

A Threefold Cord: Secret Prayer, Doing Good, and Self-Denial

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Well you can open up your Bibles to Ecclesiastes. I don't intend to stay there only make a point from there; only draw forth a principle from there actually. Ecclesiastes chapter 4. Father, I pray that You would feed us from Your Word, totally dependent upon You to make it convicting, to make it powerful, to reach our hearts, and reach our consciences. Lord, please reach our hearts, our souls, with this message. I pray in Christ's name. Amen.

I was really thinking about 2018, that if I could preach a message today that would somehow flavor this year for us. That's what went into my thinking. Ecclesiastes 4:9 It's really a proverb. Ecclesiastes 4:9 "Two are better than one." That's the preacher Solomon. "Two are better than one," and he's going to tell us why. "...because they have a good reward for their toil." And even like the Geneva translation actually brings out that the good reward is probably that they have a better reward than they would have if they stayed separate. That's kind of the idea there. V. 10 "For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow." Now you can see the reality of that. If these two guys are separate, and one falls and can't get back up, obviously when you're together with somebody else and they can come help you and pick you up, what's been accomplished - the greater good - is far beyond what the two could have achieved separate, because if they're separate and they fall, and they can't get back up, they've lost everything. They've lost the whole day. "If they fall, one will lift up his fellow, but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up." And you know that could be spiritually. Undoubtedly, that's why the Lord has put us all together in the church to lift up one another. Again, "if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone..." Here you have adversaries. One guy against another guy. And you might be prevailed against by one guy, but if there's two of you, "two will withstand him." And then he throws in the proverbial saying, "a threefold cord is not quickly broken." He actually takes it from one to two, and then three. A threefold cord.

The title of my sermon: "A Threefold Cord." Solomon's point is clear. Two are better than one. Not two separate, but when they're brought together, to get the advantage, the two must be working together. Their bodies must be close together to retain the heat. They must withstand a foe together. And even more, if you take three strands - like if you braided hair or you took three threads and you wound them all together to create one cord, the reality is it's even better than two. And the thing is it's not quickly broken. There's a strength.

Now, I totally intend to spiritualize this truth today. Totally. The threefold cord is your life. One strand in that cord: secret prayer. Craig came very close to that one today. It's right there with secret fasting. That's one strand. Because one of the things I want to emphasize today, look, this prayer and fasting isn't just for a week of prayer and fasting. This is your life. This is our life. One strand: secret prayer. But wrapped, brought close together, the second strand: doing good. Third strand wound in there: self-denial. (incomplete thought) Listen, prayer without doing good and without self-denial has no feet. It's no good to pray that God make the Gospel

advantageous to souls in our community if we're not willing to take that message to those ears of those people. But you know what happens if you have works without self-denial? It's just cheap. All it will result in is cheap, little demonstrations of religion. Brethren, if you try to do works without prayer, they'll just be powerless. It will be a demonstration of the flesh. Prayer is our dependence on the Lord. You wrap all three of these together. You wrap them all together. You see, the principle here is they need to lie together to really produce the warmth. They need to be close. You know, the thing here is if an adversary comes or if you're working and one of you falls, the other one lifts up the other. These lift each other up. These bring strength to one another. They prevail together. That's the issue. They fail otherwise.

But God helping us, what I want us to do is - look, I'm going to show you from Scripture this threefold cord is absolutely something that God wants us with the hand of faith to reach up and grab hold of. Brethren, I just think how fruitful we might be; what a church we might be if you really take this threefold cord into the grips of your own faith; lay hold on this and seek to live this out.

First Strand: Secret Prayer

The first strand in this threefold cord: secret prayer. Let's look at it. Matthew 6:6 Let's go to Matthew 6 a second time this morning - now this afternoon. Matthew 6:6 "But when you pray, go into your room..." King James: "enter into thy closet." If you ever wonder where that idea of the prayer closet - it's right there. "Enter into thy closet." You see, again, just like with Craig in the first message, this is something that Jesus assumes is going to be a reality in your life.

The closet. The secret place. And notice: "shut the door." Why do you shut the door? Well, not just so that you're not the hypocrite; so that the people in the other room can't see you. It's because this is about shutting out the disturbances, shutting out the distractions, and just your soul alone with the living God. "Go into your room..." "Enter into thy closet..." "Shut the door and pray." Don't get on your phone. Don't get on your computer. And if you don't have a place that you can go to get away from those, then you need to have one. Many of you know that Susannah Wesley - her secret place was under her apron. She put it over her head and the children knew, don't go there. "Pray to your Father Who is in secret, and your Father Who sees in secret will reward you..." And I'll just add openly.

Brethren, we're talking about shutting ourselves away to God; to where God and your soul are alone. Where we depart from here; we go into the presence where our own soul flies away to where He is; where there's a connection. This is what I was talking about when I was talking about fasting.

Brethren, I find there are seasons when something happens. There is a connection with the Lord - yes, there are times when it's difficult, when I feel cold. There are times when connecting with God just - it seems like He's far away. It seems like my thoughts are wandering. I start to pray and then I wander off here. Or I'm out walking somewhere, and I see something, and my mind's gone over there. Or I start thinking about some situation that I need to deal with and it's difficult. But there are other seasons, there is a connection with the Lord. That's the issue. Your Father - He sees in secret. He's there in secret.

Brethren, secret prayer is not to be some mere duty of the Christian, like taking out the garbage or getting the oil changed on your car where it's this checklist. You know, all the things

I've got to do today. Well, I need to make sure that I do that. So you run over and you pray, "Lord, I want this, this, this, this..." Well, yeah, I did my prayer thing today. Brethren, that isn't it. We must consider secret prayer to be one of the great works of our life.

When you think about your life, do you even think that way? Does that enter into your mind? That when you think about the things that you want to do well in life - and you know this, you know. If you're ever going to do anything well in life - you know, somebody's a chess champion. Did that just happen? Or they play the violin extremely well. Somebody can play a sport. Can you cook well? Sew well? Weld well? Can you problem solve issues on your computer? Well, that's well and great, but the question is can you pray? Do you even regard this as the great work of your life?

I mean, listen, when you have the great apostle himself coming along to those Gentile churches and saying 1 Thessalonians, "Pray without ceasing." Craig's been dealing with the Colossian letter. To the Colossians, he says, "Continue steadfastly in prayer." To the Romans, "be constant in prayer." Listen to what God is telling you. This man is under inspiration. God is telling you, be constant in this. You know the words of Jesus Christ Himself there in Luke 18. He says (yeah, you can grab that brother); What does He say? He says that we need to be steadfast in prayer. "Men ought always to pray and not faint." These are the calls of our Savior, this apostle. (incomplete thought) It's like to everyone of the Gentile churches, he needed to say this to them. You need to pray. Not just a little. You need to pray constantly. You need to persevere in it. You need to be about it. You need to not faint in it. This is something that we need to give ourselves to. How often do you think this way? This is the great work of the Christian's life that we pray, we pray, we pray. Secret prayer. The desire of secret communion with God. Brethren, it's one of the great evidences that you've become a Christian.

Listen. I prayed some when I was a nominal Catholic. But when God saved me, I wanted to commune with Him. I spent hours communing with Him. Why? Something happened. Something in the desires happened.

If you don't have a desire to be communing with the Father in secret, you need to go back and start over again, because something's wrong and something's broken. But see, I know with a lot of you, there's a desire there. But you know what? The longer we go on in the history of mankind, and the more gadgets we develop and devise and the way technology is and the distractions of this world, we are in the communication age, and the problem with it is all this communication floods us. And I know there's a desire in some of your hearts, but listen, if you're going to be men or women of prayer, you've got to be disciplined. And you've got to learn to say no to things. You are going to have to make time in your day.

I'll tell you this, when something is important to somebody you can typically see the level of importance that it holds in a person's life by the sacrifices that they are willing to make for it to happen. And if you're not willing to make those sacrifices, that says an enormous amount about how important you think this is. Strive, brethren, strive to make this one of the great works of your life. This is your life: Prayer. Constant. Always. Secret place.

Do any of you not even have that place? Whether it's under the apron, ladies... whether you actually find a closet somewhere, or whether it's out under the stars at night. Is there that place in your life where you go and shut the door? If that's foreign to you, listen, then stop. Forsake your way. Because if that's foreign to you, the way that you are on needs to be

forsaken because it's a bad way. It's a wrong way. It's a backward way. It's a powerless way. It may be very likely an un-Christian way. The secret place.

"Men ought always to pray." This needs to be our life's work, no matter what else God has called you to. You say, God has called me to do this and this and the other. That's ok. But God has called you to this. And so matter what else He's called you to, He has called you to make this a life's work.

Because, brethren, this is where your life derives power. When you watch people in the Christian life, and you marvel, wow... what patience! What holiness! What power they have in their lives! What power they have demonstrated in some way! Brethren, the power of God is channeled into the Christian life through prayer. Prayerlessness does not produce power, because prayerlessness is basically avoiding God. It's not going to God in the secret place. And you're not going to experience the reward. Brethren, you know very well this reality. Moses' face shined only when he was in the presence of God. And I can use that.

You say, well, that's an Old Testament thing and we don't actually go into His presence in the Shekinah glory like he did. Brethren, if that's what you think, you think wrong, because Paul used that very example and brought it out in 2 Corinthians 3 for us. For you and I. Because there's a reality in that truth that when we behold the glory of the Lord and when we're standing in this presence, there is where the change takes place. People that spend much time in the presence of God end up unlike people that don't spend that time. This is where we derive that power. Brethren, you know what happens when you go into the secret place? Look, if you go and your mind, your heart, your spirit lifts up to God - something happens. I'll tell you one thing that happens. There's an awareness that you're speaking to God. And oftentimes what that does is it produces an awareness of yourself. Because it's a place where you come and you put your conscience under the very gaze of omniscience - One Who knows it all. Do you find that happens? You go to Him and it's like you're trying to talk to Him about something, but suddenly your conscience is there beneath His gaze, and it's saying something's not right. You see, when we're regular in the secret places of prayer, you know what it does? You know what it does with your life as far as purity and holiness? (incomplete thought) The secret place is the place where we come and we confess. It's the place where we come and we lay down our pride, our lack of gentleness, our lack of faith, our irritability, our lack of patience. It's that place where you cry out for help. "Lord, take that away."

Have you ever been there? Where it's like, "Lord, You have promised in Your Word to conform us to the image of Christ. Lord, that's Your promise! It's right there. I read it in the pages of Romans 8. You have promised that I'm predestinated to be conformed to the image of this firstborn Son. You have promised in Your Word to make us blameless and make us holy. You have promised that by degrees that we are going to be conformed to the image of this Lord Whose glory that we see. You've promised that." It's the place where you go there and you ask for power. It's the place there, brethren, where your heart is lifted up and you adore Him for not dealing with you according to your sins. Do you ever go there and you're just struck by all the blessings that you have? And by the fact that He has not dealt with you according to the things that you've done in your life? And you're lifted up to the cross? And Lord, thank You! Thank You! It's that place of adoration. Listen, brethren, it's a place of weeping - weeping over your failures, but weeping over just gratitude. It's a place where you connect with the living God.

Brethren, secret prayer is where we meet God. Don't let the busyness of this world rob you of your God. Brethren, don't you recognize that the greatest thing we have in salvation is our God? It's like what are you going to do? Live on the broken cisterns when you have this fullness that is there?

Brethren, the rewards that come when God says: You go into that secret place. I'm going to reward you. Oh, you better believe it. He created us. He knows what the greatest rewards are. He knows what most satisfies. He knows what most brings joy. He knows what's for our greatest good. Rewards - the reward of the Father. Don't let the cares of this world encroach.

Because I'll tell you this, you know what happens - have you ever read in Scripture about those who get encroached upon by the cares of the world? Both places I read about it in Scripture, it's not a good thing. One is the cares of this world, they encroach and there's no fruitfulness. The other one is a steward who goes about getting drunk and beating his fellow servants, and the cares of this world come upon him and then the Lord Jesus returns, and he's not ready. You know what the cares of the world do? They make you fruitless. What do you think Jesus is saying? You think that guy was ready to meet his Lord? You think it's like he's just going to get a pat on the back? Well done, good and faithful servant? Although, there were these minor things like you were getting drunk all the time. And the thing that all of this is couched in the midst of is the cares of the world. We may think, oh, the cares of this world, to be distracted sometimes away from secret prayer a minor thing. Uh uh. You're not ready to meet the Lord. You're not ready. Don't let the cares of the world rob you of God or of His reward.

Listen to this. Just listen. You know these words, but listen. "Every one who asks receives. The one who seeks finds. The one who knocks, it will be opened." Do you know what the reality is? Those who pray most, receive most. You know, if you look at your life and you wonder, why don't I have what they have? Ok, I'm not saying this works all the time. There are times we ask for things and the Lord doesn't give them to us. But I can tell you this, when you have promises like this, that if you ask, you will receive - everyone who asks receives - if you notice that in the spiritual kingdom, there are some people that have a lot more, there is a good likelihood that they pray more. You take Brainerd - he was a missionary to the American Indians. You look at his life. You say, wow... he reached heights. But look how he prayed; look how he fasted. And Edwards could say, maybe not a single time that he wasn't rewarded - even sometimes the same day.

Brethren, you know what's happening if you're not in that secret place praying every single day? You're robbing yourself. You're robbing yourself of how those times with the Lord would transform you into a greater likeness of Christ. You're robbing yourself of beholding more of the glory of God. You're robbing yourself of the rewards. You're robbing yourself of answered prayer. Those who pray the most, stand in the presence of God the most. And just like it was with Moses, they're going to have the most glory of God shining from their faces. Those who pray most walk where other men don't walk. They experience what other men don't experience. Listen, Jesus says if you love Me, He says My Father will love you and I will love you, and He says I will manifest Myself to you. But you're not showing much love for Him if you don't care to spend time with Him. But He says if you love Me, it's going to be rewarded with manifestations of Christ. That's valuable. Brethren, the great commandment that Jesus gives to us: Follow Me. You say, oh, I thought it was love... Yeah, it's hard to separate those two. Follow Me. Follow Me.

He said if you would be My disciple, you must follow Me. You notice when He came around to everybody, James and John: Follow Me. Peter and Andrew: Follow Me. Matthew: Follow Me. Rich, young ruler: Follow Me. That was always it. Follow Me. Do you see Him out there? Those of you that have read your Gospels? That's why it's so important to be in the Gospel all the time. Because you see Christ - the One we're supposed to follow. Let's follow Him. Do you see Him? Follow Him.

"He went up on the mountains... Matthew 14:23 "...by Himself to pray. When evening came, He was there alone." Now think with me. "He was there alone." Where? On the mountain. That was His closet. Alone. That's what shutting the door is: alone.

You're not alone today, even if you shut the door and you've got this buzzing in your pocket. You know how the King James says "quit yourself like men?" Be a man! Don't be some little slave of a cell phone. Be a man. You're going to have to be one if you're going to be familiar and make it the great object of your life to pray like some of the men and women of old, whose lives we cherish. We're moved on when we read them. But how do you think they lived lives like that? Oh, if you looked at their prayer lives, you'd have some idea. Mark 1:35 "Rising very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus departed and went out to a desolate place and there He prayed." Hear Him. A mountain by Himself. A desolate place all alone. Hear His words. Do you see Him out there? You know what He's saying to you? Follow Me. Follow Me. Luke 5:16 "He would withdraw to desolate places and pray." Luke 6:12 "In these days, He went out to the mountain to pray and all night He continued in prayer to God." You find Him in these places before the sun rises in the morning. You find Him there in the afternoon all the way till night. You find Him there all through the night. Desolate places.

Listen, if you want to excel at this, you need to arrange your life around this. It's not going to happen by magic. Be resolute about this. Make the sacrifices that are necessary to maintain one or two or three times of secret prayer every single day. You say, two or three times? I don't even do it once a day! Then repent! That's not praying constantly. That's not showing up in the secret place. That's not imitating Christ. Follow Me. Follow Me. Follow Me.

Brethren, I thought about this. If I could take every moment that I've ever wasted in my life, and could have given it to secret prayer, how different my life would be. I mean just think of the greater sanctification that you and I might have in our lives if we took some of the needless, unnecessary wastes of time out of our life and replaced it with secret communion with God, just how our lives would be different. More answers to prayer. Don't let your friends; don't let your family; don't let the cares of this world; don't let your business; don't let your pleasure rob you of God. This is the greatest gift of all.

I'll tell you this, those who have experienced God come close, they know it. They know it. There's nothing in this world that compares. There's nothing better. If you say, I don't know that, listen, if you love Him and you give yourself to seeking Him, He says He'll manifest Himself. And if you're not knowing these manifestations, it's not because He hasn't promised to give them. Look, spend the time to find God. Spend time - the time necessary - to find God in ways that thrill your soul; that cause you to drop on your face because He's come and the sense of His holiness is enough to put you on the floor. Because brethren, I'll tell you, you have experiences like Isaiah had. Yeah, I know he went to the temple; he saw the Lord; he actually had a vision. But when you have experiences where God comes close, it's life changing.

You ask how to pray? Listen, I'll tell you from my own experience, have the Word of God involved with it. Oftentimes, going out - I like to pray outside - walking and begin to recite Scripture that I'm memorizing. Oh, that so primes the pump for prayer.

Mack Tomlinson - and I'm starting to do this now - he has told me about praying through the Psalms. I'm beginning to do that. Tremendous help.

Think about the promises of God when you pray. Think about reasons as to why God should give you what you're asking for. Brethren, instead of starting your secret prayer just running headlong into God's presence with all the things that you want. You say, I don't know what to pray for. Just go and get in the presence of God and begin to admit your faults. Confess your sins. Have a fresh look at the cross. Because I'll tell you, when you begin to go out and you begin to confess, and you're being transparent before the Lord, you start to look to the cross afresh - Christ's sufferings and His death for me - you're right where the Spirit will help you pray. So, that's one strand. But hear me, don't get impatient here.

Second Strand: Doing Good

Second strand: doing good. Brethren, Galatians 6:9. Don't turn to these texts, but just listen, because I'm going to move through some of these quickly. But Scripture says, the apostle says, "Let us not grow weary of doing good." Or, "well doing." We are to be well-doers. "For in due season, we will reap if we do not give up." Do you remember what was said about our Lord? "He went about doing good." Again, He says, follow Me. See, if we watch Him, we find Him up on the mountain. We find Him out in desolate places. But keep watching Him. Oh, that's good in itself. That's doing good, but watch Him in between. Watch what He's up there getting fresh grace to do; communing with His Father. Because then He comes down from the mountain. He comes away from the desolate place. And what does He do? A life just full of good. That's it. That's what it is to be His disciple. Are you His follower? That's what a Christian is: a follower of Christ. Do we follow Him? Do we follow Him to the secret place and then follow Him among the people? To do good. Doing good.

Do you know what sort of Jesus you do not find in your Bibles? We do not find the sort of Jesus Who didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't watch R-rated movies, didn't send His children to public school, didn't come late to church. We don't find that Christ. You say what? Listen, my emphasis is this: you don't find this Christ of negative emphasis in the pages of your Bible. Acts 10:38 doesn't say that Jesus went about not doing evil. That's not the Jesus of the Bible. You say, what? You're saying He did evil? No, I'm just saying that's not the issue. So often you find religious people - professing Christians - "well, what's wrong with that?" "Well, I don't do that." You know, the typical fundamentalist attitude: "I don't drink. I don't smoke. I don't dance." So? You say, what, the pastor's saying you can? I'm saying this: we're called to be followers of Christ. When you do spiritual inventory, sure, it's good if you haven't viewed pornography this week. It's great if you haven't beaten your wife this week. But brethren, those things are a given. If that's the level at which you're trying to live your Christian life, my friend, you are missing the whole point of why Jesus Christ saved a people. Have you ever read? He saved a people for His own possession. And what would chiefly characterize them? The fact that they don't do bad? Brethren, that they be zealous of good works. That's it. Get away from this negative-oriented kind of Christianity.

You know you ask some people about their Christianity, and it's like it's all the negative. It's all about what they don't do. Listen, Jesus didn't save us just to stop doing the bad things. Of course He did that. Of course, by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body. Of course that. But doing good, doing good - this is the will of God, that by doing good, you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. In the same way, doesn't Scripture say, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father Who is in Heaven?" Right there in Ephesians, we came across it: "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." Brethren, this is the heart and soul. Again, when we talk about making it a primary endeavor of your life to pray - one of the primary endeavors of our lives is doing good. with so many people it's: Well, I didn't miss church on Sunday.

Listen, church going - well, that's good. Not forsaking the assembling together of yourselves is good. But why do we come together? To stir up one another to love and good works. You see, that's the issue. You being here - that's only to equip you for the real work. To go out these doors and among one another and among the world out here in the midst of all this. Brothers, sisters, do good. Let that be the banner that flies over your life. Do good. Don't just live your life not getting drunk, then selfishly seeking to live for your own profit and your own good. Look for every occasion to do good. Look for opportunities. In your secret prayer, ask God, please, open doors. It's amazing how many times my wife has said I asked the Lord for an opportunity to evangelize and He brought it - almost instantaneously, like that day. Right away. I find that to be true too. You ask the Lord for opportunities to do good, the door will swing open. Just ask Him. Ask Him. Brethren, we are one of the richest countries that has ever lived. Well, you say, there are oil countries over in the Middle East. That doesn't matter. In light of all of human history, we are one of the richest countries that has ever existed. The average person in this country is so incredibly wealthy compared to the poverty you find in other places. You know why you've been given those riches? To do good with it. The rich are told to do good. Look for every opportunity.

Brethren, look around you. There are needs everywhere. You know the Gospel. What a mess of good you might do knowing the Gospel! Look, we have that message that men need to hear. How are they going to believe in a Christ that they've never heard of. This is the message that empowered by God is salvation unto men. Jesus Christ - think about the good He did. He went to the cross. He laid down His life. And He's actually made it that with all that good that was done, yet people will not believe unless we do the good of taking the message of that cross to their ears. Otherwise, they die in their sin and they perish. Think about all the good we can do. You have the Gospel. You walk through this world and you come back here, one week, come back, one week, come back... And if you're not taking that fragrance of the Gospel out there, look at all the missed opportunities of enlightening the world. Brethren, do good to men's souls. (incomplete thought)

I know James was saying we need to order some more business cards, but we've got tracts. Let's use them up. No matter what the financial situation is, use up tracts and we'll buy more. Keep those things flowing. Do good, brethren. Do good at work, at play, at home, at school. Relieve people's poverty. Brethren, if you see suffering, try to meet it. Use the spiritual gifts that God has given to you to help one another, to serve one another. Take what God has given to you. Look for opportunities. Look for the widow. Look for the orphan. Look for missions.

Look, brethren, look. Get your eyes opened. We need to open up our eyes. Look, this is not about you being comfortable. God did not give you the riches that He gave you in this world so that you can just keep increasing your standard of living and standard of living, and it goes up, and you can wear nicer clothes and live in nicer houses, and drive nicer cars. It's not about that. The rich need to be liberal. Give and give more. Go to the jails, go to the college campuses, go to the nursing homes, get involved with this crisis pregnancy. Brethren, pray for the women's Grace House. Be involved in that as you're able to. But have compassion on people. Try to disseminate some sort of love to everyone you meet.

If you're just thinking how can I just show kindness? Brethren, sometimes it may just be greeting somebody. I mean, I'm not saying you have to do a full three point sermon to the guy that you meet at HEB, but it might just be greeting him and being nice to people. It's good if Christians are just nice.

But see what happens is when you begin to intertwine those secret prayers with the doing good, what happens is, God brings power to that doing good. I mean, He begins to bless it. There begins to become a reward in it. You know, brethren, there are some things we do that don't touch men's hearts. And there are some things that do. And the difference is God. The difference is Him. And it may have to do with the difference being in us, but He's able to make that difference. It comes back to Him. Brethren, you only get one life here. And the reality is, look, if we had two or three or five or ten lives, we might waste one of two of them, but you don't have that. And we're to be zealous. And you remember how it is on the end. Brethren, what was Jesus looking at? He was looking at the good that people did. I was hungry and you fed Me. Brethren, go do that. I was in jail; you came. Brethren, go do that. Go do that. That's what He's going to be looking for. Because you know what? That's just like the things He did. He did good. And He tells us: follow Me. He was zealous of good works and He wants you to be. Not mediocre, brethren. Not mediocre in good works. He really wants you to pour yourself out that way. Don't live your life so cheaply where you're just going around asking all the time: what's wrong with this? what's wrong with that? It's just so cheap.

Brethren, you know what the reality is? When you go into that secret place, you can pray, "Lord, I know it. I know I can be insensitive. Take away this hard, selfish, insensitive heart. Make my heart full of love for people."

Third Strand: Self-Denial

Now, the last one. The last thread. Bear with me. Don't get impatient here, because this is critical. Threefold cord - it's when they're all wrapped around. Listen, if there's not self-denial, you will not make the disciplined decisions necessary to get into that prayer closet. If there's not self-denial, like I said before, any good works you do will be cheap (incomplete thought). You know the greatest good that Jesus did was laying down His life at that cross. The greatest good are the things that cost us the most, usually.

Self-denial. Craig brought up: it's dangerous. It is dangerous. And he hit it right on the head: motive. Self-denial is dangerous because on the one hand, the Apostle Paul actually said people who are seduced by demonic spirits are going to preach abstinence - whether that be marriage or food. Now, you know what the interesting thing is, abstinence from food is like lent, or Catholics who can't eat meat on Fridays. We look at that and we say, well, that's demonic.

Then here's Jesus over here saying, "when you fast..." I think you know that's not demonic. But isn't it close? Abstain from food is what people teach who have been influenced by these seducing spirits. Abstaining from food is also taught by Jesus. How do we bridge that gap? Because there's self-denial involved.

Listen, Craig alluded to the passage in Colossians 2. You know what Paul warns about? He warns about man-made religion. Don't taste. Don't touch. Have you ever read that? He warns against asceticism. Who knows what asceticism is? It's self-denial. It's self-mortification of the body. And he's actually warning against it. And yet the same apostle comes along to the Corinthians and says right at the end of 1 Corinthians 9, I beat my body and I keep it under. But you see brethren, the thing is here, it's all got to do with motive.

Self-denial. That's the last strand that I want to bring out. This needs to be interwoven with secret prayer, with doing good. Yes, it's fraught with dangers, but the reality is, brethren, Jesus Christ said this to us - in fact, I want to read you Paul's words before I tell you what Jesus said. He said, "I do not run aimlessly. I do not box as one beating the air, but I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others, I myself should be disqualified." King James says "cast away." The reality of that is not standing the test. And you know what he's saying? He's saying that I beat my body and I bring it under control and I say no to it and I don't let it master me, because in the end, I don't want to be cast away. In the end, I don't want to perish. Brethren, you know what I love about Paul? He's never the hyper-Calvinist. "Oh, well, I'm saved, so it doesn't really matter." "Well, if I'm one of the elect, I'm in, no matter what I do." You know, he didn't think that way. He recognized this, you need to recognize what he's saying. He's saying I recognize that my body has such appetites that if I give myself into those I may perish at last. Listen, Jesus said this: "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily..." That means die. Cross - death instrument. Die daily. "...and follow Me." See, we keep coming back to that. Follow Me. Follow Him to the secret place. Follow Him in being zealous of good works. Follow Him in - you talk about self-denial - He wasn't born into a wealthy family. He could have been. He was born into some degree of poverty. He went to the cross. His own ease? He said, I did not come to be served. I came to serve. I came to pour Myself out for others. That's the example that we have. John said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." You want to be fruitful? There's dying. Death brings fruitfulness. Dying to self. Deny self. Carry the cross daily.

Brethren, let's face it. By nature - I'm talking about our lost states - we're soft. We love pleasure. You know what? You could say, what about the guy that goes into the military and he becomes a seal. Does he like just soft things? No, he likes the honor. He likes the attention. But see, we're like that. If it makes us look good, we'll make some denials if it makes us look good; we'll make the denials to be this kind of athlete over there, because we want that applause. But by nature, we are honor seeking. We are the kind of people that we seek self-gratification and applause and pleasure. That's what we are.

Brethren, the reality is that when we get saved, I know that the cross of Jesus Christ has dealt our selfishness a mortal blow, but you and I know it's not dead yet. That principal is still - that's in operation within us, and that's why Paul has to come along and say, I beat my body. I give it a black eye. I keep it under. And that's why you get Jesus coming along and saying, you need to die. You need to deny yourself. Why? Because, brethren, I'm telling you just like I

mentioned that in regards to Paul, there is something in our appetites that is willing to carry us away if we give place to it. This is what it is about the Spirit of God and putting to death the deeds of the body. It is by this Spirit, you are putting to death something that needs to be put to death. There's something in our mortal bodies. It likes softness. You know, one of the things today with all the wealth that we have, we have so much softness. And we don't really even think about it, I'm afraid. We are able to keep the temperature within very narrow bands 99% of our life. And we scream like - I know it's graphic - I just think of Bob Jennings talking about people screaming like stuck pigs. But we scream bloody murder, like my mom used to say, if we just have to walk from the door out to our cars and it's 30 degrees. Oh, it's so cold out here. We are so soft. The temperature, the humidity... And our food. We are a pampered people. That's just a reality. My great uncle came back from fighting in the Battle of the Bulge. He came in on like day four or five after D-day, and he fought behind Patton. And I went and talked to him - he and his wife were in their 90's, sharing the Gospel with him over in Tennessee. His wife said when he came home from the war, he slept on the ground in the backyard. Because he had been so used to that during the war, that getting in a bed was unheard of. We need some of that in us. Because brethren, we're soft.

Doesn't it seem like they're figuring out how to make clothes softer? And towels softer? And if you would have heard how we cried when we went to Mexico because the water wasn't exactly the right temperature in the showers? Right, Pete? I mean, we are soft. And brethren, if we're going to live this Christian life with the kind of sacrifices that we need to be making, brethren, you need to deny the self. And listen, motive has everything to do with it. If the motive is, oh yeah, I'm going to make these sacrifices - so it comes back to the fasting thing. You see, fasting fits right in with all this self-denial. If you do it because you want to be seen of people, and you want to put a notch in your spiritual belt, and you want to make sure everybody knows.

Listen, I have a friend I went to high school with. He's now a Jesuit priest. He let the whole world know, right on the Internet - I saw it there. I was kind of finding out what's going on with his life. He tells the story publicly in front of the whole audience about how when he was a kid in elementary school, he'd walk - this is back when I knew him. I used to be his neighbor. And he put rocks in his shoes. Why? Well, that's what Catholics do. This self-mortification. But the thing is, he had to tell everybody. I'm not talking about the things that you go and broadcast. Paul was setting himself forth as an example, but he didn't tell us exactly how he did, what he did - that's not the issue. But brethren, we need to look at our lives.

Look, I'll tell you this. It doesn't help us to make things more comfortable, more soft. So often we can get this, you know, we're in this day where we have so much wealth. We can eat exactly these right things. All these diets, well, it's in the name of health, and I'm going to live longer and I'm going to be healthy. But I'll tell you this, if all the pampering makes you soft spiritually, it's not helping you. You might live a little bit longer, but that's not what we need. We don't need to live longer. We need to live better while we live. Brethren, don't go after all the self-pampering in this life. Don't do that. Hudson Taylor. Brethren, there was a reason before he went to China, he went into the inner city. And he was eating the very meagerest of diets. And you know this. You've heard it. He slept on boards. And he lived in poor housing in the slums. Why? He was preparing to go to China. And he recognized this. He recognized that if he's going to make it over there being all lavished with the best food and the softest clothes and the nice

house, which really is how he grew up; he wasn't going to do well over there. (incomplete thought) You say, well, Hudson Taylor did those things. I'm not a Hudson Taylor. Yeah, but the thing that we have to recognize is how did Hudson Taylor get to be where he was a Hudson Taylor and accomplish the things that he did? There was a lot of self-sacrifice; a lot of self-denial.

Now, I don't know where I came across this, but I believe that this was John Piper that basically pointed out - he was taking fasting, again, which is a form of self-denial, and he put fasting and young people struggling with pornography into the same little message. And I made a slight little effort to find it, but I just don't know where it's at. But you know what he said? He said you take young people today who are so wired to just gratify everything. We get sick. We take the medicine. Get sick. Go to the doctor. Soft. We're supposed to get out of bed. You know the Scripture says, "consider the ant." The ants often out there - these fire ants around here are often out there - you wonder, how did all those piles get out there? Well, the reality is, they were at work when a lot of us were still in bed. Get out of bed. That's one of the self-denials. Just get out of bed. You don't need to sleep ten hours a day. Get out of bed. Stop with all the softness. Take up the cross. But Piper said these young people - instant gratification; instant. I mean, again, I've been reading Adoniram Judson. He oftentimes would board a ship and because of tides and winds, they would often sit there for three days. Can you imagine if you got on an airplane and you had to sit on the airplane for three days before it took off? Again, we'd all be screaming like... what's going on? We'd get off the airplane. We'd find some other way. We don't have patience for that kind of thing. We want our food now. We want it the way it is. Send it back. It's not cooked just like I want it. It's not the right temperature. You know what? When you have young people that are wired that way, you have parents that give them everything. Oh, you want those clothes? Here, have those clothes. Oh, you want that cell phone? Here, have that cell phone. And more and more, you know we get away from agricultural life, and this is one of the struggles I've had in the city. It's like putting the children to work is hard. And so you grow up with this pampered generation that knows very little about hard work, about getting out in rough conditions, and what happens? You've so trained those young people to say yes to their appetites, that when their body says: "I want sexual gratification." It's just like, "yep!" Just right there.

Brethren, if I could desire something of this church that there would be - not the kind of self-denial that you want to parade, so that you could tell people like putting stones in your shoes. But brethren, you don't need the softest towel You don't need the softest clothes. You don't need the most comfortable shoes. You don't need the most comfortable temperature in your house. You don't always need to eat all the fancy food. You don't need to live in the nicer house, or have the more comfortable car. You know, it can almost be like, that automobile doesn't have air conditioning. We need to fix it! Well, you know, that isn't necessarily something that needs to be fixed for your automobile to do what automobiles are supposed to do. Look, I'm the first one to like air conditioning. I know the heat down here about kills me. But brethren, we are soft. And the truth is that there's decisions that we can make to keep our body under, like Paul did. Take up your cross daily. Adopt a course of habitual self-denial.

Basically, what Piper was getting at is this: When young people actually develop the habits of fasting - that kind of self-denial - it makes it a whole lot easier to say no to these bodily

appetites when it comes to sexual problems. And I just wondered hearing that, huh, I wonder if a poll could be taken and everybody was totally honest and we knew all the facts, if the young people most likely to fall into some kind of sexual temptation are likewise the ones that are least given to fasting. I wonder if that correlation is real. I suspect there's reality to it. You see, the fat guy who says, "oh, my stomach hurts," - I mean, that's one thing. Being overweight - that's a good indication that you're not saying no to these bodily appetites. You see, the thing is, when you have secret prayer and doing good and self-denial, oh, brethren, that is a threefold cord that is not easily broken in the Christian life. Because what it will do is it will free you to make sacrifices even when it's uncomfortable to do good. And you surround all that with prayer and bringing down the power of God, brethren, I'll tell you what it will produce, it'll produce the kind of life that we find in Christ. And may God help us to have as much of the life of Christ and the strength of His life in our lives that is mortally possible for men and women like us who've been saved to make us as much like Him as possible. Deny yourselves. You know what Scripture says. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Is that a denial? It is. Make time for prayer. Is that a denial? Rather than doing the pleasurable things? It is. Take more time in fasting even beyond this week. Make this a year of prayer and fasting. Is that a denial? That is a denial. Jesus talked about all forms of denial. Take the lowest seat. Don't seek the places of honor. Serve the Lord in ways that nobody else will know. Die to yourself that way. Die. Go do good things. Give in ways that people don't even know you do it. Make sacrifices that nobody else sees but you and the Lord. Saying no to your flesh, even when by all rights, you could pamper it. I'm not saying eating a bowl of ice cream, having a piece of lemon meringue pie... but you know what? There can be times and places when you say no. We're not going to that party. We're not going to that get-together.

You know, several years back, an Assemblies of God church just south of Monterey asked me to come down and preach at a missions conference. I knew that was risky going in. But, I had a group of people there and they all wanted to jump and shout and clap and scream, and I kind of killed that right off. But I said to them - this was a bunch of people that didn't even have their Bibles. And look, I had to be honest with them. I said we're having a missions conference and you don't even have your Bibles. I said you're not fit to go. This group at large is not fit to go. I said you know the people that end up making a difference is when all the other young people are over here hooting and hollering and having a good time; it's the person that makes the sacrifice. They go grab their Bibles and they go off by themselves. That's the person who's going to end up turning the world upside down. Self-denial. Sacrifice. Threefold cord. Oh, brethren... Make an immediate beginning. Here it is 2018. A good mile marker. If there's something that resonates in your own conscience, don't procrastinate. Immediately. Immediately, make the determination. Monday morning - different. Re-order. Brethren, this is our life. Threefold cord. Not easily broken. Strong life. Father, I pray, help us. Give us grace, in the name of Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen.