is nothing because God has preserved the knowledge of spiritual things to Himself and to those to whom He will reveal it.

And so, men have defective reasoning capacity when it comes to spiritual things. They cannot grasp the things of God. God has hidden it from them. They don't recognize Jesus Christ. They don't recognize that plan of redemption that's being carried out, even before their very eyes.

. . . Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner . . .

That which men value is nothing to God. The things which men despise are those things which God promotes. Jesus Christ came in the flesh, perfect physically and spiritually with no sin, and human beings didn't respect it; they didn't value it. They could not see it; they could not, because God had left that veil over their eyes. And so, humanity rejected Jesus Christ as something that was worthless and a nuisance. ". . . The stone which the builders rejected [referring to that Christ], the

same is become the head of the corner . . ." No, God knew that it was incredibly valuable; it was perfect. It is the cornerstone of the salvation of humanity.

. . . this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

Just because we're given an opportunity for a calling to the Truth doesn't mean we have a cakewalk into God's Kingdom. Far from it. We're going to have to prove that we love it enough to make the ultimate sacrifice. Unfortunately, too many who have been given that opportunity, have turned instead to the carnal things of the flesh. They have allowed offenses to pull them away from that original revelation that we received. And so, they too, although very earnest in their zeal for the things that they think are right—pursuing their own concept of religion—have unknowingly rejected the very Christ whom they claim to worship. ". . . The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." It was offered to many who have rejected it and have turned away from it for their own concepts. God says that His plan is not going to be thwarted by the failures of human beings. Now, we still look for and hope for the recovery of the greater majority of those who have been given the Truth, even those thousands who were once part of that Body that we knew was God's Church. And yet, they have now embraced all forms of personalized doctrines, seeking to justify themselves and their own brand of worship. God doesn't accept it.

We're not here, brethren, justifying our own brand of personalized doctrine. We haven't created anything, but we are holding on to that which we were given. We were taught through the end-time servant, Mr. Herbert Armstrong, who we accept was the man that God used to reveal the Truth in these last days. Now for the last twenty-six years, this small remnant group has continued to hold faithfully to that very Way of Life. We didn't create it. I was taught it just like you were. I haven't added my own brand of doctrine or interpretation to it. I'm not here before you, brethren, because I'm trying to seek some approval or accolades. I'm only before you because, guess what? I want to be in that Kingdom with you. I would have been very happy just to sit as a lay member among you. I did that for many years. Had it not been for the fact that God's servant who continued to be faithful for all those years, Mr. Raymond Cole, tapped me on the shoulder and said he needed my help, I wouldn't be here. That's the only reason I'm here, but I'm not here in order to come up with my own interesting take on doctrine—something tantalizing and new to offer you.

No, the Truth grows. Our understanding and depth in that Truth continues to grow, and we continue to grow by putting on more of the very mind of Jesus Christ; but that Truth never changes. We're here, holding fast to that original revelation, and I don't intent to turn from it, God helping me. But there are many who have allowed circumstances in their lives and the bad examples of others—ministers and laity alike—to cause them to become discouraged and offended, and they have turned away from that which they once held dear. We look for the time of their redemption when God is going to create, even through tribulation or difficult circumstances, an opportunity to soften their hearts and bring them back to that Truth. In the meantime, we wait patiently and work urgently on our own overcoming—that redemptive process.

"The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." It means it's not enough to talk about it. It's not enough to profess that we love God; we have to show it by the very actions of our lives. We have to bear spiritual fruit. That means we have to build character; that means we must have righteousness—the applicability of that Truth within our lives, the fruits.

"And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken . . ." That's hopefully what we're doing, brethren—that we fell on the very cornerstone, Jesus Christ, and we were broken. Our carnal nature, our will to serve the flesh, was broken. We said, "I don't want my way anymore; I know my way leads to death. When I pursue the things that come naturally to my mind, according to my emotional influence, it leads to bad things, and I don't want those bad things anymore. I want the good things that God promises for obedience." Hopefully, we are those that have fallen upon the very Rock of Jesus Christ, and we have been broken physically; and through baptism, then, we have been renewed to walk in a different way—to put on the very mind of Jesus Christ, not our own carnal mind, not to pursue and to advance the carnality of that rebellious mind. But instead, we broke that mind; we crucified that flesh, and now we're walking after the very laws of God.

And whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken [I hope that's us, brethren.]; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.

Whoever will not accept that Christ, who will not acknowledge the glory and the authority of that living God—the perfectness of the Christ who represents the Father and who brought us that priceless Way of Life—whoever will not acknowledge Him and will stand defiantly to justify the self, is absolutely going to be crushed by

that Stone and ground into powder. Which are we going to choose? I prefer to give up the ways of my own mind because I do want that reward, and I think you do too. I want to fulfill the reason for my creation, and I know you want to fulfill the reason for your creation. We should want the reward of that Kingdom, and we have to recognize that it's only through the priceless gift of Jesus Christ and His sacrifice that we can attain it.

Luke 13 and verse 24: "Strive to enter in at the strait gate . . ." It actually means "the narrow gate." It's not the gate through which most human beings walk.

Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets.

"We know you Christ! We've known you for so long! Why do you say now that you don't know us?"

But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.

Is Christ hard, cruel and unmerciful? Why would He say this? The key is right within His own words. ". . . depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity." Who are the workers of iniquity? Those who are not living the Truth. They may know the Truth; they had the opportunity by their calling to receive the Truth, but they didn't walk in the Truth. They didn't walk in a life of righteousness, trying to apply the Truth to the best of their ability through the power of the Holy Spirit. Instead, they were justifying a way that made sense to the carnal mind—heaping the lusts of the flesh upon themselves and calling it religion, calling it the worship of God. And God says, "No, I revealed to you the Truth. I told you how to worship me." Don't think that any of us are going to amend that, soften it or make it easier, and think that God is going to accept it. He absolutely won't. That's precisely what the ancient Israelites did. That's precisely what King Jeroboam did. He took the revealed doctrines—the Ten Commandments of God, the commands to keep the Holy Days—and he said, "Well, we just want to make this a little better. So, yeah, we're going to keep the Feast of

Tabernacles, but we're going to have ours in the eighth month, not the seventh month. And let's set up these two golden calves in the cities of Bethel and Dan. We'll kind of make it easier to fit in with the pagan nations that are around us because it'll make the people happy. And I don't need the Levites for a priesthood, you see; I'll just pick my own priests out of the base people of the land. That'll make me very popular. So we'll do all those things God wants; we'll just kind of modify it and make it a little better." And so, we read those stories and say, "Oh, those bad old Israelites. How terrible they were—tsk, tsk." And yet, God's people today, spiritual Israel, cannot even see the hand in front of their face—that they're doing precisely the same thing, using their own carnal reasoning to pervert what God gave and made holy. He gave it perfectly and He said, "You hold on."

There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out. And they shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God. And, behold, there are last which shall be first, and there are first which shall be last.

Yes, there are those who were called early on and unfortunately proved that they didn't have a love for that pearl of great price that God gave, and they turned away from it. And yet, God has called others and He said, "My offices are going to be filled." And if there are those who didn't appreciate the calling and the gift, and were not willing to walk on that road of redemption to receive that reward, then He's going to call others. His house is going to be filled. And so, there are those that are going to be called, even in the eleventh hour. They're going to be converted, and they're going to receive the very same reward, even as many of you who have walked in this path of life for many decades. We do have a great reward awaiting. God wants us to look for it. He wants us to relish the thought of the hope of the Kingdom of God and to apply ourselves now in that self-sacrifice.

Next, back to the fundamental—the second half: "We believe Christians must therefore live a clean, pure, holy life by faith according to the Bible standard, with constant Bible study and surrendered prayer . . ." That's what we're going to talk about now, but I'll read the rest of this. ". . . trusting God in and for all things, that yielding to pride and lust of the flesh is sin, that God hears and literally answers the believing prayers of His children who keep His commandments—according as He has

promised in His Word, including physical healing, deliverance from temptation and trouble, providing the way for every actual need."

Most of that paragraph is referring to a heading that I'm designating as "Faith"—the requirement to walk in faith and to truly trust God. But I want to cover this one phrase for the remainder of this afternoon's sermon—part of what is required of Christians is "constant Bible study and surrendered prayer." Bible study and prayer are absolutely required to give us the strength and the help that we need to receive the power of God's Holy Spirit to do our work. The problem is, too many have misinterpreted and misapplied the proper reason for Bible study. Last time, I went through and showed the perversion of this concept of "growing in grace and knowledge." Yes, Christians absolutely have to grow in grace and knowledge; we can't achieve that reward if we don't, but it's not the kind of growth that most are out there spouting. They call "growth" change, ripping the tree up by the roots and replanting it somewhere else. That's not growth at all; that's transplanting. And so it is with this concept of Bible study.

Let's turn to 2 Timothy 2:15. How many years did we hear this concept being quoted? "Study to shew thyself approved unto God . . ." This meant, as we were told, study your Bibles—stick your nose in the Bible and make sure you read x number of hours a day because that's how you're going to show yourself approved unto God. Is that really what God said here?

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

As Mr. Raymond Cole pointed out years ago, if you simply look at the Greek definition of the word "study," you find out what is really being covered here. The word "study" is better translated "endeavor." It's the Greek word *spoudazo*. It means to use speed, to make effort, to be prompt or earnest, to be diligent, to endeavor, to labor. So, the appropriate translation is "endeavor" or "labor" to show yourself approved unto God. It doesn't say anything about reading a book, whether it's the Bible or anything else. It means we have to take our Christian calling seriously. We have to work at it and apply ourselves diligently.

[Endeavor] to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Is God's Word involved? You better believe it is. But what does it mean to rightly divide the Word of Truth?

1 Peter 3:15 will tell us:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.

It means, brethren, that we had better study and learn enough to understand why we do what we do. We had better be able to answer. It doesn't mean you have to be a technical scholar. It doesn't mean you have to be able to answer every tricky question that somebody may throw at you for their own nefarious purpose, but it means we need to understand God's Law well enough that we can give an answer for why we practice the things that we do—why we keep the Sabbath, why we keep the Holy Days, why we tithe, why we do all of these things that are an integral part of this Way of Life. We had better be able to answer for those things and understand. It doesn't mean you have to be a technician.

So, yes, we do need to endeavor; we need to labor earnestly at this calling as Christians—this redemptive process of overcoming. And Bible study is a necessary part. But why? Because reading so many hours a day automatically gets us points and builds treasure in heaven? No, the Bible, for personal study, is a tool. It's a tool to help us accomplish the work of overcoming that we need to do.

Notice Hebrews 4 and verse 11: "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest . . ." There, again, God is focusing us on the goal at the end of that road—the Kingdom of God. He's saying, "Keep your eye on the ball. Focus on that reward that I'm offering you; you're going to need it." "Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest . . ." And guess what? There's that Greek word *spoudazo* again. It's the word "labor." I haven't heard anybody in the Church use this as a justification or an admonition to study the Bible. Let us study the Bible, therefore, to enter into that rest. No, I think they understand that, in this context, it means to work hard. Let us work hard to enter in. Studying the Bible is a part of that, but it's not the be-all-end-all.

Let us labour [*spoudazo*], therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. For the word of God . . .

There's the Holy Scripture. There are those commandments we were given. How are we going to use them?

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

How is it that Christians are to use the Word of God in their Christian endeavor? It is to be used in our personal lives, brethren, as a two-edged sword to show us our own sins—how far short we fall from the perfect example of the standard that God gave in His Word. For self-examination—to use that Word as a mirror to show us what we need to change and overcome. That's how that Bible study becomes an integral part of the true Christian's endeavor. We use that Word, that study, and the inspiration we receive, as a reflection of what we are supposed to become; for inspiration when we are discouraged and having problems. God will speak to us and show us ourselves and what we need to do.

Now, how does that differ from the way that so many out there are using their personal Bible study? Many are out there, brethren, thinking that their scholastic endeavors to become a Greek or a Hebrew scholar, or to see how many Lexicons or Bible dictionaries they can master, talk about and speak from, show their closeness with God. Let alone, all of the rest who are out there spending all of their time in the Biblical prophecies—the long-range prophecies that God laid down. Over a third of the Bible is prophecy; and so, they think that their calling is to spend their time figuring out the hidden keys of future prophecies so they can predict when Christ is going to return, who the two witnesses are going to be, and who the beast and the false prophet are. That's how they spend their time; and they think they're absolutely fulfilling their obligation as a Christian by keeping their nose in the Bible, and hunting and searching for all of these hidden meanings. Are they accomplishing what God told us to do? No, what did He say in Revelation 2 and 3 that we're supposed to be doing? Only the overcomers are going to be there.

I can spend all day long looking for hidden meanings in future prophecies, and not spend a single ounce of time on personal overcoming—fighting the carnal nature which wants to rule in me, the bad attitude and those evil things that rise up in my natural mind. Oh, it's nice to kind of put that whole project on the side. Because guess what? Overcoming is hard. It's not nice. It's difficult; it hurts. Oh, I would

much rather spend my time just studying the Bible and looking into the interpretation of Greek and Hebrew words, putting together my big, colored charts of the way everything is going to work out in the future, and talking to everybody about my ideas and interpretations. Boy, that would be great. The problem is, I'd be missing the opportunity to do the work that God called me to do, which is to fight the carnal nature within me and to overcome. That's what I'm supposed to be using the Bible for.

God gave us that Word so that when you hear the preaching of chosen servants that God raised up to preach the Truth by authority in the name of Jesus Christ, you can take that same Bible and you can verify the things that you're hearing. Did God give the Bible so that every one of us can sit down and receive direct inspiration of new Truth and figure things out? That's what many people out there think. They think, "I don't need a ministry. I've got the Bible; I've got the Holy Spirit; I've got everything I need. Just you and me, God. I'll sit in my living room, and I'll take publications from all of these different churches. And I'll pick and choose, myself, what I think is good and what is not. I'll kind of put together my own little set of doctrines here. You and me, God. I'll study my Bible, and you'll inspire me directly and give me the Truth and everything I need." Is that the way God works? He never has. Every example in the Bible is that God uses chosen servants whom He sends to proclaim that Truth to those He calls. Christ came, and they didn't accept Him. They had the Bible—they had all of the Old Testament prophecies that said that He was going to come. That didn't help them recognize Him when He arrived. He said He was going to send apostles and servants after Him, which He did, who were going to speak in His name and by His authority to give the Truth. They were going to raise up those churches and feed those flocks, and they did, but they also became corrupted in time. The people rebelled and went apostate, just like they did in the last-day church. The same thing happened. History repeated itself and that, too, is according to prophecy. Now we have all of these that are out there who believe—because they've been so hurt by the abuses of ministers in the past—that they don't need a ministry. "I've got my Bible; I've got direct access to the throne of God. That's all I need," they say. It denies the fact, brethren, that Christ said He was going to be with someone, even until His very return.

Matthew 28, verses 19 and 20; Matthew 24, verses 45 and 46—read them for yourself. He promised there were going to be faithful servants, even if they were few—even if it was only a very small remnant, as it says in Isaiah 1. But they were going to be there. They were going to be led by faithful shepherds who were not

going to repudiate the foundation of the knowledge of that Way of Life. They were going to hold fast and teach the Truth. And so, the true Christian recognizes that God has preserved a ministry through whom those principles are taught. It's just the way God chose to do it. He chose to save them through the foolishness of preaching. He could have chosen to inspire every single one of you in your homes through your personal Bible study. If God had chosen to do that, that would have been a perfect plan. The problem is, that's not what He said. He said that He was going to do it through the foolishness of preaching. Somebody was going to have to hear the Word spoken and respond. But what He did do, is give you the power to discern between one who is speaking truly of the Holy Spirit and one who is speaking of his own mind. John chapter 10—read it for yourself. "My sheep know my voice." Do you have the ability to determine who is speaking by God's authority as a minister of God? You bet you do. You have that absolute obligation. And you can read it in your Bible so that when you hear a minister preach, you can confirm it by the word of those things that you were taught from the beginning. You can know. And then, you use that Bible in your own personal time, every day, to have those scriptures speak to you personally.

I don't know everything that goes on in your own heart and mind, and you don't know mine. I have my secret problems that I'm fighting to overcome, and you have yours. We all have them. Your responsibility is not to confess all of your sins to me, and I'm certainly not going to confess mine to you. But we have to be in the process and the business of overcoming those selves. It is a very personal thing, and so we use the Bible. We use the Holy Word of God, which He has given us for that process of overcoming. That Word will speak to you. Ask God to guide you, to strengthen you, and to show you. And by the very words that you hear from the ministry at the pulpit, along with your personal Bible study, God will show you how to apply those principles in your own life and it will become incredibly meaningful and valuable to you. The purpose of personal Bible study, then, is to confirm the things being taught by the ministry and to let God's Word reveal what we need to do for personal overcoming and mastery. That's the proper use of that study.

Regular and consistent prayer is also required of true Christians. Mr. Armstrong wrote, ". . . constant Bible study and surrendered prayer . . ." Obviously, I could give a number of sermons on this single topic of prayer, and I'm just going to give an overview on it to complete this afternoon's sermon. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, "Pray without ceasing." It doesn't mean we spend twenty-four hours a day, every day, praying; it means that prayer is an integral part of our lives. That personal

contact with God through the Holy Spirit is a meaningful and needful part of our existence. Because if we're going to overcome and fight these carnal feelings, these natural natures, we're going to need His Spirit. And that Spirit can be quenched within us. We have to stir it up. We have to fight for it; we have to ask for it. And so, we have to incorporate prayer as a needed part of growing close to God.

Romans 12:12: "Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer." The word "instant" is actually better translated "earnest" or "diligent." ". . . patient in tribulation; continuing [diligently] in prayer." It is an important part, and we have to make it a part of our regular lives. Mr. Armstrong used to advise a minimum of 30 minutes of prayer a day. Forty-five minutes is better; an hour is even better. Maybe, depending upon certain problems or things that you may be facing in your life, there might be a need to increase the amount of time you spend in prayer and fasting. But minimally, brethren, 30 minutes a day. Now, for those who may not have ever learned to discipline themselves to incorporate prayer in their lives, I tell you what, even if you start with ten minutes a day—you don't have to tell me or anybody else that you're not praying 30 minutes a day—start to make it a habit.

I found that incredibly difficult, and I grew up in the Church. I knew we were supposed to pray; I just had the hardest time making it a habit. I remember being eighteen years old and being at Ambassador College, and they had prayer closets all along the hallway in the dormitories to make it very, very easy for students to pray. There were a lot of young people who were very diligent and dutiful about it; I had the hardest time. It just had never become a habit or something I felt compelled to do as a necessity. I knew it was right; I knew I needed to, but boy, it was hard to do. But I did start working at it. At first, it was out of obligation, but in time, by building the habit, I slowly began to find the value in that time of contact with God. As time progressed, I began to feel it as an integral need, something that I missed when I didn't do it. So, if you have not found that level of appreciation for prayer in your daily life, don't lose heart. But God said it's a necessity—it's a requirement—to draw close to Him. Apply yourself, even if it's five minutes a day, even if it's ten minutes a day. Start the habit. You will slowly be able to incorporate it.

Matthew 21 and verse 21:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be

thou cast into the sea; it shall be done. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

". . . whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive." This is an indication that prayer is a pretty powerful tool in the arsenal of the people of God. God hears those prayers. Those prayers are incredibly important.

Revelation 5 and verse 8. This is referring back to that same image we read earlier of the throne of God at the very time when Jesus Christ is given the authority of the Father to set in motion the final events as a part of taking possession of His Kingdom.

And when he had taken the book, the four [living creatures] and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints.

I think many people read over this, and they don't grasp how significant this is. Picture the very throne of God—the glory of that throne, the Father sitting on that throne, the Son sitting on His right hand, this incredible angelic host, serving with all of the light and the glory, the singing and the worship. It is beyond the capacity of our minds to remotely comprehend. And now, a part of the very worship that's going on at the throne of God in heaven is, guess what? Your prayers. Your prayers are incense, sweet odors, at the very throne of God. ". . . and golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints." It means that your earnest and heartfelt prayers to God are incorporated as a part of the very worship at His throne, along with all of those other glorious activities taking place on a continual basis. Now, how important does that make your prayer? It's priceless.

Ephesians 6 and verse 17:

And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Here is an admonition, even in that spiritual battle, which was the focus of the entire series of sermons I gave at the Feast of Tabernacles last year on the armor of

God. Those prayers and supplications are an integral part of that spiritual warfare that we are fighting.

Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

So we pray, not only that God help us, strengthen us and give us more of His Holy Spirit, but we also pray for all of God's people. We show our willingness to sacrifice even our time, our energies, to pray for those who are in need, whether it be physical illness, emotional or mental difficulties—someone who has a problem, who is distraught, who needs help—and we spend our time sacrificing and praying for them. ". . . and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints; And for me . . ." Another obligation in that prayer is for the ministry.

And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel.

I can tell you that the ministry appreciates your prayers—depends upon your prayers—for the work that we have to do, for the travel, and for the responsibilities that we carry out on a daily basis. I try very hard, brethren, not to take for granted your prayers and the help and the benevolence that God shows continually to help us to continue to serve this small remnant around the world.

Philippians 4 and verse 6:

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Even as Christ gave the format in the Lord's prayer, thanksgiving is a key part of our daily prayers. We express our thankfulness for everything that He has given to us—the revelation of His Truth, the protection that He gives us day by day and all that we possess spiritually and physically, which none of us deserve, but which has been given as an incredible gift. We remember to thank God so that we do not show a lack of appreciation. We thank Him daily for the mercy that He has shown.

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

James 5 and verse 15:

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Who is a righteous man? Who is a righteous individual? Jesus Christ is the personification of righteousness, and even though we're not perfect, brethren, if we are applying the Truth that we know and working hard to use the power of God's Spirit to overcome and to make the right decisions more often than we make the wrong ones, then we are proving that we love God. Christ said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Keep them—not just know them, not just be able to quote them to somebody. Keep them; act upon them. That's a lifestyle of righteousness. Those who prove that they love God by sacrificing the carnal inclination to do instead what God requires—it is them He calls righteous, and it is to those that He promises to hear their prayers. Those who are working hard and diligently to honor God—it is those whom He is going to hear when they offer their supplications and cry out to Him in time of need. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

Prayer has always been taught for all of these years as an integral and a necessary part of our spiritual lives. Studying the Bible, using the Word as a two-edged sword to show us our sins and how to set about overcoming and putting on more of Jesus Christ; the knowledge of the hope of salvation in that Kingdom of God which He offers to us, that carrot that God has set out as an incentive to motivate us through the very hard times of the troublous path that we are walking as Christians—all of these things are a part of that fundamental number seventeen. Next time, brethren, hopefully, we'll complete this particular fundamental with a discussion on the element of faith—faith to achieve that redemption and that reward. Next time.