

# Pitfalls for the Mind

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*A ReVision Resource*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

Pitfalls for the Mind  
Strong Souls Part 17  
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## Welcome to *Pitfalls for the Mind*

We have the mind of Christ, but we need to grow into it, so that we can reach maturity in our thinking and live increasingly as true disciples of the Lord.

But this means we must apply ourselves to growing in maturity in the mind of Christ for the rest of our lives, looking to God's Word and His world to reveal Christ to us, and following His Spirit as He shapes us into the image of our Lord.

It's an exciting adventure, and it becomes more exciting the longer we work at it. But, like any challenge of this sort, there are pitfalls to be mindful of – bumps and hurdles in the road we'll need to watch out for and be ready to get over as often as they appear. In this final study in our series on a sound mind, we'll look at some of the more significant pitfalls that can ensnare our minds and keep us from pressing on to maturity in the mind of Christ.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 Get in Line!

*Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!" But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men."* Matthew 16.22, 23

### *Growing in the mind of Christ*

As believers in and followers of Jesus, we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2.16). As we have seen, the mind of Christ affords us a unique perspective and an extraordinary outlook on the world. When we are thinking with the mind of Christ, we see our lives from the vantage point of His exalted throne; self-interest takes a back seat, a longing to serve rises in our souls, and the desire to advance the Kingdom and righteousness of God infuses everything we do. We want to see the Lord's agenda come to fulfillment, with many of our neighbors coming to know Him, His Church growing in unity and maturity, and the goodness of the Lord coming to light in every aspect of life and culture.

We have the mind of Christ, but it is necessary for us to *grow into* that mindset, since much of our old way of thinking continues to plague our minds. So we look to the Word of Christ, and to the revelation of His glory in creation and culture, to help us make progress in realizing and making better use of that which we possess by grace through faith, the mind of our Lord Jesus Christ. We know that a strong soul requires a sound mind, so we are determined to let that mind – the mind of Christ – be in us for His glory and praise.

This is an ongoing, lifelong struggle and privilege. Forces are arrayed against us, both spiritual and temporal, and conditions yet exist within us that can discourage us from growing in the mind of Christ, from applying ourselves to the hard work such maturing requires.

And there are pitfalls in the path toward maturity in the mind of Christ which, if we fail to recognize and avoid them, can make progress difficult.

### *How about I lead?*

In this segment of our study on strong souls, I want to consider various traps and tendencies that can frustrate progress in realizing and using the mind of Christ. We need to be aware of these, and to spot them whenever they appear in our path, so that we can go around or over them without falling in and becoming ensnared (Prov. 1.17).

The first pitfall is the tendency to think that we know better than the Lord how to accomplish His goals and objectives. Now we don't fall into this pitfall out of wanting to subvert the Lord or set aside His agenda. Indeed, very often we end up in this trap when, in *our* minds, we're only wanting to do what's best. We hear the Lord speaking in His Word, and something in us whispers, "That can't be right. Who'd want to do *that*? That won't work here. Not these days. Not with the people I know. Surely there's *a better way*?"

This is exactly where Peter found himself, there on the outskirts of Caesarea-Philippi. Having just shone like the Sunday schooler who was first in the Sword Drill, Peter may have been a little too full of himself and his ideas. But remember, as Peter himself explained, he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Jesus. They had become so identified with Him that, if He was going to be a marked man, so, inevitably, would they. They had committed to learning a new trade, a new calling in life, and they seemed to understand that there would be no going back to what they'd known before.

In terms consistent with this part of our study, they were trying to learn the mind of Christ, and Peter had just won the biggest gold star yet: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16.17). This was big. This was brilliant. Peter's confession of

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Jesus as Christ and Son of God indicated that he had crossed a significant threshold in his thinking, and that he was on track with Jesus Himself, as Jesus readily acknowledged.

But while Peter had advanced in *one* area of his thinking, he failed to notice that in *another* area, he was still lagging. Upon hearing from Jesus that they would be going on to Jerusalem, where He would be taken prisoner and killed, Peter, wanting to spare the Lord – and perhaps himself? – fell into the pitfall of thinking he knew better than Jesus how Jesus should accomplish His work.

### *Get in line!*

Imagine Peter's shock upon being rebuked so sternly by the Lord! "Satan!" How could that be? How could he have been so blind and stupid to think *he* could lead *the Lord* to a better way of doing *His* work? Peter stumbled over the idea of arrest, suffering, and death, and perhaps of himself a bit too closely identified with such possibilities. As he considered the *inconvenience, difficulty*, and perhaps *pain and loss* of what Jesus had spread before them, Peter decided that another route would be more feasible or at least more agreeable.

We don't think the road of discipleship should be hard – fraught with obstacles, hard work, long periods of study and reflection, intense days and nights of prayer, and profound transformations in our worldview and way of life. Following Jesus should be all gold stars and high praise and a splendid time guaranteed for all.

So when Jesus promises us things like persecution, trouble, growing pains, self-denial, diligent work, and crosses to bear, we immediately want to find alternate routes. We want to follow Jesus, and to be seen to be His disciples. It's just that, given our preference for the easy way, we don't want to walk the path Jesus describes. We want to end up in the same place, where He is in glory, but we think we can achieve that on *our* terms, rather than *His*.

This tendency to think we know better than Jesus shows up in many ways. Jesus says we ought always to pray (Lk. 18.1). We say a little prayer will be enough. Jesus says seeking the Kingdom should be the defining priority of our lives (Matt. 6.33). We say we'll get around to that when we've completed all our other seeking. Jesus says Kingdom greatness depends on learning and obeying God's Law (Matt. 5.17-19). We say God's Law is of little use to us, now that we are saved. We'll just try to love others as best we can. Jesus says He will build His Church by equipping His people for ministry (Matt. 16.18; Eph. 4.11-16). We say we'll just hold a worship service, spruce up the building, hire a staff, run some programs, do a little advertising, and hope for the best.

The same arch-deceiver who proffered that notion to Peter's mind will do it to yours as well, if in any way, you find yourself seeking alternate routes for the life of discipleship, ways and means and ends other than those which Jesus walked and taught. A sound mind seeks ever to avoid the ways of *men*, but never the way of *Christ*.

### *For reflection*

1. What are some aspects of the life of discipleship that strike you as hard or difficult or not exactly what you might choose?
2. What are some ways that people try to get around following Jesus by thinking up their own ideas about what it means to be a disciple?
3. Can you identify any areas in your own life where you are *not* following the Lord's agenda, but have *substituted your own best ideas* about how to be a disciple of Jesus?

*Next steps – Transformation: Are you in any way, like Peter, holding to the "things of men" rather than those of the Lord? List them out. Face them down. Repent of them before the Lord, and resolve to follow Jesus and avoid the pitfall of thinking you know better than the Lord how to be His disciple.*

## 2 As Good as It Gets?

*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* Ephesians 3.20, 21

### *Too easily satisfied*

A problem common to many Christians is that they become too easily satisfied with their experience of following Christ. They've found a good church, met some Christian friends, maybe joined a Bible study group or found a ministry niche, and perhaps devote some time to Bible reading and prayer. They are moved by a joyous service of worship or a strong message from the pulpit. They enjoy the times of fellowship and serving with other believers. Their lives as Christians are good, and they don't want anything to change.

And that's just the problem. Many Christians, having found a sweet spot for their discipleship, are of the opinion things just can't get any better. They couldn't be happier in their relationship with Jesus, and, since being happy in Jesus is, as they see it, the main objective of discipleship, they're content to keep things just the way they are.

This translates into their state of mind as well. They become complacent about learning and indifferent to increasing in the mind of Christ. They've come to believe that their level of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom is good enough for them, and they see no need to exert themselves further. They've settled into a state of life and mind that's good enough for them.

But if there's one thing we can say about our Lord Jesus, it is that He was in the business of *unsettling* people. Wherever He went, He challenged settled ways of thinking, as well as the priorities, values, routines, commitments, worldviews, progress in faith, and agendas people had adopted. Even those who embraced His message and devoted themselves to His way, He refused to allow to settle into a comfortable life of just being happy with the state of their Christian existence. The apostles, in all their correspondence, urged their readers to grow, press on, add to, improve, increase, expand, enlarge, and do so more and more in every aspect of their walk with and work for the Lord.

And the primary reason why the apostles *lived* this way, and why they repeatedly worked to *unsettle the saints and keep them on the growth curve* toward the renewing of their minds and all their lives, is because they understood that, when it comes to following Jesus, life is never as good as it gets. There is always more righteousness, more peace, and more joy in the Spirit to know, and more love and truth to share, as long as we are willing to press on.

### *We don't dare!*

Paul was especially urgent about not becoming complacent, either in our thinking or living as followers of Jesus Christ. God is able to do exceedingly abundantly more in and for and through us than we have ever dared to ask or think! So why do we not realize this promised boon, any more than we do?

Because we do not dare to *think* it could be so, nor to *ask* that it might *be* so. In our thinking, we are stuck in our experience, satisfied with our progress and experience of faith, and scornful – and that's the word, *scornful* – of the Lord's promise of exceedingly abundantly more. Our Christian faith is as good as we need it, thank you very much, and we prefer to be left alone and not troubled with all that pressing on, striving for the goal for the prize of the upward calling, and other “legalistic-sounding” talk.

This complacency about the state of our Christian lives is the second pitfall to growing in the mind of Christ, in which we think, plan, live, and work according to *our* expectations for the life of faith, rather than the *Lord's*. Jesus says, “more and more”; we say, “good enough.” Jesus says, “precious and very great promises”;

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we say “I’m good where I am.” Jesus says, “exceedingly abundantly above”; we say, “I’m OK, thanks.” We become slaves to our comfort, rather than servants of our conquering-and-to-conquer King. We dare not think any higher of our calling, or the possibilities for serving the Lord, because that seems too far beyond our experience. And while it undoubtedly *is* too far beyond our experience to imagine, plan for, and prepare for whatever that exceedingly abundantly more might be, it is *not* beyond the ability or the will of Him Who calls us to His Kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2.12).

#### *Minds in gear*

The apostle Peter urged his readers to press on, to grow continually in the Lord and His Kingdom, and to add to everything they’d ever experienced in the Lord, more and more and more. And he said that, if they were going to do this, they’d have to gird up their minds for action, be obedient to their calling, and press on toward holiness in mind and life (2 Pet. 1.5-11; 1 Pet. 1.13-16).

Escaping the pitfall of complacency begins with hearing God in His Word and world, and telling ourselves, every day, that it’s never as good as it gets when it comes to knowing and following Jesus. We must build into our thinking an expectation of growth, an alertness to opportunities for service, a readiness to bear witness, and an eagerness to improve in the mind of Christ for every area of our lives. And we must apply ourselves to furnishing our minds with new insights, greater knowledge, and deeper understanding of our great salvation.

Only as we *think* about how we might increase in the Lord and His service will we dare to *ask* the Lord to make it so. As we grow in the mind of Christ, to understand and appreciate the greatness of His power, and His resolute determination to reconcile all things to God and to restore His goodness in the land of the living – only as we grow to think about our lives like this, will we think, ask, plan, learn, and endeavor to realize the exceedingly abundantly more of the life of faith which God has in store for us.

And we will never say that our Christian life is as good as it gets, because, seen from the vantage point of the mind of Christ, it never is.

#### *For reflection*

1. Why do you think Christians become so easily satisfied with their experience of the Lord?
2. How might you be able to tell when a “good as it gets” mentality is beginning to infect your thinking about the life of faith?
3. Suggest some ways Christians can help one another avoid and overcome the pitfall of complacency in faith.

*Next steps – Transformation: Can you think of any area of your life where you have become complacent about improving in your walk with or work for the Lord? What’s one thing you could do to begin overcoming that complacency?*



### 3 Not under Law?

*For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.* Romans 8.6, 7

#### *The grace snare*

Incredible as it may seem, many Christians have had their progress toward maturity in the mind of Christ interrupted by grace. Well, not grace *actually*, but grace as an *excuse* for not following the Lord Jesus in the way He has clearly marked out for us.

You can tell if you're trapped in this "grace" snare if you've ever said, if only to yourself, that in your walk with the Lord Jesus you're "under grace, not Law." Those who make this claim see grace as liberating and Law as legalistic. They want to be "free" in Jesus from any onerous, legal burdens, any demanding list of "do's and don'ts", any obligatory directives that might prevent them from "following the leading of the Spirit" in any situation.

Jesus, such people insist, has done away with any need for the Law of God. If we just look to Him, cling to Him, and love like Him, we'll know the freedom of God's Spirit to spread His love abroad through us as each situation or opportunity requires.

Well, that sounds nice. Except that it indicates a mind wholly opposite to the mind of Christ and completely out of accord with Scripture and the purpose and nature of grace.

A sound mind, which is essential to a strong soul, is a mind set, like the mind of Christ, on obedience to God's Law as the key to life and love.

#### *Consider the Law*

Let's consider just a few basic things about the Law of God. First, the Law was given to a people who had experienced God's saving grace, so that they might *continue* and *abound* in that grace by understanding the basic parameters of what love for God and neighbors requires. The first four of the Ten Commandments, and all their supporting statutes and rules, outline how we may express and grow in love for God. The last six of the commandments, together with their supporting rules and statutes, do the same for practicing neighbor love.

This is the path Jesus walked as He was among us on earth, and it is the path He commands us to walk as well (1 Jn. 2.1-6). If we want to *think* with the mind of Christ, so that we *live* the life of a follower of Christ, we'll need to bring our thinking more into line with the teaching of God's Law.

Paul insisted that, just because the Law can't save us doesn't mean we don't establish it as the foundation of things holy and righteous and good (Rom. 3.31; 7.12). In his view, we're not saved *by* the Law, but we're not saved *without* it. Jesus explained that greatness in the Kingdom lies along the path of learning, obeying, and teaching the Law of God (Matt. 5.17-19). The apostle John, echoing our Lord Jesus, summarized the teaching of the Law as love (1 Jn. 5.1-3; cf. Matt. 22.34-40). And the apostle James described the Law of God as the "perfect law of liberty," and insisted that all believers should strive to live by this standard (Jms. 2.8-10).

The Law of God is His gift of grace to us, to guide us into a life of grace that expresses the reality of Christ increasing in us (2 Cor. 3.12-18).

Further, the Law of God encodes the mind of the Spirit of God, as Paul explained in our text. God has written His Law on our hearts, as those who are made in His image (Rom. 2.14, 15). However, our sojourn in sin has obscured the role of the Law in growing us into the mind of God, to love Him and our neighbors.

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Thus, when God gives us His Spirit, He immediately begins to redress this situation, setting up shop in our soul to teach us the Law of God, and to make us willing and able to obey it (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Phil. 2.13). The more we submit to His teaching, the more we grow beyond the *letter* of the Law – as if the Law were something we have to “look up” at any moment, in order to know what we must do – into the *Spirit* of Law, Who forms us *by* the Law and Word of God into the image of our Lord Jesus Christ, beginning with our minds.

If you find yourself opposed to reading, meditating in, learning, obeying, and teaching the Law of God (cf. Pss. 1, 119), then no matter how ardently you insist that you are “under grace, not Law,” you are in fact living out of a *carnal* mind, a mind dead set *against* the Spirit’s work of forming you into the mind and image of Jesus Christ.

#### *What to do?*

How do we extricate ourselves from this snare? By following the counsel of Scripture concerning the Law of God. The Law of God is the cornerstone and footprint of all Scripture. It is the acorn to the oak of divine revelation. All the prophets point back to the Law as the way into the promises of God. All the New Testament assumes the Law and the promises as the guardrails along the path of sanctification. We must make growing in the Law of God a more central focus in our effort to become mature in the mind of Christ.

Begin by memorizing the Ten Commandments, and praying through them regularly, stopping on each one to allow the Spirit to search your heart and mind, and to surface any failures of omission or commission where each commandment is concerned. Give thanks to God for each commandment and the grace it contains.

Enroll in the Spirit’s school of Law, and study the statutes, precepts, rules, and counsels of Exodus through Deuteronomy, giving greater attention to how the civil codes given here help us to understand the application of the Ten Commandments in everyday situations. Read some books on the Law of God, so that you learn how to interpret the Law today. We do live in the age of grace, and, as the New Testament indicates, that does not *negate* the Law, but it affects the way we *apply* the commandments and statutes of God. We’ll need to train ourselves to think with the mind of Christ and the Spirit concerning how the Law, applied in our lives and times, can help to bring to light more love for God and our neighbors (cf. 1 Cor. 9.3-14).

You will not make progress in the mind of Christ, or in His grace, if you use “grace” as an excuse for not learning, obeying, and teaching the Law of God. Don’t let grace, wrongly understood, distract or divert you from growing to maturity in the mind of Christ. A sound mind requires a sound footing in the holy and righteous and good Law of God.

#### *For reflection*

1. Why do you think so many Christians are averse to learning and obeying God’s Law?
2. What’s the difference between working *for* your salvation and working *out* your salvation? What role does the Law play in bringing us to salvation, and in helping us to grow in it (cf. Rom. 7.7, 12)?
3. Meditate on Psalm 1. Why is neglecting the Law of God living out of a carnal mind, rather than the mind of the Spirit?

*Next steps – Preparation: What can you do to bring more consistent and fruitful reading and study of God’s Law into your regimen of spiritual disciplines?*

## 4 The Wrong Horizon

*Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.'"*" Luke 12.16-19

### *The problem with unseen things*

The writer of Hebrews explained that true faith, faith that represents maturity in the mind of Christ, results in assurance of salvation and evidence in line with the unseen things of Christ (Heb. 11.1).

What are those unseen things?

They are those things which exist in the unseen realm of heavenly glory, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Paul exhorts us to set our minds on these things, and not on the things of this world (Col. 3.1-3). Our lives, he insists, have been hidden with Christ in God. We are being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, and we are on a journey toward the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells.

By contemplating Christ exalted in glory, surrounded by the sights, sounds, and smells of the heavenly court, adored by departed saints and serving angels, and working even now both to uphold the world and everything in it, and to prepare an eternal dwelling place for us, we may expect our vision to expand, our expectations to soar, and our thinking, planning, and living to mature in line with the mind of Christ.

Put another way, a sound mind, one that contributes mightily to a strong soul, focuses continually on Jesus Christ and the glory of the unseen realm.

The problem with unseen things, of course, is that they are unseen. And for too many Christians, the *seen* things of this world have become about as far as they can see into the precious and very great promises of Christ and the eternal blessings of His heavenly Kingdom.

The third pitfall toward maturity in the mind of Christ – besides complacency and neglect of the Law – is our tendency to focus on the wrong horizon in our walk with and work for the Lord.

### *It is well with my soul*

For too many of us, the health of our souls and our relationship with Christ is measured in material terms. We have a great church, plenty of Christian friends, a good Bible study group, a happy family, good job, nice home and two cars, possessions and leisure time, and money in the bank. What we apply our minds to – all our planning, anticipating, preparing, and doing – is whatever populates our temporal horizon. We organize our days around the things of here and now, and scarcely ever consider the City to Come, which the great saints of Scripture strained to see and strove to attain (Heb. 11.13-16).

Solomon wrote that his son was much more oriented to things “under the sun” than we are to things “under the heavens.” Can the same be said of us?

Not knowing – or finding it too difficult – to set our minds on the things above, where Christ is seated in heavenly places, we focus on the *temporal* horizon of our journey, exerting our best thinking and efforts toward maintaining and increasing the things, conditions, and circumstances which are the source of our wellbeing. We are aware, if only vaguely, of the unseen realm where Christ rules in glory, surrounded by departed saints and holy angels, in an environment and atmosphere of the most exalted beauty, goodness, and truth. But because we either do not know how to see into this realm, or find setting our minds there too

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difficult, we nod toward our exalted King and give lip service to seeking His Kingdom, as we invest the best part of our attention and strength indulging, enjoying, and increasing our material comforts.

If we are not careful, we may end up like the man in Jesus' parable, or, more likely, like Demas, who loved this present world so much that he abandoned the field of spiritual struggle, forsaking his Kingdom-and-glory calling, and leaving his colleague to languish in a Roman prison (2 Tim. 4.9, 10).

#### *The mature mind*

The apostle Paul insisted that the person who is mature in his thinking takes as his focus in life "the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3.14). He continued, "Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind..." (v. 15). The mind that is maturing in the mind of Christ is set on the *far* horizon of the City to Come, which Christ is even now preparing for us, and takes its bearings in life by the North Star of Jesus, exalted in glory. Whatever it takes to train the eye of understanding to peer beyond the veil that separates time from eternity (Eph. 1.15-23), allowing us to set our minds on the things that are above, we need to learn and practice, until the *far* – and far more beautiful – horizon of glory to come is the primary focus of all our lives (Col. 3.1-13).

Having possessions, being comfortable, and enjoying life are not bad things. They're just not to be regarded as ends in themselves. God does not bless us with a good life in temporal terms merely to make us happy with things. All that we have in this life we have received from Him as a trust (1 Cor. 4.7). When we are focused on the City to Come and the far horizon of God's glory, we will receive His gifts with praise and thanksgiving, and use them as stewards for the progress of His Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Spirit. Thus we avoid making idols of our possessions or our comfort, and instead employ these as means to the end of glorifying God now and working for the progress of His Kingdom.

People who are mature in their thinking, think about their lives from the perspective of coming glory. Knowing themselves to be seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 2.6), they find their true happiness in being hidden with Christ in God, and they use the benefits and opportunities of this earthly sojourn, not as means to temporal happiness, but as happy resources for serving the Lord Who bought them, owns them, and calls them to use all things for the praise of His glorious grace (1 Cor. 10.31).

Our minds will lack the soundness we require in an uncertain world until they are anchored in and focused on the unseen things of Christ.

#### *For reflection*

1. How might a person be able to tell when his happiness was more dependent on material blessings than eternal ones?
2. How should we practice setting our minds on the far horizon – Christ exalted in glory, and the City to Come?
3. Will it really make a difference in how we live, if we focus on the far horizon as our true and defining destination? Explain.

*Next steps – Preparation: What do you "see" in the unseen realm, where Christ is seated in glory? How do you keep that unseen realm in focus? How might you spend more time filling out this vision and meditating on it deeply?*

## 5 How Can This Be?

*Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"* John 3.9

### *The value of reason*

Of course, when we think about the mind, we think about reasoning. "Reason" defines a way of knowing that involves making observations, relating observations to experience, analyzing, sorting and categorizing, prioritizing, concluding, extrapolating, and so forth. Throughout this study on a sound mind we have stressed the role of reason in studying the Word and world of our Lord Jesus so that we can gain insight into His mind and press on to maturity and a sound mind.

But the same reasoning that can lead us to greater heights of maturity in the mind of Christ can also be a snare in our path, a pitfall, as it was in this situation for Nicodemus.

Nicodemus had already reasoned within himself concerning Jesus. He'd seen or perhaps heard about the many signs Jesus had done in Jerusalem. He came to Him by night, hoping to learn more about Him. He wanted to fit Jesus into the categories of his thinking, so that he could satisfy himself intellectually about this Man sent from God.

Nicodemus was a man of Scripture. He knew the Old Testament, and, based on what he'd seen or heard, he had already concluded that Jesus was a teacher sent from God (Jn. 3.2). Jesus fit the categories with which Nicodemus was familiar, so he had no trouble accepting this fact. His reason had led him to a conclusion in line with what he already knew. So far, so good.

It was what followed in their conversation that threw Nicodemus for a loop.

### *The limits of reason*

Jesus refused to engage Nicodemus at the level of mere reason. Instead, He challenged Nicodemus, based on what he had already concluded, to go a further step, to learn from Jesus the greatest mystery ever revealed to human beings, and to believe the teaching of Jesus, simply because He was Jesus.

When Jesus explained to Nicodemus that a person had to be "born from above" or "born again" to see the Kingdom of God, He challenged the limits of Nicodemus' reasoning. But Nicodemus, trapped in his experience and reason, could not process Jesus' message the way Jesus intended. His absurd follow-up question about entering his mother's womb a second time showed that Nicodemus was trying to force divine revelation into the finite categories of unbelieving human thought.

Job had wanted to do the same thing. He understood that God was somehow back of all his misery. But he was not content with that and demanded that God explain Himself in ways that would make sense to his reasoning.

God, of course, was not about to do that. And just as He would not do that for Nicodemus or Job, He will not do that for us. God's thoughts and ways are higher than our thoughts and ways (Is. 55.8, 9). And, while human beings have been created in the image of God, with eternity in our hearts, so that we can know God and His thoughts and ways, still, we cannot know as fully or completely as God does, and so must be content to believe and obey without always having to know fully according to our finite reasoning powers (Eccl. 3.11).

### *Understanding and trust*

In our walk with the Lord, we must differentiate between knowing and understanding. We cannot always know as fully or completely as God knows. Our duty is to receive from God the things He reveals to us

about Himself and His will, and to work hard to understand His intentions. And if we truly understand God's Word, we will believe and obey it, even though we cannot always make sense of it within our frames of reference. Like Peter, walking on the water.

For example, Jesus commands us to be His witnesses, and He has given us His Spirit to empower us for this high and holy calling (Acts 1.8). But we have no experience in being witnesses. In our way of thinking, witnessing for Jesus is not what we do. We are not quick on our feet where words are concerned. We're afraid of botching the Gospel, or of not being able to answer questions or objections, or of sounding ignorant. We suspect that the unsaved people in our Personal Mission Field aren't all that interested in spiritual matters anyway, and so, with all this baggage cluttering our frame of reference, we reason that being a witness must mean something other than talking with someone about the Lord, or else it must not apply to us, but to those specially gifted and called for such work.

Or in the church, Jesus taught that the way to make disciples was through shepherding (cf. Jn. 10). But we've never seen that done effectively in a church; and our experience in the world, and the frame of reference within which we think about such matters, tells us that the way to get things done is by organization and technique, not by shepherding, whatever that is. So we follow what is familiar to our thinking and experience, and either ignore or redefine the plain teaching of Jesus, rather than work to understand, believe, and obey it.

In many other ways, we block, modify, or simply reject the plain teaching of Scripture by relying on our finite and often misguided reasoning; and we ensnare ourselves in a major pitfall keeping us from growing to maturity in the mind of Christ: insisting that we will only believe and obey what agrees with our reasoning.

A sound mind approaches the revelation of God like Augustine, who wrote, "I believe in order that I might understand." We must use our reason to understand the substance and intent of the teaching of our Lord; but we must believe the Word of God and set our minds to obey it, even though we might not, like Nicodemus, understand how such a thing can be.

This is the work of faith that shapes our finite reasoning for a sound mind and a strong soul.

*For reflection*

1. Why is it unreasonable to think that we should be able to understand fully what God promises or commands?
2. Why is it so that faith and obedience lead to understanding?
3. Can you see any areas in your walk with or work for the Lord where you may be ensnared in finite human reasoning?

*Next steps – Transformation: What is one area of your life where you understand what God commands or promises, but you have yet to believe and obey Him because you can't see how this should be so? What can you do to remedy that today?*

## 6 The Most Fundamental Error of Thinking

*“These things you have done, and I kept silent;  
You thought that I was altogether like you;  
But I will rebuke you,  
And set them in order before your eyes.”* Psalm 50:21

*Asaph*

Surely, this is the most fundamental error of thinking humans ever make: to think of God, spiritual things, worship, human life, the world, and everything else from *our* vantage point rather than *His*.

This was Israel’s problem in the days immediately following the construction of the temple. These were high-flying days for Israel, days of great prosperity and influence, when the nations of the world looked to Solomon and Jerusalem as the source of wisdom and wealth (cf. 1 Kgs. 10).

Asaph prophesied during this time. Appointed by King David to lead the musicians in worship, Asaph was ready to serve when, under Solomon’s leadership, David’s vision finally came to reality.

But the deeper reality Israel experienced as the temple was being built, shielded from the eyes of most, was the disastrous state of the nation’s spiritual life. As glorious as the temple was, and as powerful as Israel became during the reign of Solomon, the rot of spiritual and moral compromise set in, even in the king’s household, and under his leadership (cf. 1 Kgs. 11).

Outward success and growth; inward shallowness and self-seeking. It’s a familiar story.

Asaph could see what was happening. And even though the nation was safe, strong, and surfeited with wealth, he knew that, spiritually, things were going awry. The people had persuaded themselves that God was just like them, that He thought like they did, and so was agreeable to their doing things their own way, indulging all their base desires, and pursuing their schemes for success – all the while continuing an outward show of faith.

Asaph saw the sham in all this. He is the author of 12 Psalms, (50 and 73-83), and the general tone of those psalms is so out of step with the times in which Asaph wrote them, that many scholars have difficulty assigning these psalms to the Asaph appointed by David.

But Hezekiah, in a later generation, understood the message of Asaph, and he commanded that the psalms of Asaph be used in his day, when the people were trying to emerge from a period of spiritual languishing into the light of revival and renewal (2 Chron. 29:30). Asaph’s psalms can lead us to revived thinking as well.

*Not like us at all*

We will not mature in the mind of Christ if we keep thinking that God is like us, that above all He wants us to be happy, wants us to enjoy ourselves and not to inconvenience ourselves in any way, whether spiritual or material. We deprive ourselves of the blessings of God so long as we think we can worship Him as we like, serve Him as we please, make His Word say whatever we want, and pick-and-choose our way through the life of faith. This is what Solomon and Israel did, and it’s what we do as well; and, since we do it in the Name of the Lord, we must think that He thinks like we do about following Jesus, that as long as we continue to “worship” Him, we can do pretty much whatever we want, and still consider ourselves to be Christians.

When, through the prophet Asaph, God called His people together in worship, His purpose was to expose their spiritual rot, denounce the outward sham of their lives, and remind them that, when it came to how they

### *Pitfalls for the Mind*

thought about Him and the life of faith, they had it altogether backwards.

We will not realize a sound mind if we are always starting with ourselves, our experience, our desires, and our ability to think things through. We deprive ourselves of the perspective, presence, power, and promise of God if we try, like Nicodemus, to force His agenda and power into our puny, familiar, comfortable human ways. Or if, like the people of Israel, we indulge our every whim and fancy, all the while telling ourselves that, because we're still worshiping God, we're right where we should be, and all's well between us.

God is not like us, and He does not intend to become like us. Rather, God's work is to make us become like Him, to transform us – beginning in our minds – so that we *think* like Jesus, *feel* like Jesus, *will* what Jesus wills, and *do* what Jesus has commanded us to do.

#### *Look to the Lord*

We need to look to the Lord to set things in order for us, so that we understand His Word and ways, and get our minds around His thinking and will. Then we can set goals, make plans, and take the next steps of faith, trusting in Him, seeking His glory, resting in His power and promise, and giving Him praise and thanks for all He does in and through us.

But if we keep insisting that God should be pleased to do things our way rather than His, bless our priorities instead of His, overlook our “little sins”, and go along with our ideas about what it means to be saved, to be a Christian, or to grow a church, realizing the soundness of mind that makes for a strong soul will continue to elude us.

God is not like us, and if we are ever going to become more like Him, we need to let His Word define our faith, determine our path, and direct everything we do in His Name.

We have the mind of Christ! Let us learn to think with *this* mind, and not merely our own.

#### *For reflection*

1. Can you think of some ways it might appear to God that we think He is just like us?
2. What might be some signs suggesting that we are trying to make God in our own image, rather than allowing Him to remake us in His?
3. Read Psalm 50. Do you see any parallels between this psalm and the state of things in churches today?

*Next steps – Preparation: Use Psalm 50 as a guide to prayer for yourself and your church. Listen as you pray for the Lord to point out any areas where your thinking is not what it should be.*



## 7 Our Commanding Focus

*For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying: "What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet." For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus...* Hebrews 2.5-9a

*We see Jesus?*

I'm persuaded that one of the biggest problems in the Church today is that, while we see clearly the mess the world is in, and all the work that remains to set things right, we do not have a clear vision of the end we should be seeking.

For many Christians, things will be on the right path again once we get the right people in office, the right judges on the Court, and correct a few things here and there in the culture. The end such Christians seek is that of moral and cultural renewal.

For other believers, there's no fixing the world, so we just need to hunker down in our faith communities, worship with all our might, and hope the Lord returns real soon. For such believers, the end they seek is just to get by in this life and to be transported to heaven, sooner rather than later.

Still others can't be bothered with the troubles of the world. There are too many doctrines to explain, false teachings to rebuff, and misguided brethren to set straight. The end such believers seek is orthodoxy, preferably, their version.

Yes, we do not yet see all things put under the feet of God's image-bearers, and we can find any number of prescriptions for finding our way out of this mess.

But unless we "see Jesus" nothing else will matter. Our minds are focused on a myriad of things to do, and these can blot out the one most needed matter on which we must set our minds: Jesus.

*Consider His Presence*

Twice following His assertion that "we see Jesus" the writer of Hebrews instructs us to *consider* Him more carefully. I suppose that, at least in some sense, most true Christians "see" Jesus. So thought that staunch Puritan John Owen. As he wrote in *Christologia*, "Every [believer] hath the idea or image of Christ in his mind, in the eye of faith, as it is represented unto him in the glass of the Gospel... We behold His glory 'in a glass,' which implants the image of it on our minds." This, Owen insisted, is a very good thing, because "hereby the mind is transformed into the same image, made like unto Christ so represented unto us – which is the conformity we speak of. Hence every true believer hath his heart under the conduct of an habitual inclination and desire to be like unto Christ."

All believers have some image of Jesus in mind, perhaps drawn from Sunday school posters or illustrated Bibles. They see Him, smiling as He receives the little children, or walking on the water, healing a blind man, hanging on a cross, showing His nail-scarred hands to incredulous disciples, or standing to welcome them home to glory. Or maybe they "see" Jesus as summarized in some concise doctrinal formulary, or confession of faith.

But is this what the writer of Hebrews meant when He said we “see Jesus”? If we look more closely at those two exhortations to *consider* Jesus, we may discern some deeper sense to what it means to *see Jesus* so that we can set the Lord always before us whatever else we may be doing (Ps. 16.8).

The first command to *consider* Jesus comes in Hebrews 3.1, and uses the verb, *katanoeo*, which can be translated to *observe, notice, pay attention to, or be aware of*. The emphasis here seems to be on the *immanence* of our Lord Jesus Christ, His being with us always, making Himself known in the 10,000 forms and places where, as Hopkins put it, He is wont to show Himself to us in His world. The goodness, lovingkindness, wisdom, grace, elegance, and strength of Jesus are evident on every hand, if only we know how to see Him.

If we want to think like Jesus and to mature in His mind, we’ll need to pay attention to His Presence with us as we go about in His world. As we observe Him, notice His movements, pay attention to His revelation, and are aware of His Presence, we will be more likely to think, plan, and live from out of *His* mind rather than ours alone. But we must look for His Presence – in others, in creation, in things beautiful and good – if we are to set our minds there and see Him continuously.

#### *Consider Him in His Word*

In Hebrews 12.3 the verb we translate *consider* is the Greek word *analogizomai*, and means something like to *consider closely, compare, or even analyze*. Here we must look to Jesus’ Word, not His world, to gain a clear and compelling vision of Him. Jesus is throughout the Scriptures, as He Himself insisted (Jn. 5.39). In some places, He is clearer than others, and we may consider Him closely as we analyze those passages and compare them with one another. The light we gain from the gospels, Revelation 1, the book of Hebrews, the psalms, and certain passages in the prophets will then help us in analyzing all the rest of Scripture to see how Jesus is present everywhere in His Word. All this considering, comparing, and analyzing will lead to a clearer and more comprehensive vision and understanding of Jesus, in all His majesty and might, humility and suffering, victory, reign, and imminent return. And seeing Jesus clearly here will fit us for seeing His Presence with us always in our world.

We will see Jesus when we devote ourselves to searching the Scriptures and studying the world to discern Jesus Christ in all His majesty, goodness, wisdom, strength, love, and hope. The vision of Jesus that can emerge from such careful considerations will stretch our minds increasingly into the mind of Christ, so that, as we *see Jesus* more clearly and consistently, we can think His plans and will His will in reconciling the world to God for revival, renewal, and awakening.

We are called to set Jesus as the commanding focus in our lives. We must not be distracted from Him, even as we engage our sound minds in all the matters, details, and issues that make up our daily lives. Let our continuous prayer to the Father be, “Sir, we would see Jesus.”

#### *For reflection*

1. Explain the difference between the two ways of *considering* Jesus mentioned in Hebrews. How do you practice each of these?
2. What are some indicators that would suggest we were making progress toward maturity in the mind of Christ?
3. How can Christians help one another to *see Jesus* as the writer of Hebrews suggests?

*Next steps – Preparation: Begin a notebook or journal today, devoted to considering Jesus and seeing Him more clearly. Share your observations with others as often as you can.*

*Pitfalls for the Mind*

*For reflection or discussion*

1. Which of the pitfalls for the mind do you think is most prevalent among Christians today? Why?
2. Which of these pitfalls are you most likely to have to deal with in your own walk with the Lord? How can you prepare for this?
3. What does it mean to *see* Jesus? How would you counsel a new believer to grow into maturity in the mind of Christ?
4. What can you begin doing to *consider* Jesus more consistently and fruitfully?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study about pitfalls for the mind? How are you applying that lesson in your own walk with and work for the Lord?

*Prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. Visit our website at [www.ailbe.org](http://www.ailbe.org) to learn more.

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Thank you.