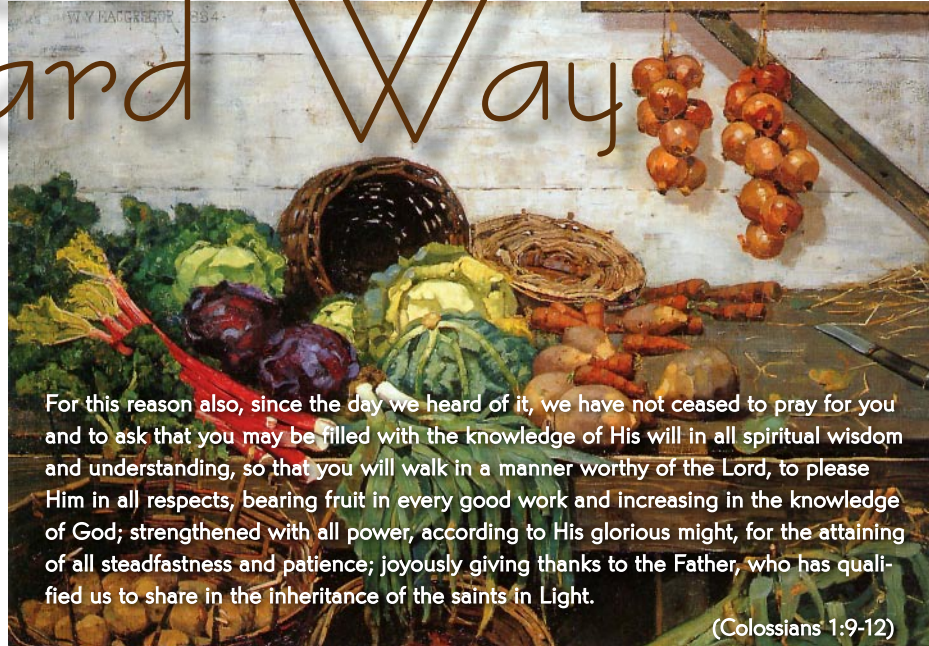


Doing Things the Hard Way



For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

(Colossians 1:9-12)

It won't be the first, nor will it be the last time people will say we are crazy. There will come a time in the future—perhaps even tomorrow—when someone will shake their heads in stunned incredulity over our thoroughly unnatural behavior.

But then they will eat some of our food, and become believers.

Linda once calculated (she of the more orderly mind) that it takes two hours of labor *per pint* to make our salsa. That is, from the cutting up of all the ingredients to twisting tight the sealed canning lid, each pint takes two hours of manual labor. If the batch includes seven pints, it took fourteen hours for the job. And, of course, that doesn't include the growing of the crops that become the ingredients. Take, for example, the key ingredient: tomatoes. In the early spring the tomato seeds are planted in flats, and kept indoors under fluorescent lights for a couple of months. After the seedlings have reached a certain size, they are transplanted into individual containers. Then, once the garden soil has warmed sufficiently, it is tilled, and the tomatoes are planted and staked. Later, when the fast-growing plants require it, a supporting cage is placed around each plant. While they grow, blossom, and bear their fruit, the plants are lovingly attended, weeded, and watered during dry periods. When at last the fruit has ripened sufficiently, and is ready to eat, the tomatoes are picked and brought into the house. Only then does the two-hours-per-pint clock start.

As one might surmise, salsa is not our only homegrown product. Linda's recipes for pumpkin pie and pumpkin bread begin with, "Set the pumpkin seed one inch below the surface of the soil," and our hallowed quarts of applesauce begin on our orchard trees. The jams and jellies we eat are made from the berries and plums we pick from the bushes, and summer potato salad is made from the potatoes, onions, and pickles (cucumbers) raised in our own garden.

Why do we inflict upon ourselves all this work? Well, you sit down to the meal spread upon our table and you will have the answer. Sure, it would be a lot easier to buy a jar of applesauce from the grocery store, but that bland wallpaper paste can in no way compare to homegrown. We could buy our pumpkin in a can, but the pies and breads would be second-rate in comparison. We could buy our jam and jelly from *Smuckers*, but the flavor—or, more accurately, the *lack* of flavor—would disappoint. And it would be immeasurably easier to acquire our salsa from the grocery shelf, but it could never equal the fresh, uncluttered, delicious taste of Linda's.

Many shake their heads over the work we put into our fare—but only until they taste it. Then they understand, and there is no going back for them.

The Easy Life

Many people—including some Christians—shake their heads over the “work” some others put into living life as a follower of Christ. They watch others rise early on a Sunday morning to congregate in their finery for worship and study, and they conclude that that requires far too much effort on what is supposed to be a day of rest. They see Bibles and study books sitting on the coffee table, and wonder why their friends bother. They observe their believing friends delivering or preparing meals for others, spending their Saturdays building shelters for the homeless, or spending their vacations treating the sick in Haiti, and they scratch their heads, thinking, “Wouldn’t it be easier just to donate some money?”

The answer is, yes, it *would* be easier. But that’s not the point, is it.

The Christian life is more than salvation. If it were limited to that, God would have no reason to leave us here after we place our trust in Christ. It’s not as if our justification is only a halfway measure, one that we must complete on our own efforts. No, Christ’s propitiation is a completed act; nothing we do in the flesh can add to it. It’s not as if He holds us here while He builds another wing onto heaven for the overflow crowd. God has room to spare in His home.

God’s gracious salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son is a breathtaking, foundational part of our life in Christ—but it is not all. What rests on that foundation—what is meant to occupy the believer until he or she meets the Lord face to face—is a passion to know God deeper, more substantially, more intimately, so as to truly revel in our relationship with Him.

The point of life is not ease. The point of life is glorifying God and serving Him with an undivided heart.

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

(Matthew 22:36-40)

True Faith

When I was a child my mother repeatedly told me, “Don’t just *tell* me you love me. *Show* me.” In other words, “Talk is cheap, son. I’ll know your love is true when you obey me.” And this is what James, the

brother of our Lord, is saying when he writes,

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.

If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

(James 1:22-27)

In this self-centered world it is easy—indeed, preferred—to do as little as possible. We like to buy our religion off the shelf: pre-packaged, pre-cooked, pre-digested. Pop it into the microwave for a few minutes and, *voilà!* faith. Religion today is not unlike the practice during the American Civil War of wealthy men who had been drafted into the Union army hiring others to serve in their stead. The practice was perfectly legal, but hardly patriotic. Just so, Christians today like to lean back in their pew and let others do the heavy lifting. “I have faith. Isn’t that enough?”

Well, in a word, no. Faith without subjection; faith without obedience; faith without service; faith without a desire in the heart to know the Lord more intimately, more authentically, is no faith at all. True faith—true religion—energizes the feet, the hands, the mind. It excites a desire to be something more than what is simply agreeable. True faith works, it breathes the pure oxygen of the heavenlies, it experiences holy intimacies alien to common man.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

(Ephesians 1:3)

Our relationship with God cannot be purchased, pre-packaged, off the store shelf. It must be planted, nurtured, watered with heavenly rain, and picked by hand. Sometimes that product is in its most effective state when raw; full of vitamins and health, it is to be consumed on the spot. But at other times it can and should be processed further—either to store it safely for later consumption, or to make it into something better and larger than what it started out to be.

There isn’t much to commend a solitary raw pumpkin but to carve it into a jack-o’-lantern for Halloween. But cook its meat and use it in a pie and it becomes the perfect, delicious end to a Thanksgiving feast. Just so, infantile faith is little more than a hollow shell awaiting further processing. Cook it, simmer it, add the spices of experience, study, history, prayer, submission, service, and praise. Add in everything that accompanies a life well-spent, and instead of a withered, decaying lump of a childish believer, you will have a mature pillar of the faith—one ready and equipped to fill the hearts and minds of those who come after.

dsf