

BEYOND TODAY

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Thoughts that lead to sin

There is a fine line between temptation and sin. When and how do we cross that line?

Resisting temptation to prevent it becoming sin can be a tall order. Half of all respondents to the question, “Why do we give in to temptations?” didn’t really know. The remainder variously acknowledged enjoyment, avoiding pain, satisfying the expectations of others, taking a short cut to success, or lacking willpower as reasons to succumb. Few claimed it was due to sinful human nature (Barna Group study for Todd Hunter’s book *Our Favourite Sins* (Thomas Nelson, 2012).

Examples of temptation

Temptation can be defined as an enticement or allurements, especially to something known to be evil. In modern society where the lines between good and evil have become blurred, we need to go to biblical definitions of right and wrong as stipulated by God Himself.

Scripture defines sin as breaking the law of God (1 John 3:4, KJV). The New King James version calls it “lawlessness.” The Almighty gives a stark warning to those who try to alter His standards: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20).

When God created Adam He instructed him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil lest he die. Satan deceived Eve by convincing her that were she to eat from it she would not die but would become as wise as God. Scripture is silent on how long Eve had been with Adam in the Garden of Eden knowing that this tree was forbidden (Genesis 3:2-3), but all of a sudden she “saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise.” Eve knew God was wise and this may have seemed a useful short cut to speed up the process of becoming like Him. She “took

of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate” (verse 6). She was deceived into disobeying her Creator whose wisdom she acknowledged.

Even among Christ’s disciples worldly ambition reared its head. The gospel of Mark records, “Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, ‘Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask.’ And He said to them, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ They said to Him, ‘Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory’” (Mark 10:35-37). These disciples were guilty of pride

We can all be tempted by pride, self-righteousness, covetousness and spiritual ambition.

and a desire to appear greater than their companions. Christ explained that was not the right attitude (verses 42-45). Another temptation is lying to impress others. An example of this is found in the account of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, who sold a possession. Instead of telling the apostle Peter that they were only donating part of the proceeds, they insisted they were giving the whole sum, which was untrue. Sadly, both husband and wife paid with their lives for giving in to this temptation (Acts 5:1-11).

All can be tempted by pride, self-righteousness (often revealed in being judgemental of others), covetousness and spiritual ambition.

Sin begins as a thought

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ pointed out that temptation begins in the mind, and that hatred, contempt or being unreasonably angry with someone was equiva-

lent to spiritual murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

He gave similar warnings regarding sexual sins: “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27-28).

Temptation becomes sin when we surrender to it. This applies even if we succumb in what we might believe is the privacy of our minds. “The Lord knows the thoughts of man,” says the writer of Psalm 94 (in verse 11). King Solomon remarked, “The thoughts of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord” (Proverbs 15:26). Even our darkest, most secret thoughts are known to God.

Dwelling on an evil thought is just as much a sin as the action, because it damages our minds. Everything we allow into our minds has an effect, including what we read, what we watch, what we listen to and what we imagine. “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things” (Matthew 12:35).

We never outgrow temptations, but they can become harder to spot as we continue to emulate Christ. When we overcome in one area Satan often attacks us in another. Sometimes we can find ourselves considering a wrong action and wondering, “Where did that thought come from?”

Deal with temptation when it first appears

Like a tenacious weed, it is easier to reject a wrong thought immediately it is noticed than to allow it to take root and then try to eradicate it. Left unchecked, temptation can entwine itself into our minds and lead to breaking God’s law. James, a half-brother of Jesus Christ, explained, “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

We need to choose to eject the evil thought and deliberately replace it with thoughts more appropriate to a follower of Christ (Philippians 4:8). If we are failing in this because the thoughts are so intrusive, we can try meditating on the scriptures, singing psalms, or crying out to God in prayer for help. All the thoughts of a disciple of Christ are to be brought into subjection “to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). It is impossible for human beings trying to do it alone. It can be done with the help of Christ and the Father.

Lifestyle changes can help diminish temptation. For example, consider the company we keep. The apostle Paul

admonished, “Do not be deceived: ‘Evil company corrupts good habits’” (1 Corinthians 15:33). Consider how we spend our time, our money, and our emotions. Does what we do glorify God? Or does it damage our mind or body?

We must be responsible for our lives and take control. With God’s help gambling, smoking, drinking too much, viewing pornography and many other sins can be overcome – but not if we continue to frequent places where such temptations are rife, or saturate the mind with media influences that glorify sinful practices.

Complacency is another enemy. “Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Pride, anger, lust and greed have a nasty habit of creeping up on us unnoticed. No one is immune to temptation!

Christ understands temptation

Jesus set aside His glory to become a man and face the same temptations we do (Philippians 2:5-8). The gospel of

Matthew lists three inducements with which Satan tempted Christ. In the first, Satan tried to come between Christ and His Father by suggesting Christ satisfy His physical needs instead of continuing His fast, the second appealed

to spiritual pride (which the Son of God didn’t have), and the third offered a short cut to the rulership He had not yet been given (Matthew 4:1-11). In each case, Jesus cast out the sinful thought the devil had tried to place in His mind and replaced it with the word of God.

Although our High Priest and Saviour never allowed those thoughts to mature into sin, He knows what temptation is like. For this reason, He can empathise with us and ask the Father to help us when we cry out in our personal battles with evil. The writer of Hebrews explained that “we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

There is a great purpose in temptations: “Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

Christ overcame sin and the world and has entered His glory. In our battle we often slip up, but if we continue to repent and strive, with God’s help, against temptation and its consequences, our Heavenly Father promises to forgive us and blot out our sins. There is a great reward for those who succeed in this battle.

Bryan Ellams

Beyond Today Supplement

Rehearse now for future roles

God oversees events on earth, as a playwright might direct a play.

It was that great dramatist William Shakespeare who declared:

*“All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts.”*

Shakespeare was right, the whole world is a stage.

But a far greater playwright, God the Father, is right now working on His current production. It’s a lavish presentation called “The Story of Mankind.” It’s a 7000-year work in three acts – “Old Testament,” “New Testament,” and “Millennium,” produced and directed by the Father’s Son, Jesus Christ, who also has the starring role as the hero.

The work has high drama interspersed with mellow interludes. It includes adventure and slow movements, pain and sorrow, laughter and joy, war and thunder, music and tenderness. There is a nasty villain working behind the scenes to bring the project down. There is even a beast and a dragon. At times it’s pantomime farce, but at its roots is a powerfully moving love story.

A new production

In our physical lives, we experience challenges, and opportunities, each one serving as a rehearsal for our spiritual life in the Kingdom of God. We all have our part to play, and if we get it right, we will automatically go into the Father’s sequel, called “My Family” – the Kingdom of God. Advance publicity predicts that this one will run and run, in fact for eternity!

But to be in the Kingdom of God you have got to be good, in fact more than good – striving for perfection. So, we have to rehearse now. We must study our script, the Bible, from which we need to learn not only every word but also the directions in it and then practise it.

Shakespeare said that we have many parts to play, and so do we. But God said it first. He inspired wise King Solomon to write about the seasons of life (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). For disciples of Christ our experiences are not merely happenstance. As God’s people we don’t just go through the motions of living but must be active participants in His plan. When we play our part we can see God’s perfect timing in our lives. Our lives will afford us all the experiences that we need to work towards perfection.

Along with the experiences, our Director Jesus Christ provides those qualified to guide us. The apostle Paul tells

us that there are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, as well as special roles and resources that we have access to. Beyond the immediate help and coaching we need to achieve our goal of perfection, we should look always to the measure and stature of Jesus Christ who is our example (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Seek God’s Kingdom

More good advice is available in another of Paul’s letters: “But I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14).

Rather than getting hung up on mistakes, failures, missed opportunities, we must forget those things, learn the lessons, apologise and ask forgiveness where necessary, and keep moving forward towards perfection.

The benefit of this is clearly demonstrated by those who have completed the course and await their place in

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God’s Family. Of patriarchs such as Enoch, Noah and Abraham the book of Hebrews records, “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland . . . Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them . . . And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Hebrews 11:13-16, 39-40).

Let’s live life now knowing that we rehearsing for a future role in the Kingdom of God.

Frank Jarvis

What is a living sacrifice?

By understanding the requirements of the Old Testament sacrifices, we can learn more of what is required of Christ's followers today.

Since Christ's death and resurrection the shedding of animal blood is no longer required to cover the penalty of sin. From that time only living sacrifices are acceptable to God. Paul elaborates in the first two verses of Romans 12. Rather than living our own ways, he instructs us: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God".

What comprised a sacrifice

In Exodus 12:5 the Passover lamb which was to be sacrificed had to be "without blemish" – in other words perfect. If we look at all the other scriptures relating to animal sacrifices, they too had to be without blemish. Why? What does this mean? We must remember that these sacrifices represented an individual yet to enter this world as a human being – Jesus Christ – who was to die in our place, paying the death penalty for all sins upon our repentance so that we could be saved. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that in His human life He was without sin, that perfect sacrifice. The author is here encouraging us to emulate Christ, striving for a perfect sinless life, whilst we are still alive – a living sacrifice.

At this point, a definition of sin may be helpful. John's first epistle tells us plainly, "Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). The New International Version translates it thus: "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness." The Contemporary English Version similarly translates it "Everyone who sins breaks God's law, because sin is the same as breaking God's law."

Take action

How does striving to live a sinless life begin? It starts with God the Father calling us by opening our minds to understand His word (John 6:44). This is the first step on

our road to repentance – understanding what the Bible says. At first, so we are not overwhelmed with the task, we comprehend just a few points.

Once we understand that we have been contravening God's law we need to do something about it. Peter showed mankind what the next step is when he spoke on the Day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:38 he told those present to repent and be baptised. It is at this point (baptism followed by the laying on of hands) that God gives the help of His Holy Spirit to the repentant individual (see John 14:16, 26). This step is to act on the knowledge that has been acquired – by not conforming to this world but beginning to change the way we live.

With the guidance of God's indwelling Spirit, we realise just how much we need the shed blood of Jesus Christ to wash away our sins and thus maintain our reconciliation to God the Father. As we look further into

God's word we discover where else we have been conforming to this world and we turn instead to seek to obey God.

This then brings us into a closer and deeper relationship with God until eventually the desire to please the self

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is overturned by the desire to please God – that "good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2).

From this we learn that repentance is not a one-off act and that just saying that you accept Jesus as the Christ does not produce reconciliation with God. We must be living a life that emulates the life of Christ, copying Him to the best of our ability. With the help of God, and Christ's perfect sacrifice, we can follow that way of life which results in us becoming a living sacrifice.

David Payne



God's perfect way of life for His human creation

The biblical priesthood reveals the future roles of Christ's disciples.

Teaching those who live through the great tribulation, and later those who rise to physical life in the second resurrection, will be the priority of the elect of God who will rise to immortality in the first resurrection (Revelation 20:4-6; 5:8-10).

The primary function of the priesthood set up by Moses was to teach. Under the old covenant system, they explained to the people the laws, statutes and ordinances of God and instructed them on how to apply them to their lives.

A glimpse of this future teaching role

The prophet Isaiah explains it thus: "And though the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your teachers will not be moved into a corner anymore, but your eyes shall see your teachers. Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left" (Isaiah 30:20-21).

Christ's followers will be the teachers and instructors of the ways of God to those living in the millennium. Interestingly, not only did Jesus state that He was the Way but one of the New Testament designations of the Church He founded was "the Way" (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23).

The prophet Ezekiel elaborates: "And they shall teach My people the difference between the holy and the unholy, and cause them to discern between the unclean and the clean. In controversy they shall stand as judges, and

God expects His followers to be conversant with His word, not only for their future service, but in their lives today.

judge it according to My judgements. They shall keep My laws and My statutes in all My appointed meetings, and they shall hallow My Sabbaths" (Ezekiel 44:23-24).

Concerning the way

As we look at these sections of scripture, we notice that there are three distinct attributes that God expected



Teachers and rulers under Christ shall teach others God's way as they have been taught.

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of those righteous priests.

- They must know the way of God.
- They must go the way of God.
- They must show the way of God.

A prime example of an individual carrying out this function in a proper way is found in the example of Ezra "a skilled scribe in the law of Moses". "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). In other words: Know the way, go the way, show the way.

What about us today? Can we see the pattern that must be in place in our lives if we are going to be teachers that serve as priests of God and Christ in Their Kingdom? God isn't going to place just anyone in the position of being a teacher if he or she hasn't first demonstrated that they know the way, go the way, and can show the way. If we're going to be priests of God serving in the millennium, teaching God's people, we must understand and master these spiritual concepts now.

Followers of Jesus Christ should aim to travel the same path He walked.

Know the way

God expects His followers to be conversant with His

word, not only for future service, but in their lives today. Christ explained that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).

All seeking to please God need to commit to studying His word and internalising it in their lives. Many scriptures praise the knowledge of the Almighty’s teachings, such as: “Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:104-105). God’s word illuminates the way before us. It gives us knowledge and understanding as to how to direct our steps.

The apostle Paul declares that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Here Paul mentions four uses of scripture:

- Doctrine: To establish teaching.
- Reproof: To convince someone of the error of their ways and point them in the proper direction.
- Correction: To change from wrong to right actions.

We should be self-correcting in the light of God’s words.

- Instruction in righteousness: To allow God’s word to teach us to be more like the Father and Jesus Christ.

King David wrote: “Show me Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths” (Psalm 25:4). We should approach God and His word with this mindset.

Go the way

Once we know the way of God, then we are accountable before Him to walk accordingly. This involves putting into action the things we learn from God’s word.

God summed up His desire for the children of Israel as: “What does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good?” (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

Having given them words of life, God expected His people to live by them. The same is true of us today. We have a limited amount of time to learn these matters. When Christ returns, then time is up. In the meantime, hold nothing back, submit to and be led by God.

James, Christ’s half-brother, has much to say about following through once we know what to do. For example: “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22) and “Therefore, to him who

knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin” (James 4:17).

If we know the path but don’t follow it, it is indeed a very serious matter before God.

Show the way

Following on from living lives patterned on God’s instructions, we ought to be able to teach them to others. This is often called “the great commission.” Christ instructed His followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations . . . teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

They were to take what they knew and lived by, and teach it to others. That is the duty of the Church Jesus established. Both corporately and individually we should set an example based on what He taught.

What do neighbours, work colleagues and family members see? In general chatting or in discussions are we aware of our audience? Is whatever we are about to say helpful at all to showing God’s way of life. Our ability to do this is tied to our spiritual maturity or lack thereof.

***“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”
(James 1:22).***

The apostle Peter emphasised the importance of being prepared to teach. He advised, “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defence to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15).

Are we living examples of Christ’s instruction? The purpose of Christian lives is to prepare a people for service to God and His Son in the age to come. In this physical life, God provides us with opportunities to develop the character and skills necessary to fulfil that calling. Let’s implement His instructions in the way we live our lives before Him. God must reign over us now and we must willingly subject ourselves to this way of life.

For more information on this subject, please request or download our free booklets *Tools for Spiritual Growth* and *Why Were You Born?*

Jason Godfrey

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downloaded from our
website at www.ucg.org
or requested from the address
at the bottom of the front page.**



Q Christ said in Matthew 24:34, “this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.” Which generation does Christ mean?
FAQ

A First, note the future context. Jesus had just said, “So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near – at the doors!” (verse 33). Did His disciples “see all these things” in their generation? No they didn’t. They were not in a generation that had the ability to destroy all of mankind. Jesus said of the final, end-time generation, “And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved” (verse 22). Clearly the weapons of that day were not sufficient to bring this prophecy to pass.

Although Christ’s disciples did see wars, famines, plagues and persecutions, and some even lived to see the destruction of Jerusalem several decades later, these were not the total fulfilment of Jesus Christ’s words. They were not the prophesied global events that would directly lead to Jesus Christ’s return.

So what did Jesus mean when He referred to “this generation”? He could not have meant that current generation of His day. They died without seeing all the events leading to His return. The obvious meaning, then, is that He could only have meant the generation of the last days.

Jesus knew that the course of end-time events would not continue indefinitely. Once they were set in motion, all would occur within the lifetime of one generation. Only one generation will witness all the mounting global conditions described in God’s Word. That generation will see the arrival of the specific 3½-year period that will mark the end of “this present evil age” and usher in the Kingdom of God.

To study the prophesied events to occur before Christ’s return please request or download our study aid *Seven Prophetic Signs Before Jesus Returns*.

Let the Bible answer...

What does the Bible teach about anxiety?

Christ instructed us not to be anxious, explaining that anxiety cannot solve anything: Luke 12:22-29.

The book of Proverbs states that depression often results from anxiety: Proverbs 12:25.

God can comfort us when we are anxious: Psalm 94:19. We need to seek God’s help in prayer: Philippians 4:6-8.

Q Why did God make mankind subject to sin?
FAQ

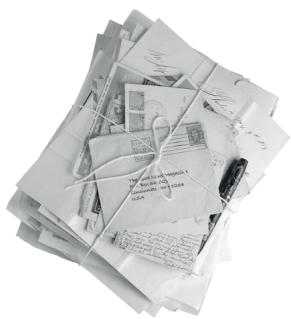
A God could forcibly prevent people from sinning, but that would not enable us to achieve the potential that He wants us to realise. God desires the best for mankind, a future greater than we could possibly imagine. With that objective He is working with our mind, spirit and character. His will is that we learn right from wrong, and that we choose to do right without pressure from Him. We must have free will to make those choices; otherwise, we would not develop good character.

By analogy, people tend not to break the law when the police are watching. Does that prove that they are good citizens? No, for they are under pressure to comply with the law. We demonstrate good character by obeying the laws of the land when no authority is standing over us. It’s similar spiritually. God makes His laws known to us, but leaves it up to us to act on that knowledge.

Working with us in this way requires infinite patience on God’s part. Like a loving parent, He doesn’t want anyone to be hurt. However, He realises that we need the freedom to make mistakes. That it is the only way to develop good character.

Sin’s consequences are often painful and unpleasant, with an unwelcome effect on others. God also allows Satan to play upon the weaknesses of human nature, encouraging wrong choices. Resistance to these influences builds strength spiritually.

God has provided us with a way to obtain forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ. His plan enables us to develop genuine character, at the same time providing us with a way to escape the death penalty that sin brings. Our booklets *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* and *Why Were You Born?* give a fuller explanation of God’s plan.



Letters From Our Readers

Appreciation

Please continue to send your wonderful magazine, and thank you for sharing this information with us all. I especially appreciate the UK Supplement.

Reader in Walsall

Thank you for your booklet *What Happens After Death*. I enjoyed it and it cleared up some stuff I was finding hard to take in regarding the death of my wife.

Reader in Plymouth

Thank you for all you are doing with the resources you provide to help us understand more about current events.

Reader in Blackburn

Thank you for sending me this brilliant magazine of truth and understanding.

Reader in Sheffield

Thank you for all your magazines and booklets. All are like opening the

window blinds to shed light into the room.

Reader in Romford

I have found every issue captivating, inspiring and educational in my Christian journey.

Reader in Kenley

Superb information and a seriously wonderful read. Please continue to send me this informative magazine.

Reader in Stranraer

Studying the Bible

I've only read a little of the Bible. I need to get more done. I'm looking forward to learning more.

Reader in Peterborough

Editor's comment: You may like to request our free 12-lesson Bible Study Course. It is designed to walk you through the basic lessons and themes of the Bible. It will explain why the Bible is true, teach you how to study more effectively, and answer some of life's greatest questions. We will send you

one lesson each month until you finish the course.

If you do not have copies you may also wish to request our booklets You Can Understand the Bible and Is The Bible True?

I thank God for this *Bible Study Course*. It saved my life.

Student in Manchester

Amazingly truthful literature, biblically explained and profound. I would like to commence your *Bible Study Course*.

Reader in Croydon

God's plans for us

Thank you for the very interesting *Beyond Today* magazine. I find this ministry so exciting, teaching what God has in store for us.

Reader in Arbroath

Middle East

I like your magazine because it explains what is going on in the world today, particularly in the Middle East.

Reader in Hereford

How you can help

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Jesus Christ instructed His disciples that as they had freely received they were to freely give (Matthew

10:8), so we supply our literature free of charge, making Christ's message available to all. Our gratitude goes to those who assist financially in this aspect of the Church's work.

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