

God's Sweet Sixteen – Part 1

We've now finished our review of the seven stages of Kingdom Progression. We're to be functioning in the Kingdom Life stage. To do that is to abide in Jesus, to sum up all things in Jesus, to access empowering grace, to function in the law of the Spirit which is life in Christ Jesus, to have deliverance from the prison of self, and to bring maximal glory to God. The Christian concepts often seem too big to get our arms wrapped tightly around. We speak of loving God, worshipping God, exalting God, glorifying God. And those concepts can seem overwhelming and beyond reach. That's why Paul in I Corinthians, chapter 13 took love and broke love into components as to what love is and what love is not to make it understandable and digestible rather than leaving us with just some vague abstraction which did not have power. The principle, of course, is that of the prism, where we shine light through a prism, bend the light rays of different wave lengths to different degrees and separate light into its component colors, the principle that we know as the rainbow in nature. We're going to again use that same principle and take the big concepts and break them down into components which taken together then help us to grasp and function in the larger concept.

You recall the terminology of “Sweet Sixteen” as used in the NCAA basketball tournament. That designates the final sixteen teams remaining that continue into the four regional tournaments. I've adopted that same term for God's purposes by examining what I call “God's Sweet Sixteen”. This list, of course, is not meant to be exhaustive. The basic theme is this. If at any moment of your life you're doing any one of these sixteen things, then you are at that moment loving God, worshipping God, exalting God, and glorifying God. Understand that we can distinguish these sixteen things, but we cannot separate them because they're so interrelated. Each one of these will overlap with, feed into, and be fed out of each of the other fifteen. We cannot do only one of these in isolation. The point of this is not constant self examination. That would only fix your gaze upon yourself and not upon Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. The point is not to take these sixteen things and make them into sixteen self improvement projects. That would be to function according to the law of sin and death. The point is to complete the feedback loop. These sixteen things will be increasing over time if your gaze is fixed upon Jesus. They will be stagnant, complacent, or regressing if your eyes are on yourself trying to make these sixteen things happen. These do not include the specific fruits of the Spirit as listed in Galatians 5:22-23. We discussed those in the Kingdom of God series under the heading of “Abiding in Jesus” and specifically as the fruit of abiding in Jesus. These sixteen things are to occur concurrent with the fruit of the Spirit. There's no specific order to these; you could jump in anywhere and start swimming. I've arranged them into groupings where most of them begin with common letters simply to help me recall them all.

We're going to begin today with *pray* and *praise*. Then we'll take it up later with *seek, surrender, rejoice, repent, rest, humble, obey, give, forgive, thank, tremble, trust, testify, and teach*. You notice that two begin with "p," two with "s," three with "r," five with "t." The remaining four spell hog, h-o-g, humble, obey, and give. And any good resident of Iowa should be able to spell hog. With that grouping of h-o-g (spelling hog), the fourth member of that fourth group is forgive so it becomes easy to remember. So I use simple mnemonics like that as probably do all of you to help me remember things including lists of things. When we look at God's sweet sixteen the principles are as follows. We're trying to do two things. II Corinthians

11:3 – Do not be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ. When Christianity begins to seem complex to us, it simply tells us we are being led astray from the simplicity of Christ. I Corinthians 14:33 – for God is not a God of confusion. So if Christianity seems complicated and confusing, it's not coming from God and it's because we are making things complicated because the more complicated we view them, the more we can remain in self worship. But reducing the apparent complexity to simplicity is not the ultimate goal. The goal is transformation into the image of Jesus Christ to bring maximal glory to God. II Corinthians 3:18 tells us that we are to be transformed from glory to glory into the image of Jesus Christ. So our two goals are to make the complex simple and have the simple become transforming.

According to Webster, communion means the act of sharing, participation, and mutual interaction. Now let us view communion in the context of the presence of God. The presence of God can be broken into three major categories. The first relates to His omnipresence. This is part of His holiness. God is everywhere. Only a holy, “other than” Being could fulfill this. All human beings are under this aspect of the presence of God. That's true whether they're saved or unsaved. There's nowhere that we can go to escape the omnipresence of God. The second aspect of the presence of God relates to His communion presence. This is the category that concerns us as Christians remaining on planet Earth. This aspect of His presence is reserved for the saved whether living or physically dead. Now, of course, we're not yet physically dead. The third aspect is His manifest presence. His presence is made tangibly and visibly evident. This, of course, is the situation in Heaven even now. This is for the saved who have already physically died. A few people have received visions of this while still on Earth. These are general principles. A sovereign God can make exceptions to His general principles anytime of His choosing. That's simply part of His sovereignty. Enoch and Elijah went into His manifest presence without physically dying. But the fact that we can name only two who did so and only a few who had visions of Heaven to see the manifest presence of God tells us that these are in fact reliable general principles by which we can function. We do not sacrifice the first and second levels when we get to the third level. In other words when we're functioning in the communion presence of God as Christians still on Earth, we do not escape His omnipresence. And when we go to Heaven and are in His manifest presence, we do not escape His omnipresence and do not escape His communion presence. So each of these three levels is additive to the prior level. We have access for communion; but we may choose not to access communion.

Next poster. Now I simply use the word “availing” as the heading for this poster to make the following points. By virtue of our salvation, God has made Himself available to us for communion. So God is available. Now separate available into two words to describe our status. We are “avail able.” We are “avail able” to access that which God has made available—namely Himself for communion. We also have our wills by which to choose whether or not to avail ourselves of the communion relationship which God has made available. We never escape from getting to choose God or un-God. God never excuses us from choosing since choosing between God and un-God is our only act of worship so that every choice we make is the same choice over and over in our Christian walk. That brings us to the first of the sweet sixteen.

Next poster. On this poster I've simply chosen five subtopics to discuss under *prayer*. I started with communion and started with our availing ourselves of the availability for communion with

God because prayer is to commune with God. Remember the three essential characteristics of God? He is the sovereign majestic creator king. He is the passionate lover. And He is the fierce, but righteous judge. God loved to create us and created us to love us. Now in that process He is displaying Himself by displaying His creative power and displaying His love particularly as provided by our salvation. Christianity is personal, not just theologic abstraction. The transcendent Holy God is personal. Our infinite God desires to function with us in intimacy. So how are we to enter the communion presence of God in prayer? We begin with entering humbly because of Who He is. He is holy and He never quits being holy in order to commune with us. He is other than and we are never to forget it. Psalms 100:4 – Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise. Well when we enter His gates and His courts, what we're entering is His presence. When we enter with thanksgiving and praise, then our prayer becomes worship; because entering with praise and thanksgiving is to acknowledge His holiness and that's what leads to communion. Leviticus 10:3 (God is speaking) – I will be regarded as Holy by those who come near to Me. Prayer is to draw near to God. Let it, therefore, begin with thanksgiving and praise. This is not just to appease the ego of our God. John 4:24 – God is spirit and those who worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. So all worship has to be truth-based. What is truth? Truth is what God is and how God views everything else. So if we're to worship Him in truth, it must begin with approaching Him as holy. Why? Because the truth is He is holy. When we regard Him as holy, we will enter prayer with praise and thanksgiving. We will not only commune with Him, we will commune with Him on His terms including viewing Him as He is and then responding to that to initiate our prayers.

Although He is holy, we do not enter with hesitation. Ephesians 3:11-12 – This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus, our Lord in Whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him. We enter prayer in a tension state. We do not feel tension; but the tension is between two conflicting spiritual principles that we're to keep in perfect balance as we enter prayer. We enter prayer humbly because of Who He is. He is the Holy God Who sovereignly created the Heavens and the Earth. We enter prayer boldly because of what He has done for us in Christ Jesus. Not to enter humbly is to forget Who He is. Not to enter boldly is to forget what He has done for us. We enter humbly in worship regarding Him as the Holy God that He in truth is. We enter boldly as the sons of God that in truth we are. We are family. So we don't have to beg and cajole, and appease to come into prayer with our God. But because we have confident access, doesn't mean we're to enter with pride. We're to enter with humility before our Holy God; but we enter with confident access because of what He has done for us in Jesus. To pray is to take all of that truth personally. This is His desire. If He didn't desire us to enter with boldness, He would not have given us bold and confident access through His Son. Not to pray is not to take all of this personally. That is to deny God, to deny His holiness, and to deny the confident access purchased for us by His Son. It is to choose to reject His communion presence as not being worth pursuing. It is to be satisfied with His omnipresence as a vague theologic abstraction which leaves us unbothered in our continued self worship.

Secondly, prayer is also a holy rebellion. If prayer is a holy rebellion, then what does it rebel against? Obviously it rebels against the unholy. So prayer is a holy rebellion against the status quo. The status quo consists of things as they presently are; and things as they presently are will always contain unholy elements. It begins with your unrenewed mind, but it exists in the fallen

state of the unsaved around us which persists. And it exists in the unrenewed mind of all fellow Christians. We rebel against all of these unholy elements in the status quo in our prayer life.

Next poster. This poster simply refers to the concept of the gaps. The first gap is to recognize in a general principle that the gap that we stand in is the gap between the way things are in the status quo, with all of its unholy elements, and the way they ought to be according to the will of God. This involves intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is to stand in the gap, leading the holy rebellion in prayer against the unholy elements in the status quo to bring them (through the power of prayer) connecting and releasing the power of God into the status quo in order to do away with the unholy elements. Let's go ahead to the categories of the gaps underneath. We stand in that one gap as a general principle in our Christian life including our prayer life. God is simultaneously standing in two gaps. Jesus Christ and Him crucified, of course, is what is in the gap between my righteousness and the righteousness of God. It's not that Jesus takes our righteousness and makes up the difference between that and God's righteousness; because our righteousness is as filthy rags before the Holy God. What I'm portraying here is that our righteousness is totally unsatisfactory. God's righteousness is perfection and Jesus Christ is in the gap in the sense of providing us the righteousness of God. Then after we're saved, the power of the Holy Spirit, which functions under Jesus Christ and Him crucified to bear witness of Jesus and bring glory to Jesus, is in the gap between what I can do and what God calls me to do, between what I can be and what God calls me to be.

Next poster. This is to remind us of the origin of choice including choice in our Christian walk. God is, God is love, love is relational, relational requires choice. If one choice is God, any other choice is un-God or ungodly in Biblical terms. Every choice is ultimately that same choice. At every moment of our thought life, we are rebelling against something. We are rebelling against either God or un-God. The point is to rebel against the proper thing and rebel against un-God. Our intercessory prayers mean that we are standing in the gap, agreeing with God, and rebelling against un-God in the status quo. There is no neutral ground. To choose God with your next thought is to rebel against un-God. To choose un-God with your next thought is to rebel against God. Not to actively choose God is to choose un-God by default; and thus, to rebel against God by our passivity. That's why we're told to pay attention lest we drift; because if we don't pay attention to choose God we will drift to un-God because of the ruts left over in our unrenewed minds from decades of functioning that way.

Now go back to the poster that has to do with the five items under prayer. Prayer is obedience. Isaiah 56:7 (God speaking through the prophet says) – My house shall be a house of prayer. When anything is expressed as a command, we instinctively do not prefer it or even do not like it. That simply reminds us of our drive towards self determination rather than submission to any outside authority including the outside authority of God. That drive is what led to all of mankind's problems to begin with. The obvious point that we often overlook is that God is always oriented toward our best interest. Thus every command has two sides. It is a command because this is His universe. He created us and we're His by virtue of creation and as Christians we are His by virtue of salvation. It is His universe, He is sovereign; thus, He can give all the commands He wants. But the flip side of that is each command is also an invitation. Thus, a command to pray is an invitation to communion. Obedience to pray is not only worship to God through obedience; it is also in our best long term interest including eternal interest. We can

distinguish giving maximal glory to God and our best long term interest; but we cannot separate them; because they are two sides of the same coin, however unpleasant we may perceive it. So if a command to pray is an invitation to communion, you can see the point. It is to take God personally; and to take His commandments personally, and to take His communion presence that He offers to us through His availability as desirable. Not to pray is to self determine that He is impersonal which means you know better of what God is than God can tell us that He is. Or if we make progress and regard Him as personal, not to pray is to self determine that our personal God does not merit personal response. Not to pray can even be taken to a form of pouting whereby we silently grumble that God is not running His universe as we privately determine that He should be running it.

Prayer is to be constant. I Thessalonians 5:17 – Pray without ceasing. This is simply part of abiding in Him. To abide means to constantly dwell. When we constantly dwell in full faith mindfulness of Who God is, Who Jesus is, who we were apart from Jesus, who we are in Jesus, what we have in Jesus, and Who the Holy Spirit is in us, then we will constantly be in communion with Him by praying without ceasing. Ceasing to have our minds oriented toward God is to cease prayer, to cease communion, to cease worship, to cease obedience, and to cease our holy rebellion against the unholy elements in the status quo. Colossians 3:17 – And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus. Any unit of time that we do not have a God focus, is a unit of time in which we will function in the flesh, in self determination, and in self worship. An attitude of praying without ceasing, is simply to be "in the spirit" rather than passively living life in the flesh with self as the basis.

Prayer is reciprocated love. Recall that love is a passion for oneness. God loves us. God has a passion for oneness with us. A command for us to pray, and to pray without ceasing, not only gives Him worship, it fulfills His love. His love drives His desire for communion with us. When we set aside units of time in which we do not have a God focus, then during those units of time we are rejecting His love. We are expressing a greater love toward whatever is the object of our gaze greater than our love toward God at that moment. We always desire to commune with the object of that which we truly love. Praying without ceasing is simply a form of saying I love you too. We cannot be regarding Jesus as our source and the cross as our means without seeing the love of God. We cannot see the love of God without responding with prayer. That prayer in response will obligatorily offer praise that He is love and offer thanksgiving that He set His love upon you to provide your salvation. You then respond with love because He first loved you. Then you say, in prayer, I love you too.

We must be careful to avoid one common pitfall. I'll use the tithe as an example. Someone who tithes faithfully as spiritual discipline can fall into the trap of regarding the 10% as belonging to God and the 90% as being his own. In reality, of course, the entire 100% belongs to God. Psalms 24:1 – The Earth is the Lord's and all it contains. So if He owns you, how can you own something that is not His? The same is true with time. It is possible to faithfully set aside times for prayer. This is good and this is Biblical. The problem comes if we begin to regard the remaining time as being our own. To do that is to faithfully set aside time to pray and then to faithfully set aside even more time not to pray. The Biblical antidote for that, of course, is to always have a God focus; and when you always have a God focus, you will pray without ceasing because that's what communion is.

Next poster. The second of the sweet sixteen is *praise*. Praise means to speak well of. Praise to God means to speak well of in its highest form. So, again, we need to remind ourselves of what truth is. Truth is what God is and how God views everything else. If you look at the simple sentence on the poster, it says: To proclaim joyfully the truth of God to blank is blank. When I joyfully proclaim the truth of God to myself, it's encouragement as David encouraged himself in the Lord. To proclaim joyfully the truth of God to another does many things; but one example would be edification. It builds up the other individual. To joyfully proclaim the truth of God to a classroom is teaching. To joyfully proclaim the truth of God to a congregation is preaching. To joyfully proclaim the truth of God to God is praise. So all of these activities are simply one action. The difference between them is not the action. The only difference is the target of that action. Thus, to praise God is to joyfully proclaim the truth of God, about God, to God. There's nothing higher than God. There's nothing higher to joyfully proclaim to God than what He tells us about Himself.

Psalms 22:3 - God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. Other versions say God is enthroned on the praises of His people. Praise to our Holy God is the natural outflow from a Christian who is regarding Jesus as Lord, and Savior, and Holy. Not to praise God is not to enthrone God; and not to enthrone God is to enthrone self. God is sovereign and is positionally enthroned. We cannot change that; however, He never takes away our wills in our Christian walk. We still get to choose whether or not to enthrone Him in our lives functionally. So just as we can be positionally in spirit life by our salvation through Jesus Christ, we can choose to function in spiritual death by choosing to walk in continued self determination. God is positionally on the throne, but we get to choose whether or not to enthrone Him in our functional lives as Christians. We enthrone Him functionally in our praise. To praise Him is to worship Him in truth; because the truth is, He is worthy of all praise. He is holy. And when we see Him as He is, we will praise Him. So not to praise Him is simply to acknowledge that you're choosing either not to see Him as He is, or to see Him as He is and choose to live otherwise which is to attempt to worship Him in a lie, not truth. You may have heard it said that if you want to ascertain where you are in your Christian walk, the first two components to look at would be your prayer life and your praise life. And your prayer life means more than time consumption in prayer. Your prayer life would involve examination of the approach of your prayer life, the content of your prayer life, the attitude by which you offer up your prayer life.

So these two are the first two of the "Sweet Sixteen" and remember these are not sixteen self improvement projects. These are sixteen things that you will see growing in your Christian life as feedback that you are in fact functioning in Kingdom Life, walking by faith in Jesus Christ and Him crucified consistently, totally, and without exception. If these things are stagnant, or Heaven forbid, regressing in your Christian life, you do not improve them; but it completes the feedback loop that you are in fact choosing to walk according to the law of sin and death in the flesh with self on the throne. You do not lose your salvation; but you cannot give God maximal glory that way. You cannot give the world maximal valid testimony of God in that way. You cannot access the abundant life for yourself in that way. And you cannot lay up maximal rewards in Heaven for eternity future in that way. So these things, I remind you as I close today, are to simply regard them as completion of the feedback loop to let you see the degree of your Christian life in which you're functioning in Kingdom Life according to the law of the Spirit of

life in Christ Jesus compared to how much of your Christian life you're functioning in the law of sin and death; because those are the only two laws that we get to choose from. So we get to choose; but we don't get to choose what the choices are and we don't get to choose the consequences of the choices. Those are already established by our sovereign God.

My time is up and I thank you for yours.