

HARD THINGS—PART 1

WHO SAYS THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS EASY?

1 of 2

What we think is valuable is not valuable at all: “that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God” (Lk 16:15). *The wisdom of the world is foolishness:* “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor 1:20). *What seems foolish is really wise; what seems weak is really strong; what is despised and rejected by the world is chosen by God:* “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God” (1 Cor 1:27–29). So we don't even come close to thinking the way God thinks: “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8–9). In summing up these verses, let me propose three principles as safeguards in making decisions: (1) *what comes naturally is probably wrong*, (2) *the opposite of what you think (your basic instincts) is probably right*, and (3) *you will probably mess up without guidance from God's Word*. Now, let's take a look at and meditate on the following fifty-three things that are hard for Christians to do (see also Part 2).

1. *a sin nature but don't sin:* God gives us a sin nature and then commands us not to sin—neither in thought, speech, nor deed. “I am of flesh” (Rom 7:14–25). “Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you” (Jn 5:14).
2. *suffer and be happy:* God allows suffering and shame and then expects us to rejoice, to suffer willingly and joyfully, when we feel like crying or throwing a fit (Mt 5:10–12; Lk 6:22–23; Acts 5:40–41; 16:23–25; Heb 10:34; Jas 1:2–3).
3. *joy in the loss of your possessions:* “You . . . accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one” (Heb 10:34). “Blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:9–22).
4. *rejoice in persecution:* “Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great” (Mt 5:11–12; cf. Lk 6:22–23).
5. *joy in testing:* “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (Jas 1:2–3). ‘Happy is a man who endures testing’ (1:12 RCL); cf. 1 Cor 10:13.
6. *delight in weaknesses, insults, calamities, persecutions, and difficulties, rather than being annoyed, irritated, and angry:* ‘I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in calamities, in persecutions, in difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor 12:10 RCL). The verb *eudokeo* means to *be well pleased, to take delight* in something (BAGD). When too weak to stop, avoid, or escape pain and suffering, be strong in faith and endurance (cf. Dan 3:13–23).
7. *be content when things are not as you wish:* “Be content with your wages” (Lk 3:14; cf. Heb 13:5); “I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Phil 4:11); content with “food and clothing” (1 Tim 6:6–8).
8. *give thanks for the bad times, when you'd rather utter curses, when it seems there is nothing to be happy about or thankful for:* “Rejoice always” (1 Thess 5:16). “In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18).
9. *don't worry, when you have every reason to worry:* ‘Worry about nothing’ (Phil 4:6 RCL) “for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Mt 6:32; cf. verses 25–34); ‘casting all your worry upon Him’ (1 Pet 5:7 RCL).
10. *have faith in what you can't see and know only from the Scriptures, when you'd much rather walk by sight:* “Walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7; cf. 4:18; Heb 11:1); “though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him” (1 Pet 1:8).
11. *have faith when things are humanly impossible:* “And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform” (Rom 4:19–21; cf. Mk 14:36; Lk 1:37).
12. *do nothing in times of danger, when you feel you must do something:* “Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD” (Ex 14:13 KJV). “You need not fight in this battle; station yourselves, stand and see the salvation of the LORD on your behalf” (2 Chr 20:17). “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not become anxious about how or what you should speak in your defense, or what you should say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:11–12); “for it shall be given you in that hour what you are to speak. For it is not you who speak, but it is the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Mt 10:19–20).
13. *a desire for revenge, yet not allowed to avenge yourself:* “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone” (Rom 12:17). “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY, SAYS THE LORD” (Rom 12:19). “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; Wait for the LORD, and He will save you” (Prov 20:22). “Do not say, ‘Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work’” (24:29).
14. *pray when you're not sure anyone's listening, and when no one talks back:* “if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us” (1 Jn 5:14–15); “will He delay long?” (Lk 18:1–8); “before they call, I will answer” (Isa 65:24).
15. *“pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44), when you'd just as soon get even:* the preposition *hyper*+genitive means “for, in behalf of, for the sake of someone” (BAGD). The opposite is imprecatory prayer (Psa 69; 109; Jer 18:19–23).
16. *“pray for those who mistreat [threaten, abuse] you” (Lk 6:28b RCL), when it would be so gratifying to threaten, mistreat, or abuse them back:* “And while being reviled [insulted, slandered], He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet 2:23). “If you are reviled [mocked, insulted] for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (4:14).
17. *don't threaten persecutors when it's what you really feel like doing:* “While suffering, He uttered no threats” (1 Pet 2:23); “those who seek to injure me have threatened destruction . . . does not open his mouth” (Psa 38:12–15).
18. *“bless those who curse you” (Lk 6:28a), when all you can think of is cursing them:* “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not” (Rom 12:14). “When we are reviled [mocked, insulted], we bless” (1 Cor 4:12).
19. *don't return insult for insult, when there's nothing you'd rather do than blow them out of the water:* “not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead . . . that you might inherit a blessing” (1 Pet 3:9).
20. *“do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6:27), when you'd rather not:* “Love your enemies, and do good . . . and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men” (6:35).
21. *“when we are slandered, we try to conciliate” (1 Cor 4:13), instead of reciprocating with character assassinations.* *Parakaleo* in Greek means “to speak in a friendly manner” (BAGD). “putting aside . . . all slander” (1 Pet 2:1; cf. Col 3:8).
22. *“it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35), when most of us like receiving better than giving; and “lend, expecting nothing in return” (Lk 6:35), when we could get a nice return on our money elsewhere.*
23. *“and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you” (Mt 5:42, when you'd rather not loan it out because they may break it or return it in worse shape than before.* Compare Ex 22:25; Deut 15:7–8; Ezek 18:4–9.
24. *sell and give all your possessions to the poor, when you want all the good things of life for yourself (Mt 19:21; Lk 12:33; 14:33; 18:22; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37).* We're naturally inclined to hang on to everything (Lk 12:16–21), but please note the repeated promises of future rewards for being so generous. “Give to him who asks of you” (Mt 5:42; Lk 6:30), when you'd like to keep it for yourself: This command has limitations and must be interpreted in keeping with the way God gives: (1) “according to His will” (1 Jn 5:14–15), (2) if “we keep His commandments and do the things that are pleasing in His sight” (3:22), and (3) “you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures” (Jas 4:3).
25. *don't love money, when we really love what money can do—provide comforts, security, entertainment, power, prestige, and to become the envy of all:* “Let your way of life be free from the love of money” (Heb 13:5; cf. 1 Tim 3:3; 6:10).
26. *“you cannot serve God and Mammon” (Mt 6:24), when you would like to serve both:* “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money” (Eccl 5:10a). In the last days “men will be lovers of self, lovers of money. . . .” (2 Tim 3:2).
27. *giving is measured in terms of sacrifice, not amount, when we wish it were measured in terms of comfortable amount:* “And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, ‘Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on’” (Lk 21:1–4).