

Learning, Always Learning

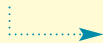


EACH WEEK OUR MINISTRY PUBLISHES A devotion for working Christians called “Made to Matter.” The purpose of the devotion is to encourage, inspire and inform workers of the many ways God cares about their lives, including their work lives.

The devotion spurs a lot of people to email us. Most of the notes we receive are from readers telling us how God is using the devotion in their lives, or to ask us questions, or to ask us to pray for them. A few write to express disagreement or to correct us for what they think is an improper point or perspective.

One of the most common emails we get goes something like this: “I know what I should be doing, but I don’t do it. Worse, I know the things I should NOT be doing, and still I do them. I never learn. What can I do?”

What would you tell them?



skills or being overcritical. It might be trusting people too much, or too little. It might be a besetting sin.

Whatever it is in our lives, mistakes we make over and over again discourage us and discourage those closest to us. Paul summed it up at the end of Romans 7:20-21 when he wrote these words: “*But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.*”

Scripture Passages

Judges (a summary of the book)

Luke 19:1-9

Introduction

As we continue our effort to find our place of service by shifting from self-absorbed workers to a Christ-centered calling, we explore one of the biggest distractions of all: mistakes we repeat again and again.

If you’ve been a worker for long, you know what we mean. It may be character flaws that keep popping up to haunt you. It might be habits like procrastination, poor organizational

Introduction

Describe how that statement by Paul compares to your own life.

Think back over your career. Are there mistakes you've made more than once that had a negative impact? List some.

What about in your spiritual life? Are there mistakes you've made over and over? If you can do so confidentially, list them here. Otherwise, simply call them to mind as you work your way through this study.

Perhaps no one in Scripture gives better evidence of repeat mistakes than the Israelites. The story of the Exodus is replete with examples of how they lost sight of God and turned to sinful actions even in the face of so many miraculous works by God. But for sheer impudence, we need to study a summary of the Book of Judges.

Consider this pattern. Read Judges 2:10-23. What sin did the Israelites repeat?

How did God punish them?

(Notice he did not remove them from the covenant promise He made to Israel, but instead disciplined them.)

Draw a parallel, if any, to your own spiritual journey.

Here's Israel's story as recorded in Judges:

Judges 2:7-11: Israel disobeys and dishonors God. God lets Aram Naharaim conquer them for eight years. Then Israel cries out for a deliverer, and God raises up Othniel to rescue them.

Judges 2:12-30: Israel disobeys and dishonors God. God lets the Moabites, Ammonites and Amalekites conquer them for eighteen years. Then Israel cries out for a deliverer, and God raises up Ehud to rescue them.

Judges 2:31: Israel disobeys and dishonors God. God lets them be conquered by the Philistines. Then Israel cries out for a deliverer, and God raises up Shamgar to rescue them.

Judges 3:1 through chapter 5: Israel disobeys and dishonors God. God lets them be conquered by the Canaanites. Then Israel cries out for a deliverer, and God raises up Deborah to rescue them.

Judges 6:1 through chapter 8: Israel disobeys and dishonors God. God lets them be conquered by the Midianites. Then Israel cries out for a deliverer, and God raises up Gideon to rescue them.

There followed the need for these judges: Tola, Jair, Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, Abdon, and Samson. Get the picture?

What was Israel's mistake?

A careful reading of the Old Testament teaches us that the source of Israel's disobedience was forgetting God's instructions to them—forgetting His Words to them. What does that suggest as a source of the struggle in our own spiritual journeys?

What's the antidote?

Now turn to the story of Zaccheus in Luke 19:1-9. What changes Zaccheus in this story?

What was Zaccheus's response to meeting Jesus?

Just as Jesus is the key to altering our eternal destiny, so too is He the key to altering our present journey. We know our eyes should be fixed on Jesus Christ as we set about our daily tasks, but the distractions around us steal our attention. We're looking to see who's noticing us, or basking in the exuberance of authority. Or maybe the cares of this world are choking us even as we pretend to chug tenaciously up the mountain of our routine. Our eyes are distracted by the unpaid bills, the unkept promises, the fear of a disappearing paycheck, or any of a hundred struggles common to our lives this side of eternity.

Regardless of our circumstances, be they joy or sorrow, doing the work of our hands and heads requires that we fix our eyes on Jesus, "the author and finisher of our faith." Only then are we able to look back on the wake of our efforts and see results that honor God. Only then can others look at the jobs we do and see our faith as well.

It's harder than it sounds. While we often can't control the circumstances of our lives, we can control where we fix our gaze. God gave us His Son to remove the barriers between us and Him, but He also gave us the Spirit to move us inexorably closer to Him. And He gave us His Word so we can know and understand Him. Pick up your Bible before the Wall Street Journal. Speak to Him before your co-workers. He promises He will be found by those who seek Him.

Just as understanding God's Word and walking faithfully with God could have spared Israel much pain and distress, so too will our commitment to knowing and obeying the will of God and walking humbly with Him spare us much pain and distress.

The beauty of our relationship with God is that it survives even repeat errors. The sorrow of those repeat errors is not that it robs us of eternal security, but that it robs us of the joy of our salvation.

Paul didn't stop writing after he penned the words of frustration in Romans 7:20-21. In Romans 8 he writes that knowing Christ frees us from being slaves to sin and to our sinful natures.

Our spiritual life may be two steps forward, one step back, but so long as we know Christ and commit ourselves to His Word, the Holy Spirit works to free us from the errors that haunt us again and again, at home and at work.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- The reason most of us repeat spiritual errors is because we allow ourselves to be distracted from our relationship with God.
- A second reason we repeat spiritual errors is because we don't engage in regular interaction with God through His Word, the Bible.
- While God may leave thorns and distresses in our paths to turn us back to Him, He never turns His back on us.
- Just as Christ can redeem us, so too can a relationship with Him redeem our actions.
- We are no longer slaves to sin, or sinful selves, if we have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior.
- God not only forgives sin, He forgets it.

For further thought: Here are some other ways we Christians find ourselves repeating mistakes. Are any of them on your list?

- You spend a considerable amount of time envious of the pay, perks, and attention others are getting.
- You say things about your employer you wouldn't say if your boss were present.
- You're working so much you've delegated teaching your kids about God to your spouse or their Sunday School teacher.
- You're working so much you don't have time or energy for reading the Bible regularly.
- You give less than your best effort because you think you're not getting paid enough.
- You are regularly less-than-courteous to customers and coworkers.
- You secretly make fun of coworkers who aren't doing their jobs well.
- You withhold information that will help another worker because it moves you up higher in the pecking order.
- You complain about your boss to other workers.
- You shun a coworker because you're afraid you'll be tainted by your association with him or her.
- You flatter the boss to gain an advantage.
- You tell your employer you're going to return after your maternity leave when you know you are definitely not going to do so. (Usually you do this for economic advantage.)
- You're secretly happy to see a coworker fail.
- You call in sick when you're not sick.
- You pick a job purely on the basis of compensation.
- You resent the successes of others.
- You haven't given much thought to how you serve God, other people, or His creation by the work you do.
- You haven't prayed for your coworkers, suppliers, and customers.
- You "bend the rules" on expense accounts or reporting hours worked.
- You take credit for somebody else's work or ideas.
- You lie to keep yourself or others out of trouble.

Our purpose in this set of studies has been to help you grow from a place where you are governed by the circumstances of your life to a place where Jesus is Lord of your life as you realize He is Lord of all, including the marketplace. Our next three studies warn of the biggest obstacle facing Christians today (busyness), and then return us to where it all began—discovering that the walk of faith requires avoiding distractions that cause us to forget that the reason we exist is to be in fellowship with God.