



MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

Volume 7, Issue 7

Web Site: <http://www.minuteswithmessiah.com>

May 2006

MOWING THE GRASS

When I lived in Illinois, one of my jobs around the house was mowing the grass. I guess, for my New Mexico readers, I ought to explain grass. It is that green growing stuff that you don't find on golf courses or ball fields, but you do find in front of grocery stores where they water the street along with the yard and the parking lot. It is the subject of a famous quote (I think it was by Will Rogers) about the government and Indian reservations. "They promised my people the land as long as the water flows and the grass grows, and then they put us on land where the water doesn't flow and the grass doesn't grow." Anyway, I had to cut the grass. I used a gas-powered lawnmower. Now, the most efficient way to mow the lawn is to start in one corner, mow a straight path to another, adjacent corner, then go back and forth, keeping one set of wheels on the edge of the grass you have already cut. That guarantees that you keep mowing in a straight line. One time, as I turned around for the next pass I saw that my cut was not straight. Then I remembered (and for years afterward thought about it every time I was mowing) the words of Jesus. "No man, having put his hand to the lawnmower, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." Actually, in Luke 9:62 Jesus used the word "plow" instead of "lawnmower," but who puts his hand to the plow in the United States these days. (Putting a tractor to a plow, maybe; but never a hand.)

Plow or lawnmower, what Jesus said still applies. If you don't keep your eyes forward, on a set goal, you can't cut a straight line. This passage tells me some other things as well.

Not everybody is fit for God's kingdom. That may be a shocking statement to some, and flies in the face of the Universalist doctrine that everybody will eventually be in heaven. It may even shock some people who, if they think about it, really believe it. Not everybody is fit for the kingdom of God. Everybody has the opportunity to be, but not everybody takes it. One of my favorite, and most comforting, passages is the one in 1 Corinthians 6:9-12 where Paul lists a number of types of sinner, and concludes by saying, "and such were some of you: but you are washed, you are sanctified." As comforting as that is,

so much is it also terrifying, because for each of those that chose to follow God and leave their sin, many more chose to continue in their ways. By making that choice they made themselves unfit for the kingdom. They may be unfit, but God did not make them that way.

Another thing I learn from what Jesus says is that some that think they are in the kingdom are not fit for the kingdom. He is not talking about people who never put their hand to the lawnmower or plow. He is talking about those who began to plow the row or mow the grass and then looked back. Some of these may be people who have prayed for Jesus to come into their lives, and then continued to live as they had before. Some may have been immersed for remission of sins, but later went back to their old lives. Some may even believe that it is impossible to lose salvation once they have attained it. They may have been saved, but are now unfit for the kingdom. These are the people Paul addresses in Romans 6:1-2. "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" If it is frightening that some may choose to remain unfit for the kingdom, how much more frightening should it be that someone in the kingdom may choose to become unfit for his calling!

On a positive note, Jesus is also saying that those who don't act like Lot's wife are properly suited for the kingdom. In this world some people may feel like a square peg in a round hole. This world just does not fit properly. That is because God is the tailor. If we expect to live in this world we won't find the perfect fit. If we expect to live in God's kingdom we will find the perfect fit. We will be fit for the kingdom, and it will fit us. We just have to keep mowing a straight line without looking back.

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WILL WORK FOR FRUIT

There is a great debate among the Christian denominations about the difference between faith and works. Is faith itself a work? Is immersion a work or an act of faith? Do we do works because of our faith, or in order to be saved, or for some other reason? The argument centers, really, on what Paul considered works of law, or legalistic works. This debate is prompted by two letters of Paul—Galatians and Ephesians. Paul is sometimes made to contradict himself when people compare works and faith or works and grace. That is unfortunate, but not really what is to be considered in the following. Paul also makes a contrast between works and fruit. When he contrasts work and fruit he is talking about those things that work on us as opposed to those things that can work in us. The passage is Galatians 5:19-23.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told

You may no more save yourself by keeping the Ten Commandments than you can by worshipping idols.

you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

In this comparison Paul does not make a one-to-one contrast. That is, the fruit of the Spirit is not the opposite of the works of the flesh. First of all, he lists more works of the flesh than the fruit of the Spirit. Secondly, and somewhat related, he lists works (plural) of the flesh, but fruit (singular) of the Spirit. The flesh works on us in various ways. Whatever tool Satan uses on one person may not work on another.

On the other hand, the Spirit works on us in only one way, producing fruit. The Spirit produces one fruit, although it manifests itself in various ways. This makes sense. A fig tree does not bear apples, oranges,

and cherries. It may have, at the same time, fruit in different degrees of development. A fig tree may have a bud, a green fig, and a ripe fig growing at the same time, but they are all figs. The Spirit of God cannot bear different fruits, but one fruit

The works of the flesh

Paul says the works of the flesh are obviously seen. The things that he lists are generally things most people consider to be obvious sins. Some other lists include things, like lying, for instance, which many people consider to be right or wrong based on the situation. Few, even those who commit such things, consider murder or adultery to be acceptable behavior. Unfortunately fornication is becoming acceptable in the United States and parts of Europe, but many people consider it to be wrong, even if they are not Christians. The word that is translated witchcraft is more correctly interpreted as either drug use or drug pushing. Paul seems to have selected these works because they are obviously wrong.

Paul also describes these things as works. It could be argued, then, that sin is an act. A passing thought may not be sinful in itself, but dwelling on a thought can lead to the act. Jesus said, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.” (Matthew 5: 21-22) What he is saying is that the thought is the parent of the action. Hate is the parent of murder. The fulfillment of lust is the child of dwelling on adultery. Oath breaking can only come after rash oath making. The act is what is a sin. Anger, an emotion, is natural at times. Paul says, “Be angry, and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath.” (Ephesians 4:26) Yet Jesus says causeless anger leads to murder. The anger may not be a sin, in itself, but the resulting act will clearly be wrong. Sin is not a thought or an emotion, but a work of the flesh.

It may also be significant that the discussion of the works of the flesh comes in a letter that is primarily about the difference between works of legalism and grace. It is almost as if Paul is saying that relying on legalistic observance of religion for salvation is the same as relying on murder, inciting revolution, or drunkenness for salvation. You may no more save yourself by keeping the Ten Commandments than you can by worshipping idols. Works, for works sake, are worthless for salvation, whether they be good or bad. This has always been so. Some people try to contrast the Old Covenant with the New, saying that the God of the Old was one of justice

and the God of the New is one of love. They contrast blind obedience with faith. The strange thing is that they don't get this idea from the Bible. God has never accepted mere obedience without faith. "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." (Psalm 40:6-8, quoted in Hebrews 10) God has always wanted obedience because of faith, not in place of it.

It should also be noted that Paul designates these things as works of the flesh. The writers of the Bible generally use the word "flesh" in contrast with spiritual things. This is not to be taken as teaching the Gnostic idea that the flesh and the spirit are distinct from each other and that one can do anything in the flesh without affecting his spirit. Instead, Paul is saying that any work, sinful or saintly, is good only for salvation of the flesh, but not the soul. Reliance on works for salvation, again, is futile. The spiritual man relies on the grace of God, because the works of the flesh have nothing to do with his salvation. We are created for good works. They are a natural result of our faith. But they are insufficient to save us.

The fruit of the Spirit

In contradistinction with the works of the flesh Paul gives the fruit of the Spirit. It is not fruits, but fruit. It is not works, or even a work. When we have the Spirit of God in us, we need do nothing. We will do much, but that is a reaction, not a result.

Jesus tells us to bear fruit (John 15). Some people have thought that meant that "you can't get into heaven by yourself." They teach that the fruit we bear is converts to Christianity. If you don't actively teach others, you won't make it to heaven. That is not what Paul says here. That would even be reliance on your own works. Instead Paul says the fruit we bear is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." It is probably true that if we bear this fruit other people will naturally want to follow our God. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) You might even say that believers are the fruit of the fruit. Without the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of new believers is impossible; with the fruit of the Spirit, the fruit of new believers is inevitable.

Because this is the fruit and not the fruits, the things Paul lists here are neither consecutive nor cumulative. It is not that you can't have peace or joy until you have love. They come at the same time. It is not that love is good and joy is good, but love and joy together are better. They are inseparable. This fruit is concurrent. If we have the Spirit in us we have love, and joy, and peace, and

faith, and patience, and the other things listed. We necessarily have all of the above. As the Spirit works within us, we grow in all these things. We may need one more than another, and he gives each as it is needed. It might even be argued that these things are dependent on each other. Patience and self-control cannot exist without love, but it is not love if it is not patient and self-controlled. Meekness and goodness may be results, at times, of faith, but faith does not grow where meekness and goodness are absent. This may be why Paul uses the singular here. There is not one tree that bears different fruits. Instead the one fruit may be viewed from several different sides, and appear unique from each side.

The contrast made here shows us, also, that we cannot develop these things without God. If there is active selflessness or self-control, if there is a true value of self or value of God, it comes only from the word of God

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working within us. Left to ourselves love becomes self-interest and patience is only what others owe us. Without the Holy Spirit, the word of God, working in us the only god we acknowledge is the god of self.

The final point that Paul makes in this context is that law is really a negative thing, but God is positive. Somebody once said that every stoplight was paid for by someone's blood. That means that we don't make laws until they are necessary to prevent harm. Most of the time our laws are restrictive; they take the form "thou shalt not." This is the way of the flesh. A person is considered good if he does not violate the law. The spirit of God, however, yields positive fruit that no law opposes. We have laws against adultery or murder, but never against love or goodness. The works of the flesh never have a positive result; the fruit of the Spirit can have no other result.

If the question were "which would you prefer," Paul makes the answer obvious. Do you want to count on works for salvation? Do you think that the sacrifice of Christ was unnecessary? Paul would ask, "How could you believe that?" The fruit of the Spirit is clearly superior to the works of the flesh. The choice is obvious.

IN GOD'S HALL

What I am about to write was inspired by a poem I read in a book about the New York Yankees. Bobby Richardson read the poem at the funerals of both Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle. I won't print the poem here, for reasons of copyright, but some of the thoughts in it will be here. The poem is by Walt Huntley and can currently be found on the internet at <http://www.theswearingens.com/mick/poem.htm> or other places. It is about God's Hall of Fame.

Most of the world knows four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. For some of us the United States has four different seasons: spring training, baseball season, the post-season (including the playoffs and the World Series), and the off-season. America also has all kinds of halls of fame—football, basketball, rodeo, bowling, cowboy, etc. But when someone talks of going into “THE Hall of Fame” it means the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. (Yes, that town is named for a relative of the author James Fenimore Cooper.)

While Cooperstown may be The Hall in this world, there is a more important Hall of Fame. Some people call Hebrews 11 God's Hall of Fame. That it may be, but those listed in that chapter are just the charter members. The end of that chapter says that there are other, equally important, members. “And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.” (Verses 39-40) There, in that last verse, it says that we can be important members of this Hall of Fame.

It is not easy to get into most halls of fame. You have to do something extra special, and even then you may not be selected. Roger Maris broke the Babe's single season homerun record and he is not in the Hall. Ron Santo had better statistics overall than many Hall of Fame third basemen, and he isn't in there (yet). But God lets people into his Hall of Fame on different criteria. You don't get voted in. You don't have to perform feats of skill or miracles on the field. I have only one homerun in my career (an inside-the-park hit into the left field corner) but I can still be in God's Hall of Fame.

All those people listed in Hebrews 11 have one thing in common. It is not how well they played the game. After all, Samson is there and he is known for the number of errors he committed. No, God has only one column in his box score. The top of that column does not have an H (hits), RBI (runs batted in), W (wins), or K (strikeouts). At the head of that column is an F. It doesn't stand for fielding but for faith. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” (Eph 2:8)

God's Hall of Fame is exclusive. Not everybody gets in. But everybody can. Many Hall of Fame acceptance speeches contain a line something like, “I dreamed of this day, but never really thought it could happen to me.” God's people can be confident of entry into his Hall of Fame. Anyone who makes the team is there. If Cooperstown is “THE Hall of Fame,” then heaven is it in more capital letters. God's hall is “THE HALL OF FAME.” And I am a member. Are you?

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