

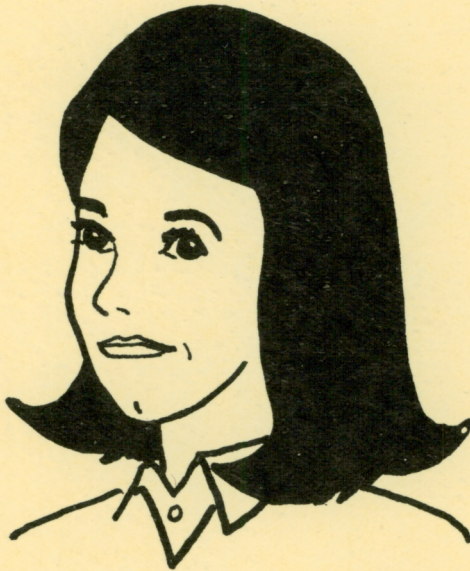
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Who Needs Religion Anyway!



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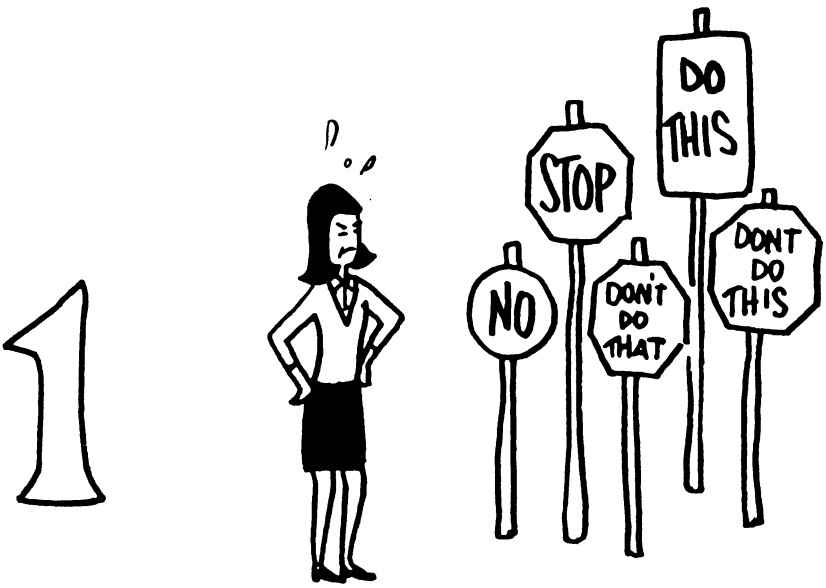
M. E. Rees

Who Needs Religion Anyway!

M. E. Rees

*Illustrated
by
Vern Rothermel*

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"You think I'm all wrong, don't you?"

This sudden, unexpected attack caught me off guard. I was the guest minister that day in a small, sea-coast city. Penny had decided to ride in my car to her home where I had been invited to dinner. I parked the car in the driveway and stopped to admire some beautiful flowers before entering the house. I wasn't aware that she was standing directly behind me until she spoke.

I didn't turn around. I guess I was afraid she would see the look of amazement which must have shown on my face.

"Let's say," I began slowly, cautiously, "let's say at this point I don't know whether you are right or wrong. In the first place I'm not a girl; in the second place, I'm not fifteen; and third, I don't know what you are talking about. With these limitations I'm afraid I would find it very difficult to come to any reasonable conclusion."

Now I looked at her and saw a smile starting to form at the corners of her mouth, but it

disappeared as she set her jaw and her brown eyes flashed.

"I'm sick and tired of religion! I hate the Ten Commandments! Don't do this! Don't do that! Gotta do this! Gotta do that! Who needs religion, anyway?!"

My feelings shifted from amazement to slight amusement at this explosive outburst, then suddenly I felt a sense of deep concern. This was no surface storm; this was the eruption of volcanic forces deep within this lovely girl.

"Why, Penny," I said, "you don't 'gotta' do anything. Away back when God created the world He made provision so all the Penny Smiths, and Bob Jones' and Mary Browns could do exactly as they wished. No, no, you don't *have* to do anything you don't want to do."

"You must be kidding," she replied. "All the religion I hear makes you do things...doesn't it?" I saw the fire in her eyes begin to fade.

"No," I answered. "Religion--that is true religion--doesn't *make* anyone do one thing they really don't want to do. In fact religion gives a person absolute freedom. Would you like to talk about it?"

"I think I would." She shrugged her shoulders and seated herself in a lawn chair. Almost back to her normal, sweet self again she added cheerily, "OK. Begin."

"About six thousand years ago God created this world. It was a beautiful place with every kind of plant, tree, bird, fish and animal you can imagine. Now, because He had a great universe

to care for, He needed someone to look after this brand new world which He had made.

"So, one day He said, 'Let us make man in our image, and after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth.' (Genesis 1:26). And this is how God created the first man and woman and put them in charge of everything He had made. Then, He gave them a beautiful garden home for a wedding present."

"I like that," Penny said.

"But there was something else God gave them which I think was even more wonderful than their dominion over all the earth, or the garden home, and that was the power of choice. Of course, God could have fixed things so they would have had to do exactly as He wished--but He didn't. Adam and Eve could do exactly what they wanted to do."

"Really?" she asked.

"Yes, really," I replied.

"But didn't they have rules to follow? I remember where God told them they couldn't touch one of the trees."

"You are right, Penny. But God didn't say they would be *unable* to touch it, He just said *not* to touch it. They could, if they wanted to, you know. In fact they did. The law says not to drive over the speed limit, but I can if I want to. Of course there might be some penalties. I might have to pay a fine or go to jail if I chose to be reckless, but it is still my choice. And so it was with them.

"God told them what the results would be if they were obedient. He said they would be happy and live forever. Can you imagine, Penny, what it would be like to never have a cold, or a toothache, or get old--forever?" She shook her head.

"Then God also told them what would happen if they did not follow His directions. He said they would have lots of trouble and eventually die. But it was still their choice."

"But why did God plant a tree right in the middle of their home, then tell them not to touch it? Doesn't hardly seem fair to me." The look on Penny's face clearly showed that she placed a great stock in being fair.

"You must remember," I replied, "that God gave them the power to choose. Now, if they didn't have anything to choose, how would they know they had this privilege? This is why God gave them the easiest test He could. You see, they had every kind of fruit they could possibly want. They didn't need the fruit of this tree at all."

"All right," she decided, "I guess it was fair, then. But if they didn't need the fruit, why did they take it?"

"That's a good question. I'm sure there are lots of people who wish they hadn't. I know I do. I guess the answer is that they simply chose to disobey, just like we do sometimes."

"I suppose so," she agreed. "But tell me what really happened that day."

"Well, God had told Adam and Eve that they must always stay together when they were working in the garden. This would provide a real safety

factor. But one day while Adam was busy, Eve must have seen a beautiful bird, or possibly a butterfly, and you know how easy it is to wander off trying to follow one of these. Almost before she realized it, she was standing before the very tree that God had warned them not to touch.

"Now Satan had crawled inside a snake which we are told was one of the most beautiful creatures in the whole garden." Penny shuddered at the thought of a snake, but didn't say anything. "This snake, with the devil inside, was lying on one of the branches of the tree. As Eve stood there looking curiously at the luscious fruit, the strangest thing happened. The snake looked right at her and said, 'Hello.'" Penny laughed.

"Eve must have stared in utter amazement. She had never heard a snake talk before. But the thing that surprises me is that when he asked in a soft, silky voice, 'Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?' she answered him! Can you imagine talking to a snake?" Penny said, "Ugh!"

"Eve told the serpent that they could eat of every tree of the garden except this one, then she added, 'God has told us we would die if we even touched it.'

"'Ho! ho!' sneered the devil, 'He knows good and well that if you ate some of this fruit you would be just like Him. As a matter of fact you would be so wise you would be like gods knowing both good and evil. That's why He doesn't want you to have any. Here, try some--it's delicious. I eat here all the time.'

"Poor Eve hesitated, 'Well, I don't know..'

"'Aw, come on. It'll be good for you. I know you'll like it.'

"Gingerly Eve took the fruit he offered and tasted it cautiously. Her eyes widened. 'It *is* delicious--it really is!'

"Suddenly she felt a strange exhilaration, almost as if she were more alive--wiser. Then as fast as she could, she filled her arms with fruit and hurried away to find Adam.

"Around a turn in the pathway she saw him still busily engaged in training some vines. 'Adam!' she called. 'Adam...I ate some of the fruit--and it didn't hurt me at all! Look, I brought some for you.'"

Penny leaned forward, expectantly. "What do you suppose he said?"

"I really don't think he said anything. I think he was too shocked. I'm sure his mind must have flashed back to God's warning about what would happen if they even touched the tree. Now he knew his lovely wife was going to die.

"He loved her so very much he couldn't bear the thought of living without her, so he quickly took the fruit from her hand and choked down a bite or two. Now at least they could die together."

"How horrible," Penny said, a look of sadness furrowing her forehead, "and they could have been so happy and lived forever after."

"Yes, it was a sad day, Penny--for all of us. And it was so unnecessary. It happened just

because they didn't obey--they made the wrong choice."

"Yes, but I don't think it was fair of God to kill them just for eating a little ol' apple." Her lips formed a tight line.

"Oh, He didn't kill them," I explained. "He just told them that if they disobeyed they would die. It wouldn't be fair to blame God for this. What if I told you that if you jumped off the Empire State Building you would die--and you jumped. I don't think anyone could say I killed you, do you?"

"No, I see what you mean. Then why did they die?"

"Well, in order for them to live forever it was necessary for them to eat the fruit of the tree of life. After they were disobedient and made the wrong choice they lost their garden home, and that's where the tree of life was located. They just couldn't get any more of its fruit.

"And besides, they didn't die right then. It was about nine hundred and thirty years later that one day they had a funeral for old Grandpa Adam. He had used up all the vitality which God gave him when he was created. He couldn't replenish his supply from the tree of life, so he died. Just like God said he would."

Penny didn't say anything for several minutes. She was looking so intently at a leaf she had picked up from the lawn that I thought maybe she wasn't listening. Then she dropped the leaf and looking squarely into my eyes said, "All right! All right! I see why Adam and Eve died, but why do I have to die just for what they did?"

"Oh, you don't have to die for what they did," I said, "but eventually you will die for what you did. I'm sure you remember the verse in the Bible which says, 'For *all* have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' (Romans 3:23). This means that even Penny Smith has sinned and eventually the result will be death." Penny studied her folded hands thoughtfully.

"But, Penny, when you asked why you had to die for what they did, I was thinking that God must have asked the same question. Looking down through the centuries He saw all the Penny Smiths, and the Bob Jones' and the Mary Browns, and He loved you so very much that He couldn't bear to see any of you die. So He sent the only Son He had to die in your place...just so you could choose to live forever."

"Oh, I do want to live forever. I want to so very much 'cause life is such fun. I never want to die!" Penny's face had such an intense, eager look it was difficult to recall that such a short time before she had said, "Who needs religion, anyway!"

"Well," I assured her, "you certainly don't have to die. You can live forever. It's all up to you. God has made a provision so you can have the same wonderful gift He gave to Adam and Eve-- the power of choice. You can do just what you really want to do."

"Is it really that easy?" she asked.

"It's that easy," I replied.

2



Dinner was over. Penny was helping her mother clear the table. I talked with her father, an old friend. I really thought our conversation about religion was over, but soon Penny came into the living room, seated herself in the corner of a daveno, and surprised me by saying, "Let's talk some more about religion."

Her father needed to make a call, so he said he would leave us to our "deep" theological discussion. I waited for Penny's opener. I didn't have long to wait.

"Now, take religion," she began, "it's so complicated--there are so many rules to follow. Quite frankly, I get pretty confused."

"Religion really isn't complicated at all, if you understand it. It's rather simple."

"Never seemed simple to me," she objected, "and if you had to sit in Bible 'Docs' class like I have to, and learn all those hard names and places and stuff--I get all wound up in a ball!"

I glanced at Penny, and the position she had assumed in the corner of the comfortable chair made me think there was a distinct possibility that she could indeed get "wound up in a ball."

"Do you remember, Penny, that when God created Adam and Eve He gave them something to do? What was it?"

"Why, they were to look after the world, weren't they?" she replied.

"That's right. They were given dominion over everything God had created. Actually we use some different words today like 'overseer', 'foreman', or possibly 'superintendent'."

"My uncle is a superintendent in a factory," Penny said. "I guess he has dominion over part of the factory. Is that right?"

"I think that illustrates it perfectly," I answered. "The Bible refers to such a person as a 'steward', and to his responsibility as 'stewardship'."

"Isn't stewardship just giving money? Seems to me that every time I hear that word, they're after money."

"No, stewardship doesn't refer to money specifically, but rather to the responsibility a person has in looking after the things which belong to someone else."

"Then my uncle is actually a steward, and his job is his stewardship," Penny reasoned.

"Yes," I agreed, "and as in every stewardship he is responsible for the things under his control

and will be held accountable for them. In speaking of the Christian steward the Bible says, 'So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God.' (Romans 14:12). So you can see that if we are going to have to give an account of our stewardship it is very important that we thoroughly understand what our stewardship responsibilities are."

"Seems reasonable," she said.

"When Adam disobeyed God, he actually lost his position as overseer, or steward. The same thing would happen to your uncle if he failed to carry out the wishes of the owners of the factory. Since that time neither Adam nor his descendants have had the supervision of the world. Satan says it belongs to him because he took it away from Adam. He doesn't really own it--God does, but he has sort of usurped authority."

"Like an invader from outer space?" suggested Penny.

"Yes, I suppose that would fit the description. So this is the reason the world is in such a mess."

"You can say that again," Penny added. "With all the terrible things that go on, I'm scared to go out of the house at night anymore."

"I can assure you," I continued, "that God doesn't intend that this will go on forever. He has a plan by which man can once more become the steward, or overseer, of this world. This is called the 'Plan of Redemption'."

"What do they actually mean by 'redemption'?" she inquired.

"If you needed some money very badly, you could take your watch down to a pawn shop. The owner would loan you some money on it--actually just a fraction of its real value. Now if you want your watch again, you must redeem it. To do this you will have to pay the owner of the shop the amount he originally loaned on the watch plus some very high interest charges.

"This is what happened to the human race. They sold out to Satan for practically nothing at all. God wanted them back into the heavenly family so badly that he was willing to redeem them even though the price was terrible. It cost the life of Jesus just for the interest! And you know, Penny, one day I read that all heaven and the whole universe would have been just as happy if God had simply forgotten us when they saw how high the price was going to be for our redemption."

"I didn't realize," she said quietly, a distant look in her eyes.

"Well," I concluded, "that's what religion is all about. It is the great plan God has for getting man from the stewardship which he lost on this earth to the stewardship which he will never lose in the new earth. It's that simple."

"But...but what are all the rules for?" she asked.

"Oh, you mean the *rules*?"

"Yes, I do. All the do's and don'ts that I'm always running into. How about the Ten Commandments--why are they so important? It's just like ...well, it's just like putting a person in a strait jacket." When Penny's irritation shows, one has to smile.

I sought for a logical answer to this inquiry. I knew it had to be something extremely practical. She would accept no other.

"When we came home from church today, were you happy that I drove on the right side of the white line?"

"Don't be silly," she countered.

"But I'm not being silly at all. I'd really like to drive on the left side so I could enjoy the scenery without having all the cars going zip-zip right past my window."

"But you can't do that," she objected.

"Why not?"

"Because," she threw up her hands in a helpless gesture, "why, because you'd have a head-on!"

"I guess I'll have to agree with you."

"You'd better," she laughed, "or you won't be around to agree with anybody!"

"Penny, don't you see now that all these rules, the do's and don'ts you spoke of, are just the 'white stripe' on the highway of life? God painted it there so you wouldn't have 'head-ons'."

"You mean...you mean the Ten Commandments are white stripes, too?"

"That's right, and believe me everybody who breaks them surely has 'head-ons'. If you don't believe it, ask them. I have known a few people in my time who thought the rules were like a strait jacket and the Ten Commandments like ten chains,

so they broke out of 'jail', as they called it, and flew away to their new-found freedom.

"In just a few years you never saw such unhappy individuals. One or two of them landed in a 'real jail' because they violated God's law and they found out what restrictions really are."

"Were they kids you went to school with?" she wanted to know.

"Yes," I replied, "they were, and what a terrible price they have paid for their disobedience to rules which were only there to keep them happy."

Penny simply said, "How awful."

"It is sad, Penny, because God loved us so much He didn't want us to get into trouble, ever. So He gave us these rules to live by just so we wouldn't have 'head-ons'."

She went into the other room to answer the phone. When she returned I suggested I had better be leaving, but she insisted that this would be impossible.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I hid your hat." Her eyes sparkled. "And besides, I still have some more questions."

3



Penny's mother came into the room, seated herself in front of the large window which served as a frame for the scene outside, a picture of waves crashing against the rocky shoreline. She picked up a book from a side table but I noticed that she wasn't turning the pages and strongly suspected she was listening to her daughter's questions and observations.

I knew that Penny's parents were deeply concerned over some of her attitudes both at home and in school. One time her mother asked me if I would talk with her--but I didn't feel I should initiate the conversation--this would have to be Penny's decision. I felt honored that she had shared opinions with me which she must have kept locked deep inside for a long time.

Penny studied her fingernails with more concentration than it appeared they deserved, then glanced in her mother's direction. Satisfied that she was reading and not interested in our conversation, she began.

"I don't know how to say this. I think I understand what you mean about the rules and things,

but...well, there's the Sabbath, and the tithe, and things like that. I know the Sabbath is supposed to be a 'delight' and the tithe a great blessing, but I never felt that way--not really, that is."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you have never really understood them. You know, many times we get wrong impressions because of a lack of understanding. I remember a man who said he didn't understand the things he didn't understand."

"Maybe that's my problem," she admitted. "Tell me about the Sabbath, first. I know the rules--sundown to sundown, don't do this, don't do that. What I want to know is, why? Is it wrong to want to know why?"

"I believe that you have every right to ask the question, 'Why?'. I don't think that anything is worth believing or doing unless there is a good reason for it. Sometimes the reason may not be obvious at the time, and it might appear that the only reason was obedience."

"You mean having to do something just because someone says so."

"Yes, that's what I mean. And this is the hardest reason to understand, especially for boys and girls."

It was plain to see that obeying just for obedience' sake was hard for Penny to swallow. Before she had time to frame a question, I continued:

"Sometimes one might not see the reason for obeying at the moment but at some future time his unquestioning obedience could mean the difference

between life or death. This is why soldiers are taught to obey instantly, without asking questions. Let me illustrate.

"I was driving down the street of a small city one day. The traffic was quite heavy and moving a bit faster than the posted rate of speed. Glancing ahead and to the right I saw a brightly colored ball roll across the sidewalk and disappear between the parked cars. Running as hard as his little legs could carry him was a small boy chasing the ball."

Penny's eyes grew big in anticipation.

"My heart almost stopped as I saw his curly head pop out from between the cars. I just knew the car in front of mine couldn't stop in time. Just then I heard a booming voice from nowhere: 'Stop! Johnny! Stop!'

"The boy literally froze in his tracks. Brakes screeching, the car brushed by him with barely inches to spare. A man dashed into the street and grabbed the little fellow into his arms. As I drew up beside him I leaned out the window and said, 'Whew! That was a close one.' I'll never forget his reply:

"'You know, mister, some folks have thought I was hard on my son for always demanding instant obedience--but today it saved his life.'

"And you know, Penny, there are some folks that say that God was hard on His son, Adam, when he asked for implicit obedience--but it would have saved his life. He set one tree apart from among all the trees in the garden and said, 'don't touch it.' If Adam had obeyed in this little thing that didn't seem to matter at the time,

then God could have been sure he would obey in the big things which would matter very much."

"Then the Sabbath is like the tree for us?" she asked.

"Yes it is, as far as the particular day is concerned. God specified the seventh day as a memorial of His creation and told us how it should be observed. It is a test of obedience. But it should also be a great day of delight, as you pointed out. In fact, it should be one of the most wonderful days in the week."

"You mean just not doing anything except going to church, sitting around, and reading?" I could see the Sabbath hadn't been one of Penny's favorite days.

"Let me ask you a question," I countered. "How would you like to have to work every day, seven days each week, three hundred and sixty-five days each year--with no time off?"

"I wouldn't like it," she admitted.

"Neither would I," I agreed. "So, God gave each of us a day off each week. Did you ever think of it that way?"

"Frankly, no," she replied smiling.

"So you see there was a good reason behind God's command to keep the Sabbath day holy. Even in Eden, we are told, man needed to lay aside his own interests and pursuits so he would have time to more fully consider the marvelous works of God and to meditate on His power and goodness. Having a whole day to walk down the flower-lined paths of Eden with nothing to do except look at

the wonders God had created, Adam and Eve would have better understood how good God had been to them and this understanding would have awakened gratitude and love for Him in their hearts."

"I'd like to keep Sabbath that way," Penny added. "I like to go for walks in the woods and down by the ocean--but is that keeping Sabbath?"

"Of course it is, provided as you walk through the woods and by the sea you keep in mind that God created all these beautiful things for you to enjoy. In every flower and bird, in the fleecy clouds, and even in the tiny insects you can see His love. In the high tide marks along the shore you can remember God's promise never to destroy the earth again with a flood, and even those who live far from the ocean can see His promise in the rainbow."

"But what about going to church. Is that supposed to be fun, too?"

"I don't know if 'fun' is exactly the right word," I questioned.

"Well, you know what I mean." She spread her hands in an open-palm gesture.

"Do you like to visit a dear friend?"

"Of course."

"Well, going to church is visiting a dear Friend, for the church is His house and when we go there it's just like going to visit a friend."

"You mean *He* is really there?" She looked startled.

"He certainly is, but sometimes I don't think we realize it--at least we don't act that way."

"But," she pointed out, "when you visit a friend you can see him and talk with him. You can't do that with God."

"I know it isn't possible for us to see God now but before too long Jesus will come and then we will be able to see Him and talk with Him just as Adam and Eve did in the garden. But, I disagree when you say we can't talk with Him."

"How can you talk with someone you can't see?" Her look plainly showed she thought she had won this point.

"What about the telephone?" I countered. "You don't appear to have any difficulty talking with people you can't see."

"Yes, I know. But I can hear them talking."

"Did you ever really listen to find out if God is answering?"

"I guess not," she admitted. "I never thought of praying as being like a conversation, but I guess it is."

"Of course it is. Prayer is just like talking to God over the phone--only we don't need the phone because He is always very, very near to us."

"But how can I hear God answering when I talk with Him?"

"Oh, there are a number of ways He uses to communicate with us. Of course He would rather

just talk to us as He did with Adam and Eve before sin entered the world, but that is impossible right now. However, there are other definite ways He uses to answer our prayers.

"There is the Bible. This is our great instruction book in which God tells us how to live happy, healthy, holy lives. If we always followed it, we might not have to ask so many questions. Then there is the Spirit of Prophecy which explains these principles of the Bible in ways a little easier to apply to our daily living. And I think of another way God can answer our prayers in a very definite way--this is in the still, small voice of our consciences. I'm very sure that if we are really willing to obey what He says, He will speak to us through this medium. But, Penny, we need to listen carefully."

How Penny could instantly change from a bubbly, bouncy, teasing teenager into a serious, thoughtful adult simply amazed me. She was in one of her serious, subjective moods, now. I waited.

She brushed back a lock of hair that threatened to obscure the vision of one eye and said with conviction, "I think I understand better what it means to go to church on Sabbath, now. If I can really feel that God is there, then it will be like visiting a friend. I'm going to try to listen, too. But you said the Sabbath was a test of obedience. Why do we have to have all these tests?"

"Because God is going to restore this earth to its original beauty and the people who are going to live there are going to be good, unselfish, peaceful people. Now if He hadn't given us the power of choice, He could have made us into

this kind of people. But, because we can choose to be anything we want to, He has to know what our choice is. So, He gives us these tests to find out.

"He has to be so careful that the right kind of folks are permitted to live in the new earth because He doesn't want another mess like this one. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

"I guess not," she admitted.

"Well, no one has to worry for it isn't going to happen again. The Bible says so. And that's why God is testing us now to find out if He can trust us with all the wonderful things He is preparing."

"This seems reasonable to me," she agreed soberly. "Are there other tests?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Well, there's the tithe for one."

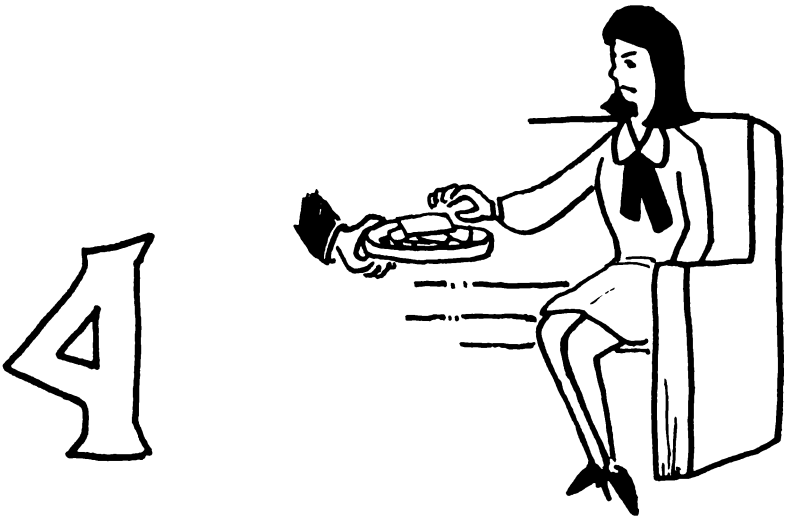
"How can that be a test? Isn't that just money you have to give when you become a member of the church?"

"No. At least that shouldn't be the case. No one *has* to give anything. All giving must be free-will; and anyway, one doesn't give the tithe--he returns it."

"Returns it?" she was puzzled. "What's the difference?"

Right at this point Penny's mother, who had

quietly left the room a few minutes before, returned with a tray of cool drinks. The sight of those tall glasses made me suddenly very thirsty. Penny took a glass and a napkin, looked at her mother, smiled and said, "Thanks, Mom."



For some minutes there was silence except for the distant roar of the ocean and the tinkle of the ice in the frosty glasses. A car door slammed and soon Mr. Smith entered the room.

"Looks like I missed out on something," he smiled, indicating the empty glasses on the tray. His wife went to the kitchen to take care of this situation.

"Well, has my daughter worn you out by now?" he asked, laughing. "When she gets started, she doesn't know when to quit."

"Not at all," I replied. "I find Penny's observations very stimulating."

Penny bowed in mock courtesy. "Thank you, sir!"

"Dad," she began, "do you pay tithe?"

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Are you *sure* you *pay* tithe?" she pursued with mischief in her eyes.

"Of course. Say, what are you getting at? Are you trying to catch me?"

"You're already caught." She looked smug, now. "The minister says you *can't* pay tithe, only *return* it. What do you think of that?"

"Well, pay it--return it, what difference does it make as long as it's an honest tithe?"

Penny turned to me and said, "That's what I'd like to know. What difference does it make?"

"I think the attitude regarding it makes the difference," I explained. "If one believes the money is his own, then he can pay it; however, if he considers the money as belonging to God, then he could only return it. One can't give something one doesn't own."

Mrs. Smith took a seat beside Penny and asked, "Can I get in on this discussion? Somehow I've never really understood the tithe. I know it is something we should do as Christians, but I'll have to confess I really don't know why."

"As I was telling Penny," I explained, "the tithe is another of the tests which God uses to determine our attitude towards Him. You remember in the beginning that God gave Adam and Eve dominion of the world. They were His stewards, managing His goods and responsible for their care. There was only one restriction in their stewardship. This was the tree of knowledge of good and evil which they were warned never to touch.

"I'm sure you recognize that in ownership there are unlimited privileges. An owner may sell or dispose of his property in any way and at any

time he may wish to do so. In stewardship there are some restrictions."

"I recognize this," said Mr. Smith, "but somehow I never thought of myself as a steward. Don't I own the things I have such as the house, the furniture, the car, etc.?"

"Not really," I replied. "They all belong to God. You are responsible for them but they are actually His. Remember? 'The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof.'"

"Yes, I remember, but somehow I guess I never applied it to my own possessions. I guess I thought I owned them, come to think of it."

"That is the problem with most people, and this is the reason they forget God. You may be interested to know that you have pinpointed the main reason why God instituted the tithing system --just so men wouldn't forget."

"How would the tithe keep men from forgetting?" Penny wondered.

"Because the tithe is a recognition of God's ownership," I explained. "The very fact that a man returns ten percent of his profits to God shows that he recognizes that, while everything he has belongs to God, this specific portion is God's alone and not to be touched or used for any other purpose than that which God has indicated."

"You mean," said Penny, "that this is also like the tree in the Garden?"

"That's right. God told our first parents not to touch the tree. He tells us not to touch the tithe. This is His, and His alone. When we

refrain from using the tithe for our own use, we clearly show that we recognize His ownership. Could I tell you a story which brought this point vividly to me?"

"Please do." Penny adjusted the pillows and settled back expectantly. The eagerness in her face would inspire any story-teller.

"Not too long ago I spent some time away up on St. Lawrence Island with the Eskimos."

Penny leaned forward and the words literally tumbled over each other: "Did you live in an igloo? Did you ride on a dog sled? Did you wear a parka? Was there lots and lots and lots of ice? Was it cold? Oh, how exciting!"

"If you'll slow down for a minute," her mother advised, "maybe we can hear the story."

"I'm sorry," repented Penny as she nestled back among the pillows.

"No, Penny, I didn't live in an igloo, or ride a dog sled or wear a parka. And there wasn't any ice because it was September and the ice hadn't come down from the far north, yet. The Eskimos live in little wooden houses, there are dogs and sleds, they do wear parkas, and it is very, very exciting."

"OK, tell me the story."

"Us," reminded her father.

"OK, us!"

"One day I went for a long hike down the beach with an Eskimo named Nathan Noongwook. When we

were several miles from the village, I found some glass balls the Japanese use on their fishing nets for floats. I wanted them very badly but there were other hikers in the area and I was afraid that if I left them out in the open they wouldn't be there when we returned.

"I was about to hide them in some deep grass and try to mark them so I could find them, but not so well that others would locate them, when Nathan said, 'Not necessary to hide.'

"He took the balls and put them right in the open, then made a mark around them in the sand with the toe of his boot.

"I asked, 'Will they be here when we return?'

"He replied, 'They be here.'

"This mark was a sign to every Eskimo that these objects belonged to someone else and were not to be touched. When I asked Nathan how long they would remain without someone taking them, he simply said, 'Until mark go 'way.'

"That evening Nathan invited some of his friends and neighbors to his little cabin to hear the gospel story. They all sat around on the floor, for there were no chairs.

"I told them the story of creation and how God created a man and placed him in charge. 'In order for this man to be free, he was given the power of choice. Of course there had to be something for him to choose, so God put His mark around one tree.'

"They watched intently as I traced an imaginary line on the floor with the toe of my shoe

around the tree I had described. Then in unison they said, 'A-a-h...A-a-h.'

"When I asked them whose tree this was, they answered, 'That God's tree.' When I asked, 'What did the man do when he took the fruit of that tree?' they said, 'Him thief--he steal fruit of God's tree.'"

"How interesting," Penny said, her eyes shining. I could see it was hard for her thoughts to return from that faroff land of igloos, dog sleds, parkas, and ice.

"So you see, the tithe is God's. He has put His mark around it. If we do not touch that which belongs to Him alone, we have passed another test which will show Him that it will be safe to take us to that wonderful new world He is preparing, for we will have demonstrated our recognition of His ownership."

"But isn't this more or less an arbitrary thing--one of the rules--as Penny likes to describe it?" questioned Mr. Smith.

"Not really," I answered. "You see, the tithe is God's share of a partnership agreement He has made with us."

"A partnership?" he asked.

"Yes, and a very interesting one, I might add. In this partnership God furnishes all the assets of time, talent, and means--then only asks for ten percent of the profits. It doesn't seem like a fair distribution when He makes Himself responsible for the success of the project. How does this strike you?"

"Well," Mr. Smith hesitated, "when you put it that way, it isn't usually the way we do it in business."

"Exactly right," I continued. "I think tithing is one of God's most wonderful plans for it shows the intimate relationship which He desires to have with us. He wants us as partners."

"You mean," Mrs. Smith asked, "that God is actually interested in our business?"

"I would rather say that He is vitally interested in *His* business of which we are a part. Do you see why I said the attitude towards our possessions was so important?"

"I'm beginning to," she said.

"Me, too," Penny added.

"I believe," I said, "that when we figure our accounts and set apart God's share, the tithe, that this should be one of the most enjoyable and comforting times we have."

"Why do you say that?" asked Penny.

"Because at this special time we are reminded of His watchcare over us. While two-thirds of the world is hungry, while uncertainty is the constant companion of the greater majority of people, we as God's children, can be secure in the knowledge that our needs will be supplied."

"Do you mean that in this partnership with God, we can be absolutely sure that all our needs will be cared for?" asked Mrs. Smith.

"That's what He promised. Do you remember

what He told the multitudes that day in Galilee? 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God,' He said, 'and all these things will come to you as a matter of course.' Jesus spoke of the birds, how God cares for them; He called attention to the flowers, how God clothes them with beauty. Then He said that those who did not believe in God would spend their entire lives trying to obtain the necessities of life. 'But you are God's children,' He reminded them. 'He knows you need these things. Don't worry about them. It's easy for Him to provide them for you, He made them.'"

"I'm beginning to see how the tithing system would keep one from forgetting God," observed Mr. Smith. "It would be pretty hard to forget a partner if you were regularly setting aside his share of the profits."

"You are right. So you can see that tithing is a test of recognition. It is a constant reminder of God's ownership. Likewise, observing the Sabbath is a test of obedience and a continual reminder that God is the Creator. These two safeguards would have prevented man from the errors of evolution and love of the world, which is idolatry."

"How simple it is," commented Mrs. Smith, "when one understands it."

"When it is explained this way," added Penny, "it doesn't sound like a lot of rules at all-- just like something I'd want to do."

"And, Penny," I reminded, "God wouldn't want you to return the tithe or keep the Sabbath unless you really wanted to."

"You aren't going to let me forget that, are you?" she added.

Penny left the room to answer the phone. The call was for her father so she skipped back to her favorite corner on the davenport and I saw the question on her face before it became audible.

"What about all the offerings we hear about in church each week? I suppose you are going to tell me there's some other reason for these besides paying the bills, and missions, and things like that."

"I wouldn't want to limit our discussion about offerings to money because it would be possible for one who didn't have any money to make an offering to God."

"Are you serious?" she asked with such a puzzled look I had to smile.

"Of course. Not everyone has money but everyone has a measure of time and a measure of talent. These can be of even greater value than money for they are more intimately related to the individual. Money can be so impersonal, but a person's time and his talents are a part of his everyday life."

"But aren't money offerings important?"

"Certainly. I wouldn't deny that, but you should consider that money has no inherent value in itself--only in the good it can do. You can't eat money, but you can obtain nourishment from the food it can buy. Money wouldn't make a very good bed, but it can provide one. You can't wear money, only the clothes it will purchase. The point is, money in itself is worthless. Its only value lies in what it can accomplish, or what we do with it."

"Seems pretty important to me." She said

this with a determined nod of her head.

"It is important in our economy in which money is used as a medium of exchange. Remember there have been times when beads, cloth, guns, tobacco, skins, and many other items were the medium of exchange. Money wouldn't have been worth anything.

"So, if you wish to discuss offerings in a broad sense of time, talent, and means, I'll be happy to comply."

"Sounds reasonable. But I may be thinking about money!" She wrinkled her nose and grinned impishly.

5



"To begin with, I would like to ask you a question, Penny. If you loved someone very much, what would you want to do for him?"

She rolled her eyes from side to side as she pondered this question. Then she looked at me, squinted one eye ever so slightly trying, it appeared, to anticipate where this question might be leading her. Finally she shrugged her shoulders and replied, "Why...do something..give him something, I suppose."

"You are so right. In fact it would be impossible for you to love someone and not want to give him something. This is a desire God planted in your heart. In fact, He had the very same desire. He loved you so much He would have given His only Son to die, just for you."

"But," she asked, "it's possible to give without loving, isn't it?"

"Definitely, but would you want to receive a gift from someone who didn't really want to give it to you?"

"I guess not. I guess I never thought of it that way."

"Your parents don't take care of you, Penny, because they have to. It's because they love you. I'm quite sure you wouldn't be very happy if you thought they did nice things for you just from a sense of duty.

"And you know, that's the way God feels. That's why He gave us the power to choose; so we would love Him from choice and not because we felt some obligation. And this brings us to a most interesting point. In everything we do, the motive is more important than what we do or the gift we make."

"Do you mean *why* we do something is more important than *what* we do?"

"Yes. The Bible says that we could give everything we have to feed the poor, and even suffer a martyr's death, but if these acts were the result of any other motive than love, they would be worthless. And I think I can illustrate this.

"What if you had a boy friend and he gave you things and did things for you, and you found out he really didn't want to. He just did it because... well, he felt you expected it of him. How would you like that?"

A rosy tint came into her cheeks at the mention of a boy friend but her eyes blazed at the very thought of a person acting like that. "Why," she retorted, "why, I'd never speak to him again!"

"God doesn't appreciate gifts from any other motive than genuine affection, either," I replied.

"What are some of the motives which prompt people to do things besides love?"

"There's the give-to-get motive."

"What's that?"

"Do you remember not long ago the church held a dinner to raise some badly-needed funds?"

"Yes."

"Do you think the people who attended that dinner would have placed the same amount of money into the fund if they didn't get anything to eat?"

"Wouldn't they?"

"It's not likely. There are many folks who will attend a dinner, or a motion picture, or some other entertainment who are happy to buy tickets to these events just as long as they get something for their money. They put band-aids on their consciences with the thought that part of the money, the part that wasn't used to prepare the dinner, or pay for the film rental, went for a good cause."

"My, I never thought of that!" She seemed shocked. Then she laughed and said, "Band-aids!"

"But, what are some other motives?" she asked.

"Well, there are those who give from a strict sense of obligation, and there are others who give for the praise they receive or for publicity. Then there are those who give under pressure to save themselves embarrassment; they really don't want to give--they feel they have to. The list is almost endless."

"I'm afraid what little I have given hasn't been from the right motive, either," Penny confessed seriously, "but I never heard this explained before, so I just didn't understand."

"I hope I can help you to see how important the motive really is. Awhile ago you mentioned that religion seemed to you like a lot of rules to follow. Actually, true religion is based on the motives. If one follows the rules from any other motive than genuine love for God, it would be an empty, unsatisfying experience, almost like living in a vacuum.

"Religion is a practical relationship between a person and God, one in which love is the motivating force for both parties. God's universe is founded on love and love must be the real reason behind every action."

I could see Penny was deep in thought, so I went to the window to watch the great, white combers sweep in from the sea. The clouds were low and purplish-black. A gull hovered motionless on the off-shore breeze silhouetted against a streak of silver where the sea met the sky.

It was growing late and I felt I must leave, but before I could put my thought into words, Penny emerged from her contemplation and said, "There's something else I don't understand. How is giving to church expense and Sabbath School expense giving to God, and from the right motive?"

"That's an easy one," I answered. "The church is God's house and the Sabbath School is His school. Love for Him will impel us to keep His house in operation and good repair. The same would be true of the Sabbath School."

"I wonder why I didn't think of that," she added, "but then, I guess I really never thought of the church as God's house. But it is, isn't it?"

The Siamese cat that had been enjoying a nap in a corner of the big chair got up, stretched and rubbed against Penny's leg. She reached down and pulled his tail playfully. He made a half-hearted swipe at her hand with his paw, and proudly stalked away.

"The thought just occurred to me," she said. "Are mission offerings gifts to God? Aren't these to people?"

"Do you remember, Penny, that Jesus said one time that if we did things for others, it was just the same as doing it for Him?"

"Oh, yes, I do remember. It was visiting people in prison and giving a cup of cold water, wasn't it?"

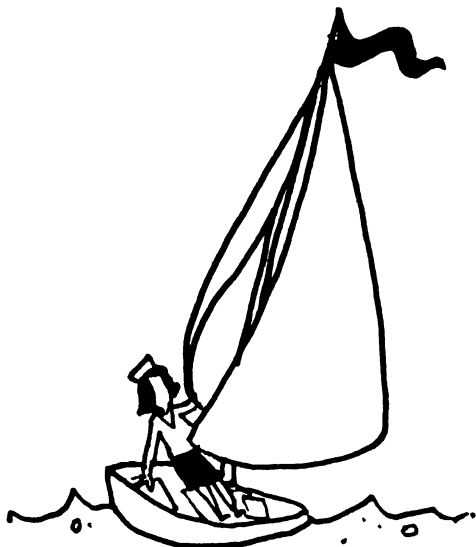
"That's right, and I read one time that every opportunity to help someone who is in need or to help spread the gospel was a *pearl* that we could send beforehand for deposit in the bank of heaven."

"Why, that's simply beautiful." It really sounded beautiful the way she said it. "Then if I could give lots of offerings to God, I would be a regular pearl merchant, wouldn't I?"

"Don't forget, Penny, offerings include time and talents. You *can* give lots of offerings, for you have talents and time and love and influence. Yes, you could be a real pearl merchant."

"This is wonderful. Now every time I hear of some need I'm going to think of pearls, lots and lots of shiny pearls."

6



I went back to the window for one last look at the sea. The silver streak on the horizon was changing to gold. The cresting waves were lead-grey with pink tops. The clouds caught and held the reflection. I turned from the window. Penny was watching me. It almost seemed she was waiting for something as yet unsaid.

"Penny," I began, "there's still something else I feel is very important."

"What is that?" she asked.

"How we use the remainder of our time, talents, and money."

"Can't we use these anyway we want to, just as long as we do all the other things right?" She didn't look at me when she said this. I suspected she knew this wasn't right.

"I don't think that is so," I reminded her, "for that would be just following the rules to which you seem to object. No, I think once more the motive would hold the key to this situation."

"How would that work here?" she wondered.

"If it were just enough to follow a list of rules, then one could keep the Sabbath according to all the do's and don'ts, as you express it, and fail miserably if he used the remainder of his time in a manner not in harmony with Christian principles. He could also be meticulous in tithing and very liberal in his offerings, but deny God's ownership of all he possesses by his wastefulness, extravagance, or other misuse of the balance of his money."

"But if it is so important how a person does every little thing, I think I'd get the feeling that someone was always looking over my shoulder just waiting for me to make a mistake."

"That's what Satan tried to get the angels to believe--that God was a tyrant, hoping a person would make a mistake so He could deal out some severe punishment. And I have read where some old-time preachers pictured God as holding a man over the fires of hell just waiting for him to do something so He could drop him."

"How awful!" Penny exclaimed. "I'd hate to go to their churches. It would scare me to death."

"I can assure you this picture of God's dealing with us is not true at all. God is love and unwilling that any of us should get into trouble or be unhappy. I know this is true or He wouldn't have sent His only Son to die for us so we could be happy forever."

"I hope you're right," she said wistfully.

"I know I'm right, Penny," I assured her.

"God has done everything He could for us. He made it possible for us to choose how we want to live, but how we choose will show Him whether we are the kind of people He can safely trust in the New Earth. He needs happy, unselfish, obedient people; those who want to live where everything is peaceful and quiet.

"And so I believe it is very important how we manage that portion of our stewardship which He leaves completely under our control. This will be the actual story of our lives. It will show our attitude and the direction we are going."

"What do you mean by direction?" she asked.

"I mean the objective or plan one has for his life, like a man sailing a boat," I answered.

"How can life be like sailing? I've never been sailing, but it does look like fun."

"Life is like sailing in many respects," I explained. "You see, in sailing it isn't usually possible to go directly towards one's objective, due to the fact that the wind rarely blows in exactly that direction. So, a sailor must steer the boat in a zig-zag sort of way which he calls 'tacking'. He sets his sails so the wind will drive him in as nearly the right direction as he can. This is called a 'tack'. When he has made as much progress in this direction as possible, he turns the boat and takes another diagonal. Eventually the boat can be sailed to the exact point desired."

"How interesting," Penny commented, "but how is life like that?"

"Every person should have a definite goal for

his life. Often he cannot take a straight path to this goal because of circumstances, so he must 'tack' back and forth, but he must carefully set his sails so everything he does is in the direction of the goal.

"The Christian steward should have only one objective and that is heaven and the New Earth. Problems may force him to zig and zag from time to time, but they should never divert him from his ultimate goal. How he uses the balance of his time, talents, and money will show the direction he is going--'the set of his sails', as a sailor would say."

"What if he makes mistakes?" she wanted to know.

"I think everyone will make some mistakes now and then, but if one never loses sight of the goal, even these will not prevent him from reaching it. God has made provision for this."

"How can a Christian know how to 'set the sails' as you explained, so he can be sure he reaches the goal?"

"That's where the rules you spoke about come in, Penny. But rather than calling them rules, I like to think of them as God's great map for the sailor. On it He shows the depth of the water, where the rocks are, where the safe channels are, and the compass setting to be followed if fog or a rain squall should make it impossible sometimes to see the objective."

"The rules do look different to me when you explain it like that."

"That's the way I like to think of them. Then

I don't think of God as looking over my shoulder waiting for me to make a mistake, but rather as standing by my side helping me to read the map right and willing to take the wheel if the sea becomes too stormy."

"Is that what religion is really about?" she asked with such unaffected sincerity. "Is it really that easy to understand?"

"That's what it's all about," I replied, "and it's that easy."

We watched together as a giant comber crashed against the rocks sending a spume of spray high into the air.

"Penny?"

"Yes?"

"Could I ask you a question?"

"I guess it's your turn. I've asked you enough of them."

"When we came home from church today, I think I heard you say, 'Who needs religion, anyway!' What do you think, now?"

She waited so long before answering I began to wonder if she ever would. I glanced in her direction. She was looking far off to the horizon where the autumn sun was just sinking beneath the surface of the sea.

Then she sighed softly and said, "I guess I do...I guess everybody does."

