

Russell Kelfer

Landmines and Lies

(Part 2)

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Series: Living Lessons From Proverbs

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

Landmines and Lies

(Part 2)

We have been studying pride, the preoccupation with self and, in particular, the perennial problem of “spiritual pride” (preoccupation with ourselves rather than with the person of God). The progression is first to seek knowledge which is finding out how God feels about pride. Then, we seek understanding which means we try to personally apply that knowledge to our own lives.

That’s where we are, and our goal in this lesson is to conclude that portion of our study (that of seeking understanding) so that in our next lesson, we might come to the place where together we find God’s wisdom to be humble.

We will look at three final landmines Satan sets for the growing Christians; landmines designed subtly to derail our climb up the mountain to spiritual maturity.

So far, we have looked at four:

Landmine 1- The Peril of Early Exaltation; The problem of exalting young Christians ahead of their time.

Landmine 2- The Problem of an Unbroken Will; Giving God conditional commitment.

Landmine 3- The Landmine of Presumption; Giving God orders in the name of faith.

Landmine 4- The Landmine of Trusting in Knowledge; Allowing spiritual information to become an end within itself.

We will look at three more landmines in this lesson:

Landmine 5- The Landmine of Kingdom Ambition; “Mirror, mirror on the wall.”

Landmine 6- The Landmine of Silent Battlefields. “All’s quite on the western front.”

Landmine 7- The Perennial Problem of Success. “Now that we’re safe, successful, and settled.”

Let’s begin with Landmine 5- The Landmine of Kingdom Ambition. It is a trap that the enemy sets with such subtlety,

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that it has infected evangelical Christianity with a kind of super spiritual ego trip most Christians have accepted as “normal”. It is the Landmine of “Kingdom Ambition”.

It’s purpose is to draw Christians into a kind of spiritual competition with one another until their vision is clouded, and they forget why they’re here. It draws hypothetical lines to determine levels of spirituality or spiritual accomplishment and then exalts us or our group into a higher or the highest level. It is so subtle, it’s sickening; but so divisive, it’s deadly! It makes one feel he is worthy of a high office in the kingdom (an attitude Jesus says makes us worthy of nothing but humiliation).

The trick is the deceitful ploy of spiritual comparisons. By getting us to measure ourselves by our relative growth, relative knowledge, relative doctrinal purity, or relative spiritual activities or productivity, we can subtly create a category in which we will excel. Perhaps we pray more (or think we do). We witness more (or do it better). Give more to missions. Have more baptisms. And we begin to imagine ourselves as being held in higher esteem by God than our “less spiritual” Christian counterparts. Jesus utterly condemned that attitude. It was an attitude He had to contend with again and again among the apostles. In Mark, chapter nine, Jesus was confronted with a series of unique experiences back to back, and the progression of those experiences provides an interesting backdrop for the Landmine of Kingdom Ambition.

It starts in Mark 9, verses 1 through 9. Jesus had taken Peter and James and John with Him up to the top of a mountain. Now Jesus spent more time with these three than He did with the others, and it could ultimately lead to a problem of jealousy and contention, but He had a reason for doing it. Meanwhile, while they were on that mountain, a marvelous thing happened. Elijah and Moses appeared before them, and Jesus was transfigured before them. “He became resplendent with divine brightness,” the Amplified Bible describes it.

What an experience! So Peter, God’s idea man, suggests they build a hotel to stay in and make it a permanent arrangement (sort of an exclusive club for the spiritually elite). But about that time, a cloud covered them, and God the Father speaks, “This is My beloved Son: hear Him.” (Luke 9:35) (You see, God was concerned that they know who His Son was; Peter was concerned with the facilities.) When the cloud vanished, so had Elijah and Moses; so much for Peter’s select circle of Super Saints. But as

they headed back down to the valley of reality, Jesus warned them not to discuss what they had just seen until after He had risen from the dead. And on the way down, they began to question Jesus about what Malachi 4:5,6 meant (about Elijah's coming), and He answered them and asked them what they thought Isaiah 53:3 meant (that the Messiah would be treated with utter contempt and be utterly despised). But they didn't understand the question.

As the four of them neared the bottom of the mountain, they looked and lo, a huge crowd had gathered. And smack in the middle of the crowd were the other nine apostles. They were the center of a frustrating and humiliating controversy. When Jesus arrived, the crowd left the nine and like a magnet ran to Him. Jesus asked the Scribes, who, as always, were in the center of the argument, "What question ye with them?" or "What's the argument about?" And one of the crowd spoke up and answered,

Master I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit;

And wheresoever he taketh him, (wherever the demon takes him) he teareth him, and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth and pineth away: and I spake to the disciples that they should cast him out and they could not."

(Mark 9:17b,18)

You could just picture the nine looking around for a scapegoat. Here this boy's father is accusing them of being unable to implement God's power and not only were they being accused before all the crowd but now Jesus was there along with His favorite three disciples. Surely the Master would vindicate them, they thought. Here's one that even God can't handle. Jesus answered,

Oh, faithless generation. How long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer with you? Bring him unto me.

(Mark 9:19)

Can't you feel that father's heart pounding? He had tried everything! Everything had failed. Now the Master spoke, "Bring the child to me!" That, my friend, is the only hope any weary parent has. "Bring him to Me."

So they brought the lad to Jesus. And when the demon who occupied the boy saw Jesus, he threw the boy into convulsions. He fell on the ground, foaming at the mouth. Jesus looked into the eyes of the boy's father.

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And He asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child.

And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.

Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.

And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears,, Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief.

(Mark 9:21-24)

Jesus rebuked the spirit and made this profound statement.

Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and enter no more into him.

(Mark 9:25b)

And the boy went through convulsions until everyone thought he was dead. But Jesus lifted him up, and he arose healed.

Now the disciples saw all this, but they weren't busy rejoicing. They were nursing a wounded pride.

After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, "Why couldn't we drive it out?"

He replied, "This kind can come out only by prayer."

(Mark 9:28,28 NIV)

(Or, "much prayer and fasting" as some manuscripts record.)

So they went on to Galilee, and there he drew them aside and taught them saying,

The Son of Man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill Him; and after that He is killed, He shall rise on the third day.

But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask Him. (Instead they were apparently preoccupied with themselves.)

And He came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?

But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest.

And He sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all.

(Mark 9:31-35)

Do you grasp the magnitude of this series of experiences? First is at the Mount of Transfiguration. Three apostles meet

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Elijah and Moses and hear the voice of God! What a potentially humbling experience. Secondly, they run into a brick wall, a child the apostles could not heal because they had not paid the price in prayer. What a humiliating experience! And thirdly, they were confronted with the reality of the resurrection, and they didn't even understand what Jesus was talking about. None of them were spiritually humble enough to even admit to Jesus they didn't know what He was talking about. (Sound familiar?)

These spiritual giants had virtually missed the significance of three of the most powerful experiences they would ever have. On a scale of 1-10, I'd say their spiritual sensitivity was about a 2. All they could think of as they plodded along behind the Master on their way to Capernaum is which one of them was the most spiritual. No doubt Peter, James, and John subtly felt they had the inside track because God had privileged them with this experiential revelation on the mountain. While they were not allowed to talk about it, they must have been churning inside with spiritual pride.

Paul, you remember, had a similar problem a few years later, and God had to hand him a thorn to keep his experience in perspective. Don't you know it was hard for Peter to keep his mouth closed? Now listen, what had just happened to them should have driven them to their knees in awe before the living God. But Satan had filled their hearts with kingdom ambition. They were so busy striving for recognition that they missed the significance of everything that had happened. So Jesus called them together for a meeting. He said, "You guys want to be somebody? Then stop keeping count of your spiritual experiences and quietly give your life away." Then in Matthew 18, verse 1, the disciples were even more up front about their kingdom ambition. Verse one in the Living Bible says,

About that time the disciples came to Jesus to ask which of them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven!

(Matthew 18:1 TLB)

(What humility. No doubt they crowded around, each expecting to win a Kingdom Academy Award.)

Jesus called a small child unto Him and set him in the midst of them,

And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

(Memory verse)

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Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

(Matthew 18:2-4)

Can't you just see the humiliation on the face of the twelve? They each were expecting recognition for some unique contribution to the Kingdom. (Peter, no doubt, expected the award for having his tongue in gear while his mind was in neutral!) Instead, Jesus takes a curly headed little lad, puts him on his lap, and says, guys, here's greatness! No expectations. No presumption. No self-centered self-exaltation. Just guileless honesty. Simple faith. Utter respect. Perfect humility. That's greatness!!

But even that didn't resolve the issue. In Matthew 20, once again the disciples were confronted with one of the most important experiences in their walking with Jesus. They were on their way to Jerusalem, and Jesus called the twelve aside and confided in them that He was about to be betrayed, condemned and finally crucified. Jesus closed with this:

...and the third day, "I will rise to life again!"

Then the mother of James and John the sons of Zebedee, brought them to Jesus, and respectfully asked a favor.

"What is your request?" He asked. She replied, "In your kingdom will you let my two sons set on two thrones next to yours?"

(Matthew 20:19-21 TLB)

(Can my boys be recognized as the most spiritual, Lord? Can they, huh?)

Then in verse 24, the other ten heard about Mrs. Zebedee's egotistical enterprise, and they got hot with James and John. Now the whole spiritual family is at odds again over who's the greatest.

These guys missed the whole point. They were having a church fight over who was deserving of the "Man of the Year" award, while the God of eternity was walking beside them on His way to a cross to die for them. They were so wrapped up in kingdom ambition they completely missed the impact of what was about to happen.

So once again (vs. 25), Jesus called them together and said to them, "It's true in this world, those in authority lord it over those who serve, because everyone wants to be important. That's not our way. Do you want to be a leader? Learn to be a servant. Do

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you have a guy who's clamoring for recognition? Let him serve like a slave." "I'm your example," Jesus concluded. "I'm God; but I didn't come to be served, but to be a servant and even to die so you can live."

Now don't be too hard on those arrogant apostles. Most of us were cut out of the same bolt of cloth. We all want to be leaders. We all want the final word, and we're so busy concentrating on who's better or who's spiritual; we're missing the message of the cross.

How many of us, as parents, are no better than Zebedee's wife? We're more concerned that our children achieve and be recognized than we are that they learn to serve in total humility of spirit.

How it must break God's heart to see churches more concerned with how they fare in Christian competition than in how their people are ministering in Jerusalem or Judea where God has placed them. Churches are so busy counting heads and counting baptisms that they forget they are nothing apart from Him. God's leaders are so busy scrambling over who's the greatest, they miss the greatest blessing of all, learning to humble themselves like little children and just serve others as slaves to Jesus Christ.

We all need to reevaluate our kingdom ambition individually, as churches, as Christian ministries, and as groups. We're not the greatest. He's the greatest! Apart from Him, we're nothing. If we don't stop counting heads and tooting horns, we're liable to walk right along side the Master and be so preoccupied with our spiritual selves that we miss the fact that He's talking about a cross, while we're daydreaming over crowns. Do you get the point?

Landmine 6- The Landmine of Silent Battlefields. The lie is, "All's quiet on the western front." The enemy must have surrendered. It's a dangerous decoy that Satan sends our way to lull us into thinking that because there is no circumstantial conflict in our lives, at the moment; we are living in total victory with the enemy on the run. The lie is, when there's no warfare, there's no problem.

The truth is often just the opposite. "In this world ye shall have tribulation." The truth is, if there is no testing going on in your life, you just may be out of the will of God; or so far

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from the battlefield you mistake the silence for victory when, in reality, you're just not close enough to the Commander-in-Chief to hear the bullets that are aimed at Him. So you misjudge physical prosperity and the ease of the absence of affliction as God's stamp of approval on your life or on your church.

It may simply be that God isn't testing you because you can't handle testing. It may be that in heaven, Satan and God are having a conversation about you like they did about Job. Satan's argument to God was, "Of course Job loves you. You've given him everything he wants. Take it away and see what he does."

Now God knew Job's heart. So He let the enemy take away his prosperity, his family, his friends, his influence, and finally his health. And while Job's confused friends argued that Job must be suffering because of disobedience, God knew that when through his afflictions, Job really saw God. Job would fall on his face and worship. If you or your group is suffering from the delusion that your freedom from problems is a sign of God's blessings, it may just be that God will not allow Satan that freedom in your life because He knows your life can't handle it.

I once belonged to a church where they had a yearly banquet to sort of revel in the church's accomplishments and growth for that year. I remember one year the pastor made this statement, "God's hand is on this church. We've not had one death or serious illness in the flock in the entire year." I was a young Christian then, but I cringed when I heard it. I can't even begin to describe to you the problems that church had in the next two years. It was as though we were to interpret the absence of problems as the presence of victory.

More likely we were out of God's will and didn't even know it. Like the Laodicea church, we were a lukewarm body, drifting into circumstantial slumber. It was said of them,

Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; (Everything's A-OK here!) and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.:

I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see.

As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous, therefore, and repent.

(Revelation 3:16-19)

Be careful, the Scripture is saying, not to be lulled into a false sense of security by the absence of what the world calls problems. It's a landmine set by Satan designed to trick the Christian by causing him to stumble over the Perennial Problem of Spiritual Pride.

The final landmine that we'll look at is Landmine 7- The Perennial Problem of Spiritual Success. The lie is: Safe, Successful, and Settled. The danger of this landmine is that it usually comes to those who have avoided the other six. God has honestly blessed your lives or your ministry. You've given Him the glory, humbled yourself, and your ministry has multiplied. Satan's subtle lie is: Now you've got it made. Unconsciously, you begin to lose that spirit of utter dependence.

You begin to take stock of your strengths and begin even to share them with other "less successful" Christians or Christian groups. The way we did it was like this, you say. And subtly you've become a spiritual authority. God used you because you were nothing; and now that He has made you something, Satan wants to slyly slip some of the glory around your shoulders. Don't let him do it!

The more spiritual success God gives us the more it ought to humble us that God can use us at all! The children of Israel, as always, were God's perfect illustration. They simply couldn't stand success! You see, it isn't hard to be a humble failure, but it's next to impossible to be a humble success. Thank God, He can do the impossible. It's what He wanted to do for Israel in Deuteronomy, chapter nine. We've read it again and again.

Understand therefore this day, that the Lord thy God is He which goeth over before thee, as a consuming fire He shall destroy them, and He shall bring them down before thy face.

Speak not thou in thine heart after the Lord thy God hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the Lord hath brought me in to possess this land: but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord doth drive them out from before thee.

Not for thy righteousness, or for the uprightness of thine heart, dost thou go to possess their land: but for the wickedness of these nations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee, and that He may perform the word which the Lord sware unto thy fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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Understand therefore, that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiff-necked people.

Remember, and forget not, how thou provokedst the Lord thy God to wrath in the wilderness: from the day that thou didst depart out of the land of Egypt, until ye came unto this place, ye have been rebellious against the Lord.

Ye have been rebellious against the Lord from the day that I knew you. (Deuteronomy 9:3-7, 24)

Jehovah was saying to them and to us, “I used you to defeat the enemy, not because of who you are, but because of who I am. It is because I hate the enemy and because I always keep my Word. So I have chosen to use even you. But don’t you remember? You’ve always been a rebel. I’m using you to glorify Me,” God says, “But be careful when you smell success.”

When thou hast eaten and art full, then thou shalt bless the Lord thy God for the good land which He hath given thee.

Beware that thou forget not the Lord thy God, in not keeping His commandments, and His judgments, and His statutes, which I command thee this day:

Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses and dwell therein;

And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied;

Then thine heart be lifted up (you’ll get proud), and thou forget the Lord thy God,... (Deuteronomy 8:10-14a)

And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.

And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the Lord thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish.

(Deuteronomy 8:17,19)

The issue is success. The problem is pride.

The danger is that once you get where you were going, you forget how you got there. You begin to say, “By my power and the might of mine hand,” and thine heart be lifted up and you forget the Lord your God. Oh, you don’t forget He is God; you simply forget He is Lord. Gradually you pray less, your hunger for spiritual things lessens, your dependence gives way to self-assurance, and you wake up one day and find though you are

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still going through the motions, but the power is gone. It happens to Christians. It happens to churches. It happens to Christian organizations.

What began in utter humility and prayer becomes sugar-coated with spiritual success, and humility gives way to spiritual pride, subtle spiritual pride. It starts out saying, "Look what God has done." And it ends up listening to others saying, "Look what you've done." And soon begins to say to itself, "We did it, God & us!" And my friend, we didn't do it.

That, according as it is written, He that glories, glory in the Lord.
(I Corinthians 1:31)

Now I'm going to say a word again to this church (so those of you listening on tape can either put cotton in your ears or else listen just in case it applies to you.) This church has been blessed beyond comprehension. We've grown in numbers. We've grown in spirit. We've grown in ministries. And Satan is using people to say, "You've got the answer." May I remind you, it's all grace.

His strength is made perfect in weakness. So God looked around and chose out nothing to turn it into something so HE would get all the glory. And I believe we stand today at the most crucial point in our spiritual pilgrimage. We can begin to revel in our "success" and begin to tell others how "we" do it. We can patent the process and preempt the person, and little by little the power will vanish. We can concentrate on what we have as though the church were a storage tank rather than humbly giving ourselves away remembering that we're not storage tanks but a satellite that receives God's mercy and sends the signal on. We can drink it in, lock it up, and hang on to what we have and lose it all; or we can fall to our knees in utter humility, in utter amazement that God would choose to use the likes of us.

We can become a people of prayer more than ever before, taking what God has given us and laying it back at His feet in utter abandonment and total humility, asking God to reveal more of the sin in our lives, seeing ourselves with greater needs, seeing God with greater provisions. We must be careful not to become comfortably prosperous, but rather uncomfortably burdened over the needs of this city and of the world and of each other. We can be overwhelmed with numbers or overwhelmed with the need for absolute repentance and revival if God is to continue to work. We have not arrived. We have not even begun.

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We have only tasted of God's goodness, and with every taste we ought to fall to our knees in wonder and awe that the Living God has chosen to live through the likes of us.

We need to spend a day in prayer and thanksgiving as a people, humbling ourselves before God.

You see, success breeds prayerlessness. Success breeds presumptuousness. Success breeds pride. As Christians, there is no basis for it. If someone comes to you on a hot day and pours you a cup of lemonade and it's the best lemonade you ever drank, do you praise the pitcher? Or the glass? No, they're just vessels, containers. The one who made it just chose to use that vessel. The praise goes to the one who made it. So Paul said, God has chosen to use earthen vessels; unpretentious containers so men and women will marvel at His grace, not at the pitchers he pours it from.

The Scripture is filled with illustrations of the perils of success. Study them when you have time and see the pattern develop. Uzziah is a good illustration. (II Chronicles 26) Uzziah was a good king. He strived to please the Lord. The Lord blessed him in all he did. He built a successful church program. He fought God's enemies, and God's enemies fell. He built fortified cities, and God helped him. He built water reservoirs, developed agricultural programs, initiated the draft, reorganized the army, and produced mighty weapons of war. We read,

So he became very famous, for the Lord helped him wonderfully until he became very powerful."

But at that point he became proud—and corrupt. He sinned against the Lord his God by entering the forbidden sanctuary of the Temple and personally burning incense upon the altar.
(II Chronicles 26:15,16 TLB)

So God made him a leper (see verse 21). He lived out his last years in isolation and seclusion.

Turn over to II Chronicles 32 and take a look at Hezekiah. Hezekiah, too, began to prosper at the hand of God. One day he became sick, and he prayed to the Lord and the Lord answered with a miracle. But verse 25 says Hezekiah didn't respond with true thanksgiving and praise for he had become proud. He took God's miracles for granted. He became presumptuous, another casualty of the syndrome of success.

Are we better off not to be blessed? That way we're less

accountable and less prone to presumption, right? Wrong! We're better off in whatever state of spiritual success God deems to place us. He knows what He's doing. All He asks of us is that the more He blesses us, the more we humble ourselves. The more we praise Him, the more we recognize the meaning of grace. Satan's landmine is laid in place. Whenever success comes, the subtle danger is that it becomes spiritual pride. At that moment, we have a choice. We can stand on our feet and say look at us, or fall on our face and say look at Him. What happens from then on will be decided by which we do. Landmines and lies are subtle and well-hidden, but devastating if ignored. That's why we've looked at them these past two weeks. Unless we recognize them, we won't turn to God for wisdom. We'll believe the lies, step on the landmines, and end up spiritually crippled, unable to run the race that is set before us. So watch out for the Landmine of Early Exaltation. Spend your early years learning to be a servant, laboring in the shadows. If there's to be any exalting done, wait for God to do it.

Watch out for the Landmine of an Unbroken Will, of giving God conditional contracts as though He were obligated to bless you on your terms. Beware of the Landmine of Presumption, of beginning to instruct God in the name of faith. Sidestep the Landmine of Trusting Knowledge, of being puffed up by what you know, when what you know only makes you more accountable for what you become.

Watch out for kingdom ambition, that attitude that is so busy competing and seeking to be the greatest that it misses the message, even the message of the cross. And be careful of Silent Battlefields. The absence of warfare doesn't necessarily mean the war is over. It may just mean you've left the Commander's side. Last, but certainly not least, be on your guard against the Perennial Problem of Success, of watching God do the impossible, only to be deceived into thinking you made it possible. Remember, He didn't do it because of your righteousness, but because He's in a conflict with the enemy and because He keeps His word.

Landmines and Lies, they dot the path ahead of us and every sign says caution! Watch where you walk. But my friends, there's good news ahead. It is true that pride, both natural and spiritual, are God's mortal enemies. They destroy His kingdom by deceiving His children and stealing His glory, but we can live in victory. We can become increasingly humble as God in us

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controls us more perfectly.

You see, the wisdom of God lives in us and is waiting to make us increasingly fruitful and increasingly humble at the same time.

Faithful is He that calleth you, who also will do it.

(I Thessalonians 5:24)

That is the subject, Lord willing, of the next lesson. Till then, may God grant us 20/20 vision to see the landmines, perfect hearing to recognize the lies, and a deeper desire to walk in wisdom that He, who is wisdom, might control our lives.

SATAN AND SUCCESS

Whatever you're doing, Christian,
Remember, as you are blessed,
To watch for Satan's subtle ploys
When you receive success!

He hates it when God's blessings come
And we begin to grow,
And then the only hope He has
Is that we'll steal the show!

That we'll forget that only God
Could write redemption's story;
That only God can change a life,
And His is ALL the glory!

Oh, Beloved Christian,
Be careful, as you see
The gentle hand of Jesus
Entrust success to thee.

Remember, Jesus did it all.
Oh, marvel at His ways,
And as He multiplies His grace,
Just multiply your praise!

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210-226-0000 or 1-800-375-7778
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