

A young child with light hair, wearing a blue turtleneck sweater and blue jeans, is seen from the side, reaching up into a large, overflowing pile of autumn leaves. The child's face is partially obscured by the leaves. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green grass and trees. The overall mood is warm and nostalgic.

PERSPECTIVE

NOVEMBER 2016

A culture of

**FAMILY
MINISTRY**

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A Culture of Family Ministry

In 2012, the Elders of MVBC gathered to brainstorm our aspirations for this local church. What did we want Mount Vernon to look like in five years? We decided to focus our prayer and energies in five key areas. We wanted to cultivate a culture of discipleship, evangelism, family ministry, generosity, and serving other churches. We didn't want to establish a new program. We didn't want to come up with a catchy slogan. Our simple desire was to see an entire congregation committed to seeing Mount Vernon grow in these areas.

When there is a culture of discipleship, a church is committed to seeing every member growing in the grace and godliness only the gospel can provide. When there is a culture of evangelism, every member will prayerfully labor to make Christ known in all the relationships the Lord provides. When there is a culture of generosity, we are eager to serve others with our resources: money, time, and skills. When there is a culture of serving other churches, a congregation shares lavishly with other pastors and congregations, laboring for the good of God's kingdom as a whole and not merely our own local church.

But what is a culture of family ministry? Simply put, we aim to partner with parents to teach, befriend, evangelize, and disciple our children. When there is a culture of family ministry, Christian parents see themselves as being on the front lines, fighting for their kids' spiritual well-being. The church is an important partner in this, but parents are the main players. And when the Lord brings kids without Christian parents, the congregation steps up, being the spiritual mothers and fathers every child so desperately needs. Cultivating a culture like this is not easy. It isn't accomplished by organizing a parenting seminar or building a top-notch VBS program. A culture of family ministry is a work of the Holy Spirit as we depend upon him to burden our parents with a vision for reaching the next generation.

My prayer is that at Mount Vernon we join together to speak and model God's Word to our children that "they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments" (Psa. 78:7). But to do this, we first need to see the vital importance of the family.

FAMILY MATTERS

Admittedly, there is no golden age for the America family. In the 1950s, when Ozzie and Harriet dazzled television sets with their sparkling picture of family life, African-American families experienced the brutality and humiliation of Jim Crow laws. We shouldn't desire to turn the clock back.

Nonetheless, we can lament the fact that current, popular portrayals of an ideal family consider a mother and a father irrelevant. ABC's *Modern Family*, which has been running since 2009, presents a same-sex couple as an example of healthy and wholesome family life. Absent from this critically acclaimed show is the sense that there is something uniquely valuable about a child being raised by a father *and* a mother. In other words, the very word, "family," is being utterly redefined for the next generation.

And it's not just in secular cultures that we find the biblical definition of a family being disparaged. Consider Islam. Friends of mine who minister in the Middle East live next to a young woman and her son. The woman is married, but only sees her husband on the weekend. Why? Because they are Muslim and her husband is a polygamist. He spends the week in a nearby city with his other family. Does this matter? Should we care that this woman sends her husband off into the arms of another woman every Monday morning? Should we care that this little boy is growing up believing it is the will of Allah for his father to have multiple wives? I think we should. Family matters.

For all of our culture's past sins, we once shared a vision for the nuclear family. Christians and non-Christians alike saw the social good that came from a husband and a wife becoming a father and a mother and investing in their children. One didn't need to be in church to understand the family. Those days are gone. From the examples paraded before our eyes by Hollywood to the millions of Muslims who embrace polygamy, our world is being presented with a distorted view of family life.

The church is the only institution left to protect and proclaim God's vision for the family. Paul told the Ephesian elders he did not shrink from declaring "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). This counsel includes the teaching that marriage is a life-long union between one man and one woman and, should God provide children, the place where biblical masculinity and femininity are to be gloriously put on display for the next generation.

I grew up in the 1980s and 90s in the secular, Pacific Northwest. My parents did not go to church because they are not Christians. We embraced the Golden Rule, but not much more. Some people talk about growing up in a Christian bubble, my childhood was just the opposite. So imagine my surprise as a teenager to discover there were people who believed premarital sex is a sin. I had no idea! How would I know? This was nearly thirty years ago.

We can no longer assume our neighbors believe God's vision for the family matters. Our children won't simply adopt this worldview by growing up in a Christian family. It has to be taught. This is why our church is committed to partnering with parents to teach, befriend, evangelize, and disciple our kids. It's because family matters.

A GOSPEL ISSUE

Someone may object at this point by saying, "Wait a second, I know the family is important, but isn't this a *secondary* issue? Is this something the church really needs to focus on? Do we need to take a stand here, and if so, why?"

Yes, because where the family goes, so goes the gospel. In other words, churches teach on and invest in families as means of protecting and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's a gospel issue. We get to see something of God in the relationship between a husband and a wife and in the relationship between a parent and a child.

Consider Genesis 1:26-27:

Then God said, "Let *us* make man in *our* image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in *his* own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them.

As Michael Reeves noted, "There is something about the relationship and difference between the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, that images the being of God."¹ Gender is not fluid. Your maleness or femaleness is not like a coat that you can exchange depending on the temperature. Gender is given by God and gender is fixed by God because in the giving of gender to individuals, and in the relationship between genders, God has made something of himself known to us. Maleness and femaleness are wonderful gifts from God given to teach us something of God. So as we see a husband and wife living together in community, we learn something of

what it means that God is community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Consider Hebrews 12:7-8:

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as *sons*. For what son is there whom his *father* does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate *children* and not *sons*.

Notice how God relates to his children ("son" here being a general term to include both sons and daughters). He treats us as sons. God adopts us into his family. The fact that God identifies himself as Father and the fact that adoption is a crucial aspect of salvation is no accident. In the family unit we learn not only who God is—Father—but we learn how God acts—with careful, loving discipline. We have received, Paul said, "the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15)

How can you understand the cost of your salvation if you fail to see that the Father sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, to die in your place? In that sense, on the cross God shed his own blood for you (Acts 20:28). And how can you understand the joy of your salvation if you fail to see how you have been adopted into God's family as his own child?

All the aspects of the family—maleness and femaleness, parents and children—speak of who God is and how he has saved us. In short, the protection and proclamation of the family is a gospel issue.

WHAT ABOUT SINGLES?

For those of you who are single, it's tempting to think family ministry isn't for you. Think again! The church is not a family of families, it's a family of redeemed sinners in all life stages and all circumstances. The church is a family of singles and divorced and widows and moms and stepdads and so forth. In Christ there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28), and we can affirm that there is likewise neither married nor unmarried for we are all "one in Christ Jesus."

A biblical understanding of the family helps us understand what the church is and how we are to relate together as a church.

Jesus explained that entrance into the kingdom of God is costly. He said more than once we must take up our cross and follow him. Repentance is hard. We have to leave

things we once deeply valued behind. Not long ago I met a believer from Somalia. He came from a Muslim background and upon his conversion his Muslim wife considered him an infidel and abandoned him taking his children with her. This brother knows the pain of picking up his cross and following Christ.

What does God give to those who have forsaken all to follow Jesus? He gives them a family:

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:29-31)

Though the believer’s ultimate reward is in heaven, God blesses us here and now with “houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands.” Jesus was not talking about a physical house anymore than he was talking about biological siblings. Jesus referred to a spiritual house—the local church. We are the “household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17). We are a family. In the church, the singles are not really single: God has given them mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. In the church the widows and widowers will never eat alone—there is a seat for everyone at the dining room table of the household of God. In the church no one is really childless—God has given each of us spiritual children.

You see, family ministry is more than teaching parents how to parent. It’s the *whole* church partnering with parents to teach, befriend, evangelize, and disciple our kids. It may not take a village to raise a child, but it does take a church.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

On any given Sunday morning at Mount Vernon we will have 45 preschoolers, 40 elementary-aged kids, and 20 youth walking through our doors. Most, but not all, brought here by their parents. While those kids of all ages are here, we aim to welcome them, to recognize them, to express our love for them, to pray over them, to teach them, and to model our Savior who gave his life for us.

It takes an army of volunteers, filled with the Holy Spirit, to make this happen. From Carolyn and Anna greeting at the front door to Jennifer and Charity making sure everyone is in their place, to Rebecca, Tommy, Lisa, Bill,

and so many others opening God’s Word in ways children can understand—in all these ways the church comes alongside parents to re-enforce what is being taught and modeled at home.

Family ministry shouldn’t start or end in the classroom at church. Family ministry takes place as moms and dads dig into the Word on their own, as they learn to ask questions of the text themselves, as they apply the Bible to their own lives, filling up their spiritual tank so that they are ready, eager, and able to pour into the lives of their children. Family ministry takes place as children sit with their parents and watch them engage in corporate worship—Sunday after Sunday, month after month, year after year. These kids are watching what their parents value. Parents who don’t spend time with the body of Christ engaging in corporate worship are telling their kids that the body of Christ doesn’t matter.

Family ministry isn’t just what happens when the body is listening to the Word being sung, prayed, and taught. Family ministry takes place when everyone in the body notices the kids in our midst and takes a moment to get down on one knee and say hello, let a child know it’s good to see them, call them by name, and ask them what they learned about God today.

So many churches build attractive spaces for children to gather and “do” church. The emphasis is on making the experience as engaging and entertaining as possible so kids want to come to church. The motives behind this ministry methodology may be pure, but there is better way. We call it cultivating a family ministry where we partner with parents to teach, befriend, evangelize and disciple their kids!

If you are looking to help cultivate a culture of family ministry of Mount Vernon and partner with parents, here are some ways to begin:

- *Pray by name for the children of the church.* You’ll find all their names in the family section of our membership directory. Pray they would come to saving faith at a young age. Pray they would learn to honor authority. Pray they would grow up repenting and believing every day of their lives. Pray they would have a hunger for God’s Word, a desire to know him better, and a heart for the nations.
- *Pray for the parents of Mount Vernon.* Read on and you’ll know better how to pray for them. But consider their need to have a personal, vibrant relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Pray they would hate

materialism, love community, and model gentle but bold discipleship.

- ✦ *Volunteer to regularly watch the little ones during our Sunday morning, Wednesday evening, and Sunday evening services.* There may not be a lot of teaching going on during these particular meetings, but you will get to know the children well. You will learn their names and how you can be praying for them. You will be an example of an adult who loves Jesus. Your presence in their lives will be a testimony to the power of the gospel beyond their parents.
- ✦ *Pursue teaching preschoolers, elementary-aged kids, or youth.* This is one of the most strategic places you can serve in the body of Christ at Mount Vernon. We have nearly 100 kids who are working through the gospel and its implications. We want the best teachers in this body to be willing to, as Bruce Ware so wonderfully put it, teach big truths to young hearts.²
- ✦ *Encourage parents you see trying to faithfully shepherd their kids on Sunday morning.* Parents often hear about it when their kids misbehave, but consider going out of your way to encourage them when you see a parent lovingly discipline a child or joyfully leading a child in corporate worship. Your word could go a long way in the life of our parents trying to carefully lead their children.
- ✦ *Talk to kids.* It's easy to pretend kids aren't here and only talk to adults. This is a very bad idea. Kids should know how glad we are to see them. They should know we are interested in their lives and their hobbies and their studies and their trials. Ask them questions. Show them you love them.

We could hire staff to build children's programs that would knock your socks off. I'm not convinced that will produce lasting spiritual fruit. It is much harder to cultivate a culture of family ministry where the entire body of Christ—singles and widows moms and dads, uncles and aunts, grandmas and grandpas, brothers and sisters—partner with parents for the good of our kids. Time will tell, but I believe this is the kind of daily, spiritual work the Bible calls us to. It's the kind of work the Lord uses to impress the gospel into the hearts of our kids, the kind of ministry we should partner with parents to fulfill, and the kind of "day by day" ministry Moses called the people of Israel to:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on

your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deut. 6:5-9)

"CHIEF INFLUENCE"

So far, I've written with the whole church in mind. This is because family ministry isn't just about the parents and their kids. It's about all of us, partnering together for the good of the next generation.

But parents, you need to realize that the buck stops with you. As the English pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, "There is no more important influence in the life of a child than the influence of the home."³ He described parents as the "chief influence" in their children's lives. And he's right! Consider that the most faithful church attendee will have his child with the body no more than four hours a week. How much more time do you have eating, playing, teaching, and working with your children.

It is your calling, mom and dad, not only to teach your children good behaviors but to impress upon them the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Conversations about the gospel should flow as freely around the dining room table and in the den as they do on folding chairs in a Sunday school class. We ought to be able to speak as joyfully about our Savior at home as we do about the latest Netflix release.

Think of the church as the trainer who wants to help come alongside the professional athlete to help him with his game. The trainer can massage sore muscles, provide a workout regimen, and offer up a timely word of encouragement, but ultimately it's up to the athlete to put the sweat and tears into the game. Mom and dad, you are the professional athlete. Are you as devoted to the spiritual nurture of your children as the superstar is to his sport?

THE PARENTING "HOUSE"

It's up to parents to teach, befriend, evangelize, and disciple their kids, but practically what does this look like? One way to understand your responsibility is to picture a house.

First, every good house has a foundation. Your parenting house needs a firm foundation. That foundation is going to be your personal walk with the Lord. This involves you spending time meditating on Scripture, going to God in prayer, and practicing all the other spiritual graces that God has ordained for our spiritual health.

When you ride an airplane, the flight attendant always tells you in the case of an emergency to put the oxygen mask on your own face before you help anyone else. The same principle applies in your shepherding of your children. If you are going to be of spiritual good to them, you need to be pursuing spiritual good in your own life. A few questions for you to consider:

- ✦ *Are you a Christian?* If you are not a Christian, it is going to be very hard to evangelize and, one day, disciple your children. Now is the time to repent and believe the Good News. This is the message that a loving God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die in the place of sinners like us. You need him and his atoning death. Jesus rose from the dead to prove everything he taught is true. Now he calls you to follow him. If you are going to lead your children well, you need to follow Jesus.
- ✦ *Is your life marked by habits of grace?* These are sometimes called the spiritual disciplines. They are wonderful and enjoyable, but it takes work. We have to commit ourselves to these practices. For a helpful primer on this topic read *Habits of Grace* by David Mathis.
- ✦ *Are you being disciplined?* There ought to be someone in your life, a fellow pilgrim on the journey, with whom you check in regularly to discuss your spiritual health. It's sad to think most of us see our dentist or doctor regularly while neglecting to have a frequent heart-to-heart with a brother or sister in Christ.

You can't parent well without a solid, spiritual foundation. You need a personal, daily walk with the Lord.

Second, every good house has rooms. This is where the action takes place. This is where you actually live and eat and sleep and spend time together. It's in these rooms that your children see you. They see what you care about. They see how you handle trials. They see what you talk about when you have down time. They see how you pray. They see what thrills you and what bores you.

It's in the rooms of your parenting house that you are modeling and teaching what it means to be a Christian.

Far too many so-called believers compartmentalize their Christian lives. They only talk about the Lord when they are gathered with the church body. They find it awkward and strange to express a hunger for God while at home engaged in the mundane details of everyday life.

Faithful parenting requires de-compartmentalizing your Christian life. It demands faithfully living out discipleship in front of your kids. A few questions for you to consider:

- ✦ *Do you lead your family in some kind of family worship?* This isn't complicated, but it requires a degree of planning. Right now I'm leading my family through 1 Kings and a children's biography of John Newton. I've got kids ranging from 14 to 6. The best time to grab everyone is right at the end of dinner. I ask them to grab their Bibles. We read a few paragraphs aloud. We talk about what the passage means, how it points us to Christ, and how we ought to respond. Then we pray. It may take anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes depending on the passage and our schedule.
- ✦ *Do you initiate conversations about the gospel?* Family worship is great, but it's not everything. We need our Christianity to overflow into drives in the car, trips to the market, and opportunities for correction. The gospel isn't the only thing you should talk about, but work hard to keep it from being a topic of conversation only at church or only during family worship.
- ✦ *Are you teaching your kids what it means to be a biblical man and woman?* They are not going to learn lessons about purity, leadership, submission, and sacrifice from the world. These are gospel lessons best taught by mom and dad. Moms, consider reading *Stepping Heavenward* by Elizabeth Prentiss when your daughters are old enough. Dads, Al Mohler has written *From Boy to Man: The Marks of Manhood* which can be found online for free.

Moms and dads, your children are watching you. Though we can be thankful God's Spirit is not bound by our failures, it would be foolish to think our weaknesses won't affect our children. None of us will be perfect, our kids need to see us humbly repenting and striving to set an example worth following.

Finally, every good house has a roof providing protection from the elements. The roof of your parenting house is the church. God has given you the body of Christ to help you raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Family ministry means parenting is a community project. You are surrounded by a whole host of believers who want to equip you, pray for you, and encourage you to faithfully shepherd your kids. A few more questions for you to consider:

- ✦ *Is the gathered church a priority in your life?* God's people have always met together. Part of Christian discipleship is submitting yourself and your preferences to others "out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). This is a crucial component of parenting. In heaven we will be together in perfect community. The church is a down payment on that heavenly gathering. Faithful parents will not neglect the church.
- ✦ *Are you looking to godly models in the church?* Deana and I have been so helped by engaging in conversations with parents and grandparents who have gone before us. We are needy for counsel. There is wisdom in seeking the help of others, especially godly brothers and sisters in the church whom we know love us and our kids.
- ✦ *Are you taking advantage of the equipping ministry of the church?* Consider taking a Sunday School handout and using it for your own family devotions. Take time to review the sermon with your children. Ask them what they understood and how it should affect their lives. Take an interest in what they are learning in class. If you take an interest in their lessons, they are more likely to take an interest in their lessons.

This is the parenting house: the foundation of personal discipleship, the rooms where you model and teach the Christian life, and the roof of the church that provides protection from the storms of life.

TRUSTING GOD

A culture of family ministry, simply put, means parents are not alone in the gargantuan task of teaching, befriending, evangelizing, and discipling their children. That said, what we ultimately need is the Holy Spirit to be at work in the hearts of our kids.

In moments of profound distress and deep discouragement, the most important thing we can do is pray our children would respond to the glorious gospel of God's amazing grace.

One of the most influential pastors in all of history, Augustine of Hippo, came to saving faith through the prayers of his mother, Monica. She pleaded with the Lord to see her son redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

May we be a church full of men and women with Monica-like faith, praying for the salvation of and blessings on all the children in our midst.

—Aaron Menikoff

¹ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 37.

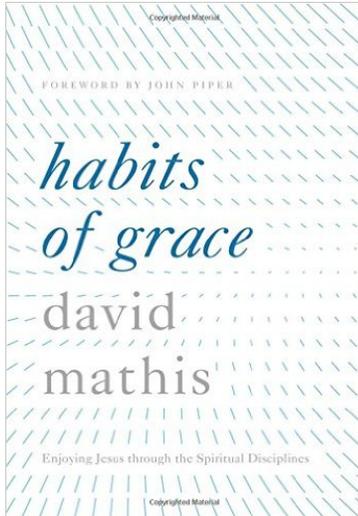
² If you don't have it, get a copy of the excellent resource! Bruce A. Ware, *Big Truths for Young Hearts: Teaching and Learning the Greatness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Raising Children God's Way* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2007).

Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines

Written by David Mathis

Bookstall Price \$13



Through the power of the Holy Spirit every Christian should continue to grow in the grace of Jesus Christ for the purpose of knowing and enjoying him. That is a humbling and exciting prospect. In *Habits of Grace*, author David Mathis shows how the spiritual disciplines are the means that God uses to bring the Christian a greater knowledge and enjoyment of himself. This book introduces the often intimidating subject of spiritual disciplines and then distills the catalog of spiritual disciplines into three primary means of grace: hearing God’s voice (the

Word), having God’s ear (prayer), and participating in the body (fellowship). Christ is at the center of this book, making it clear that we are not to pursue the completion of a list of spiritual “dos” but are to use the means of grace to put ourselves in a position for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

Habits of Grace will be a blessing to any believer seeking to draw near to God—especially those wondering how they might approach their daily time with God. The book follows a helpful pattern. First, Mathis explains how each means of grace brings about joy in Christ and his gospel. He then suggests ways to exercise the means of grace. Additionally, the book includes a process for flowing from reading, to meditating, and then praying through Scripture.

When I finished reading the book I was left with a greater appreciation for the gift of the Word of God, which Mathis describes as the fundamental means of grace. Our prayers and fellowship with the church body are built upon the foundation of Scripture. The Holy Spirit is faithful to use our time reading, praying, and gathering with believers to bring us to a greater knowledge and enjoyment of Christ, and *Habits of Grace* can show us how to partake in those means of grace more effectively.

– RECOMMENDED BY PANASHE NHEKAIRO

Excerpts from the Book

1

“The means of grace, and their many good expressions, will serve to make us more like Him, but only as our focus returns continually to Christ himself, not our own Christlikeness.”

–Grace Gone Wild, p. 30

2

“When we learn the Scriptures by heart, we’re not just memorizing ancient, enduringly relevant texts, but we’re listening to and learning the voice of our Creator and Redeemer himself. When we memorize lines from the Bible, we are shaping our minds in the moment to mimic the structure and mind-set of the mind of God.”

–Memorizing the Mind of God, p. 68

3

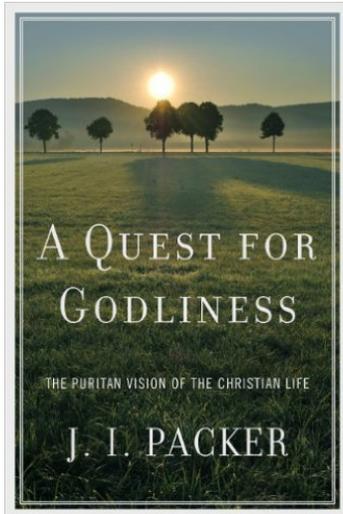
“When we put ourselves under the preaching of God’s word, it is one of the precious few moments in life today when we close our mouths and resist the temptation to respond right away, and focus our energy and attention to hearing with faith.”

–Listen for Grace in the Pulpit, p. 166

A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life

Written by J. I. Packer

Bookstall Price \$18



J.I. Packer makes no secret of his purpose in writing *A Quest for Godliness*; he wants believers today to share his view that the Puritans were spiritual giants with much to offer the church today. Packer forcefully argues that the church today needs the Puritans not only for their example of strong, robust faith, but also for their rich theological instruction. *A Quest for Godliness* details the Puritan view of the Bible, the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, Christian life, and Christian ministry. In that sense, it is a spiritual history of the Puritans. Yet, the book is so much more than that as Packer

consistently shows how Puritan teaching on those topics is biblical, practical, and applicable today.

The true value of the book is found in Packer's defense and application of the theology of the Puritans. The book, like those it profiles, is clearly and consistently gospel-centered. The aim is not simply to provide readers an intellectual understanding of Puritan thought, but to make readers love and be captured by the same biblical truths as those titans of the faith. Many of the great Puritan thinkers and theologians are profiled throughout the book, providing readers with a wealth of suggestions for additional authors and titles to explore.

A Quest for Godliness is a book for those interested in an introduction to the Puritans; it is a book for Christians looking to grow in spiritual wisdom; it is a book for pastors who want to learn to apply biblical truths to their congregations; and it is a book for those who want to recover the conviction and maturity of the Puritans. In short, it is a book for all.

– RECOMMENDED BY JESSE BRANNEN

Excerpts from the Book

1

“In the Puritans’ communion with God, as Jesus Christ was central, so Holy Scripture was supreme. By Scripture, as God’s word of instruction about divine-human relationships, they sought to live, and here, too, they were conscientiously methodical.”

–Why We Need the Puritans, p. 24

2

“For Puritanism was, above all else, a Bible movement. To the Puritan the Bible was in truth the most precious possession that this world affords. His deepest conviction was that reverence for God means reverence for Scripture, and serving God means obeying Scripture.”

–The Puritans as Interpreters of Scripture, p. 98

3

“The Puritan view was that preaching ‘gospel sermons’ means teaching the whole Christian system—the character of God, the Trinity, the plan of salvation, the entire work of grace. To preach Christ, they held, involved preaching all this. Preach less, they would tell us, and what you do preach will not be properly grasped.”

–The Puritan View of Preaching the Gospel, p. 169



^[12] Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ^[13] But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

-Hebrews 3:12-13

Hebrews is full of warnings to believers about the dangers of sin and the temptation to fall away from following Christ. In this one, the author draws on Israel’s rebellion and subsequent punishment of not entering God’s rest (see Numbers 14 and Psalm 95). He warns us of evil and unbelief in our hearts, that leads us to fall away from the Lord, and hardens our hearts to sin’s deceitfulness, all of which characterized Israel. This verse calls us to fight sin in two ways that require work and humility: honest self-examination and communal exhortation.

Honest Self-examination

We are to “take care” lest unbelief and apostasy be true of us. Implied is the need to know our hearts and weaknesses. We are to know where we’re prone to sin. Such knowledge requires much work in prayer and meditation and the humility to be honest with ourselves and the Lord.

What are three ways you know yourself to be tempted to sin in deed, thought, or attitude? Do you know yourself well enough to quickly list them? Do you know the times, seasons, and circumstances in your heart or the world that strengthens those temptations? Heed the command

to “take care” with all diligence and watchfulness by knowing yourself.

Communal Exhortation

We can’t “take care” on our own. We need other brothers and sisters. We, members of MVBC, have the collective responsibility to “exhort one another every day.” We are to encourage one another in love, pray for one another in suffering, and exhort one another to fight against sin.

Who knows you well enough to know the ways you’re tempted? Invite and welcome their exhortation. It is part of God’s way of preventing you from unbelief. They are not perfect, and they need your exhortation as well. But the beauty of the Christian life in the church is the ability to lovingly and honestly help one another fight against sin and love holiness. May this characterize MVBC.

– BRAD THAYER

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Mount Vernon
BAPTIST CHURCH