



Lovely Lord of the Lord's Day

15. Alma wanted Out and Then In

How to associate the right with delight.

"And Pastor, please take my name off the church rolls." The phone had rung in Pastor Jones's study just as we were ready to leave on our day's itinerary of visits. We were in a series of meetings together, and there were many people who wanted us to visit with them in their homes. I could see the concerned look on Pastor Jones's face. Realizing the nature of the call, I stepped out of the room, allowing the pastor the privacy of his office.

It was almost half an hour later when the pastor came to the car where I was waiting for him.

"I just can't figure it out," Pastor Jones said, in apparent desperation.

"Can I be of any help?" I offered.

"Oh, I wish you would," he said in reply, still a little stunned as he thought about the conversation. Pastor Jones then began to reconstruct the telephone conversation. Alma Smith, a young mother of three children, was engaged in divorce proceedings from her husband John. They were such a nice young couple, but something had obviously gone wrong. Alma thought her first step ought to be to have her name removed from the church roster.

Because of the immediate need, Pastor Jones asked me to accompany him to the Smith home first. We delayed the other calls and made our way over to see Alma.

We were received graciously. I was impressed with her countenance. She seemed very pleasant, kind, frank, and honest. I had rather pictured in my mind a despondent, sad, joyless creature. The kind that is waiting for some calamity to meet her just around the corner!

While I was trying to figure out this apparent paradox—a beaming personality like this requesting her name to be removed from the church roll—Alma was telling Pastor Jones about her husband's recent accident. I sat and listened, endeavoring to analyze the situation.

Although they were facing divorce. Alma had gone to visit John at the hospital frequently. While he was convalescing, she had volunteered to nurse him back to health. "I am going through with the divorce," Alma said, "but I wanted to be kind to the poor guy while he was getting better."

My admiration for Alma grew each time she made any comment. I thought to myself, "This lady is not the type that should leave the church. We need hundreds like her. Here is a woman going through with divorce, with a sick husband whom she is befriending. She has a family of little children, yet she has none of the pity-me-please attitude so often apparent in the faces of those going through such an unfortunate experience."

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I was so amazed at what I was hearing that, in sheer astonishment, I said, "You aren't the lady who is requesting to have her name removed from the church roll, are you? Surely not!"

When Alma finally got to the point of her telephone call, she revealed no bitterness or resentment. In a businesslike way, blended with friendliness, Alma explained why she had made this unexpected request.

"I was reared," she began, "in a home and in a church where religion was a set of don'ts. I've remained in the church until now, but with all this trouble I just can't stand it any longer. I don't want to belong to a church whose philosophy is 'don't do this' and 'don't do that.' I've heard it all my life, and it seems that with all these other pressures I don't need this one added to it."

Then she went on to elaborate a little more on her inner feelings. It seemed as though she was getting something off her chest which had been there, bothering her for a long time. "As a child I heard, 'Don't do this: it's the Sabbath.' 'Don't do that: it is still Sabbath.' It seemed to me as though there was a constant stream of don'ts. As I grew older, the don'ts continued." To Alma it all seemed so silly.

"I know what you mean," I said with a smile. These good people with their don'ts were misrepresenting Jesus. First they were giving Alma the impression that the religion of Christ is mostly negative. And that is a lie. Then they were giving her the impression that Christianity deals mostly with externals. That is another lie. And then they were giving her the impression, wittingly or unwittingly, that this kind of program saves. And that is a third lie. Alma evidently had been presented with a completely unbalanced picture of Christianity.

Of course there are don'ts; but true Christianity is the most positive, most beautiful, most reasonable philosophy on our planet. Don'ts cannot save. Only the Christ of the Bible can save from either a permissive or a forbidding experience.

Then I pointed out to Alma that Christ, the true Sabbath keeper, does not make the don'ts more prominent than the dos.

"Alma," I continued, "did you know that the fourth commandment dealing with the Sabbath and the fifth commandment dealing with the home do not start with a negative? All the others start with a negative. These are the only two of the ten that start with a positive. It is true that farther on in the fourth commandment there are negatives: but the fourth and fifth commandments emphasize the positive. I suppose you know, Alma, that the Sabbath represents a beautiful positive relationship with our Lord. In Genesis 2:1-3 it says it was celebrated by our Lord, and we follow His example. More than this the Sabbath was intended to accentuate in our minds the character of our Lord."

I continued, "The very first characteristic of our Lord, Alma, that is given in the Bible, is His creatorship. He is the creative, positive One; "In the beginning God created." God connects this with the holy rest day. These two chapters of Genesis tell how God also made other things. He created the world out of nothing, but He made Adam and Eve out of that which He had already made—the dust of the ground. And the holy Sabbath is given because of two positive actions of our Lord: (1) creating, (2) making. This pictures our Lord as a builder—a constructive Lord—not a negative master at all. Don't you agree, Alma?"

Alma nodded assent.

I continued: "In Exodus 16:29 God associates Sabbath keeping with another positive characteristic—His generosity. If God gave me on one day the bread of two days, as this text states, isn't that generosity?"

Alma said she had never thought of that before.

"Then," I went on, "the Bible says the Sabbath is a sign between God and His people. Since God is love, His kingdom is love, and His flag must stand for His love. Love is the most positive and powerful force in the universe."

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Alma said she had never thought of that before either. She had found her reasonable spirit rebelling against so many negatives that she had overlooked that true Sabbath keeping is beautiful and positive.

"I don't eat pork. I know the seventh day is the right day to keep," Alma exclaimed. "I believe in Jesus—so I couldn't be a Jew; and I couldn't belong to a Sunday-keeping church, but I'm fed up with all these negatives in our church."

Alma knew there are negatives in life. If your baby were about to fall down the steps or put its hand on a hot stove, your love would surely try to prevent it with the needed negative. But Alma objected to the negative philosophy of some Christians. They presented Christianity as a burden.

"Alma, you are rebelling against the things you should rebel against," I said with a smile. "You are detesting what you should abominate. Your whole soul should object to the misinformation you have grown up under. But in my study of this entire question I have found only the beautiful character of our Lord as associated in the Word of God directly with Creation and the Sabbath. May I share them with you?"

"Oh, yes, please do," Alma said with a faint smile.

"I'll be glad to. As I've mentioned already, our Lord is creative. He is constructive and generous. Our Lord is loving—and these are just a few of the many characteristics of our Lord."

Then I shared with Alma the experience of the mother who came to me asking for counsel on how to keep her boy in the church and how to train her younger children so that they would want to stay in the church too. You will remember that my wife and I suggested that she use the big toys for the Sabbath, instead of merely telling the children to put away their toys they played with during the week, thus making the Sabbath a "don't day."

I also explained how in our evangelistic meetings we have often approached the subject of healthful living, not as a set of don'ts but as a set of dos; The don'ts are there. Jesus presented some important do's and don'ts, but the negatives are eclipsed by the positives when we think of each one as a promise.

Early in our ministry we decided to present a health lecture once a week during the course of every evangelistic campaign. The very first health lecture compared a "do" face with a "don't" face. We contrasted a negative approach with a positive attitude. We went on to show the audience the effect of a negative attitude on the whole being-body, mind, and soul. We pictured also the fruit of a positive, buoyant philosophy.

The negative thinker worries, frets and fusses. He might be stubborn too. When he gets angry, the stomach gets tense. When he shows a stubborn spirit, the stomach and the rest of the organs of the body malfunction. All of this is due to a negative spirit. It can produce stomach trouble or heart trouble. Often faulty elimination accompanies this kind of attitude and brings on other problems.

"The people seemed to like that sermon." I told Alma, "because they saw themselves in this situation. I'll have to admit, however, that some of my brethren thought I went too far in these health studies. They felt it was more entertainment than study! But to me healthful living is fun, and I wanted to equate healthful living with delight and joy! Having formed this association in the minds of my listeners, it was not difficult to persuade them to make changes in their diet and other health habits—a little at a time."

Then I said, "When we came to the question of healthful drinks, we had a whole array of different hot and cold drinks on the table on the platform. That would eliminate the complaint. 'If I give up certain liquids which contain poison, what can I drink?' We just never heard that complaint from anyone, because we had a format of positives. We told the people what God would have them to do far more than what not to do. The health message is a positive, joyous message.

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"On one of the nights during the health-lecture series we showed the virtue of the use of water—in drinking as well as in fomentations etc. I actually drank water before the audience on that night.

"I explained to them that early in the morning we should take two glasses of water some time before breakfast. Then when breakfast comes we should not drink. As I spoke I drank the first two glasses of water. Then I suggested that after a couple of hours or so have passed after breakfast, we can drink two more glasses, and I proceeded to drink those two glasses of water. By the time I got to the afternoon drinking, that is the fifth glass, the audience was smiling. But when I drank the sixth glass of water, they were laughing. Then I explained that after the evening meal, in a reasonable time, they might drink the last two glasses of water. By this time I was drinking the seventh glass of water, and the people were wondering where I was putting it all!

"I'll tell you, Alma, "I continued, "no one equated healthful living with don'ts in that meeting. One lady went home from our meetings, after she had attended some two or three weeks, exclaiming, 'I believe what they are teaching about Bible doctrines, but I wouldn't take a thousand dollars for what I have learned regarding health.' 'They felt we were making a contribution to their everyday lives. And that's what we endeavored to do. I never once heard anyone complain about the negatives.

"When we came to the point of healthful foods, we had a wonderful display of good, nourishing food. It had been prepared by the ladies of the church in a delightful dinner. These dishes not only looked very attractive—they tasted 'out of this world.'

"By the time I had explained the wonderful things God has given us to eat, the don'ts were so overshadowed by the dos that no one ever came to me with the criticism, 'You are a negative people,' or 'I'll have to give up a lot to become a Christian.' How could we do otherwise, when Sabbath keeping is a sign of a positive God?"

I did not relate these experiences to Alma to boast. Far from it, I am sure that we made many mistakes in our health talks. Nevertheless, there was one mistake that we did not make—that of negativism. The don'ts were, as I say, so completely covered by the wonderful dos that the people were thrilled. We came to find that the health night was among the best attended of all the nights of the week.

Then the pastor, who was sitting there listening to the conversation, spoke up, "Alma, our church needs hundreds of ladies like you, to set a positive example and to present a beautiful format of Christianity!"

We suggested to Alma that there are negative personalities in almost every church, it is part of their makeup. Their lives are empty because they do not know the love of Jesus.

There are also those who have got their eyes fixed on things instead of Jesus. To them the Christian life becomes a "pilgrimage of sighs." They hope to find salvation by living up to some external standards. They say, but do not know by experience, that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.

I shared with Alma that we are not to keep the Sabbath to be saved. We do not refrain from alcohol or tobacco in order to be saved. Nor are we to refrain from certain articles of diet so that Christ will forgive and cleanse and save us. No! A thousand times No!

Rather we are to come to Jesus as we are—sinful, unworthy, weak, and depraved. We are to ask Him to receive us and give us, not merely repentance and forgiveness, but a new heart, and eternal life. Then we are to believe that He has given us all in Jesus Christ and return thanks that we have received.

When a sinner has been forgiven, cleansed, saved by the grace of Christ, he is pictured in Isaiah 58:14 as being a delightful person. Notice: "Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord."

It is because I am delighted with the Lord that I am delighted with all of His things, including His day of worship. It is only then that I can truly "call the Sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable."

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Thus, the Sabbath-keeping way is a delightful way. It is not a "pilgrimage of sighs." Far from it, all our service, then, springs from love for our Lord and Saviour. I defy the drunkard to show me that he is as happy as I am. I challenge any professed Christian to prove to me that cancer-producing tobacco gives him an assurance I have found in a Christ whose indwelling life delivers me from the power of the filthy weed! I invite any world-loving, pleasure-mad soul to testify of a rare delight such as I have found in the Lord. God says. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."

We looked at the clock on the wall, and Alma apologized for having to bring this discussion to a close. It was time for her to pick up the children from an appointment. She expressed real appreciation for the time we had spent with her and indicated that there were many other questions she would like to ask in the light of this new positive approach. She invited us to return at our earliest convenience.

There were other things I would have liked to discuss with Alma. One would be the sad results of evil speaking, faultfinding, and criticism. When children hear their parents criticizing some Christian worker in the Sabbath School or the church, or perhaps a teacher in the day school, it makes an impression. They associate these negatives with the experience of the one who speaks negatively. And why not? It is natural!

A little six-year-old girl lost her father whom she idolized. A few months later, her mother brought a friend, Bob, to the house. The girl, Nancy was thrilled! She ran to Bob and threw her little arms around his neatly pressed trouser leg in sheer delight and innocent love.

"Nancy!" her mother said, a frown creasing her brow, "Don't do that! Now you go on and play."

But Nancy did not seem to hear or see Mother. To make it more definite, and to obtain the desired results, Mother spoke more sternly to Nancy, "Nancy, if you do that again, Bob will not come back."

In spite of this warning, every time Bob came, Nancy greeted him with a hug around the leg. Mother continued to threaten, "Nancy, if you do that. Bob won't come back."

It never dawned on Mother that she was forming in Nancy's subconscious mind an image—one that would very nearly ruin Nancy's life later on.

One day Mother and Bob decided to terminate their friendship; Bob never returned. Little Nancy associated his not returning with Mother's threat and her own forwardness. By being too friendly she had lost a love she craved. But because she was little girl, Nancy was unable to analyze what was taking place in her own mind. Little children are unable to do this.

Not until Nancy was in her teens did she realize that something had happened to her thinking as a child. She could not understand why she froze every time a personable young man became friendly! Some of the boys in school wanted dates with Nancy, but she could not bring herself to do what she longed to do.

One day, in sheer desperation, Nancy went to seek counsel. The experience she had when she was six years old came to the surface. Then, and only then, did she realize the tremendous effect that this one oft repeated statement by her mother had accomplished in coloring her thinking.

Galatians 6:7 tells us that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

Little did that dear mother know what she was sowing in Nancy's mind; and little do fault-finding parents know what a few derogatory words spoken in the hearing of children do to warp their lives. The children associate that deacon against whom their parents speak, or that elder, or that superintendent, with the church of which Mom and Dad are members. Later parents are astonished that their children have no interest in the church. Some children actually become infidels.

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These parents, later on, come in desperation to the pastor, requesting him to work for their children's salvation. They might have a list of reasons why they think their son or daughter left the church. They might blame a school teacher, a member of the church, or some incident. The real reason—the basic reason—for the children's leaving the church is the attitude that was implanted in their young minds. The parents are reaping what they have sown.

Would it not be well for us all to join the "I-Know-Something-Good Club"? We had the privilege of first organizing such clubs thirty years ago. People of all faiths have joined these clubs. The motto of the club is, "I will speak evil of no man". They determine to esteem others better than themselves. If they do find fault with another, they will obey the scriptural injunction to go to him alone, "in the spirit of meekness."

How I wished I might have discussed these things with Alma had time permitted. But since there may be many Almas reading this, we give it as a caution against the don'ts, the negatives, which deny the positives of our delightful Lord.

I asked the Pastor later what happened to Alma, and he told me that Alma had received such courage and comfort from that visit that she took a new hold on Christ and became a wonderful working member of the church. She and John found new love again, and the home was united in the bonds of love. I was thrilled to know this.

Think of the joy, peace, and happiness which might have been hers if through the years from childhood, Alma could have experienced the sweetness of the positive Christ, the loving Christ, the fellowshiping Christ!

We repeat that, of course, there are "don'ts"—justifiable ones; but we are to fulfill a mission. That mission is to reveal to others that Christ is "altogether lovely." Song 5:16.

The psalmist, after his great sin, discovered the need for forgiveness and the joy that accompanies salvation. He cried out, "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me." Psalm 51:2, 3. Then he continued by praying, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10 It was then that he added this penetrating prayer: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee." Psalm 51:12, 13. Please take special notice of the mission which he acknowledged after his fall. It was to have a restoration of the "joy" of our Lord's "salvation." And it is followed with the ability to "teach transgressors" God's ways and to convert sinners to the Lord.

How we pray that every reader of this work will ask, believe, and claim God's program for their souls! That is the program of reflecting the delights found in Jesus Christ. To go about our work and to mingle with others in a sad, unhappy frame of mind is not true Christianity. It misrepresents our Lord Jesus Christ. It denies His character and His commands. It gives others the impression that His commandments are grievous. Therefore, as we are to call the Sabbath a delight, and we are to "delight" ourselves in the Lord, for the Joy of the Lord is our strength. And in [His] presence there is fullness of joy: at. . .[His] right hand there are pleasures forever more." Psalm 16:11.

Dear Father in heaven; I thank You that You have put this prayer into our hearts, "O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms." Psalm 95:1, 2. We sincerely ask that this may be the experience of each one of us. We believe that there is "joy and peace in believing," and that we may ask and receive that our joy may be full. We thank Thee that we are now receiving this gift of joy and happiness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit as You have promised. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FREE IN CHRIST

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What positives are found in Thee,
Thy don'ts are but protection,
The law of life but sets me free,
Clad in Thy great perfection.

My happiness is Thy delight,
Who died to bring me life;
Eternal life—to ever be
Free from a world of strife.

And Thou are coming very soon
To take me to Thy throne
Oh, hasten, come, thou happy day,
For I am going home.

Reflection: we suggest that you meditate on the seven great Bible texts following. You may also wish to try out the ten-point program, making a list each day of ten things for which to be grateful, vocalizing them at least three times each day. This practice can do wonders for the body and mind.

Seven Great Bible Facts:

1. Our Lord is “altogether lovely”. (Song of Solomon 5:16)
2. When He restores to us “the joy of . . . [His] salvation” we will “teach transgressors” His way, and “sinners shall be converted” unto Him. (Psalm 51:12, 13)
3. His commandments are not grievous. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous. “ 1 John 5:3.
4. Delighting ourselves in the Lord and calling the Sabbath a delight go hand in hand. “If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.” Isaiah 58:13, 14.
5. The joy of the Lord is . . . [our] strength. (Nehemiah 8:10)
6. We are to come before His presence with thanksgiving. “Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” Psalm 95:2, 3.
7. There is joy and peace in believing. “Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost. “ Romans 15:13.