

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION

# **SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

LESSONS ON BEING FORMED  
IN THE IMAGE OF CHRIST



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# COURSE OVERVIEW

This course examines the Christian's spiritual formation into the image of Christ. You should schedule 90-120 minutes for each class session, in addition to time for doing assignments outside of class.

If studying as a group, take turns reading the material. You should stop periodically for any class discussion. As the class leader, you are responsible to keep discussion from wandering from the material being studied. It is helpful to have a time limit for each discussion period. **Discussion questions** and **in-class activities** are indicated by arrow bullet points. Try to make sure that all students in the class are involved. If necessary, you can call on students by name.

Many footnotes refer to a **scripture** reference. Please have students look up some of the verses and take turns reading them to the group.

Each lesson ends with **assignments**. Assignments should be completed and reported before the next lesson time.

- Students will be asked to use Dr. Allan Brown's ***Daily Prayer Guide*** as a way to train themselves to pray the scriptures and to learn communion and fellowship with God in prayer.
- Students will be asked to write out a **personal prayer** based on what they learned in the lesson. These prayers should be kept in a personal prayer journal. The purpose of this assignment is to encourage students to personalize the biblical truths taught in the lessons and to turn them into sincere prayers.
- Students will also be asked to make **journal entries** of what God is teaching them through each lesson.

At the beginning of each class period students will be given the opportunity, should they so choose, to share their written prayer with their fellow classmates. The purpose of this exercise is to practice humility and mutual accountability, and to enjoy spiritual fellowship.

Each class session should begin with a **test** over the previous lesson. This test can be given orally or in writing. Tests should be taken without referring to the course book, written notes, Bible, or classmates. A test answer key is available for download at [ShepherdsGlobal.org](http://ShepherdsGlobal.org).

If the student wants to **earn a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom**, he should attend the class sessions and complete the assignments. A form is provided at the end of the course for recording the assignments completed.



## LESSON 1

# FORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Be able to define *spiritual formation*.
2. Be able to offer biblical support for spiritual formation.
3. Understand and articulate the Christian mandate.
4. Be able to discuss some of the challenges to spiritual formation.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

Our neighbors have only recently come to know Jesus, and it's been thrilling to watch them grow in their faith. Neither of them was raised in a Christian home. Neither of them has had much experience at all with church. But Becky and I have been encouraged as we watch how the gospel has transformed and is transforming their home. I don't know that I've met more than a handful of people in my life with a deeper hunger for the Word of God than Danny and Kim have.

We were in the middle of a Bible study through the Gospel of John recently, giving special attention to two questions: "What does this passage say about Jesus?" and second, "How ought this understanding of Jesus change our lives?" Suddenly, and with conviction in her voice, Kim exclaimed, "I just want to be like Jesus! In everything I do and say; and in every part of my life, I just want to be like him!" It was a very special, even sacred, moment because she did not grow up hearing that kind of language. It was a special moment because this testimony was the expression of a longing placed in the heart of Kim by the Holy Spirit through his Word. Kim, as well as Danny, have seen in Jesus a person so compelling and attractive that they long to be like him. This is the natural longing every believer should have.



## THE BIG IDEA

God's purpose for saving us is not just forgiveness, but to restore his image in us.

## INTRODUCTION

*Spiritual Formation* is a course designed for believers who want to change and be changed. It is written for men and women who have been born again, even those who love God from a pure heart, but who want to be formed in greater measure into the image of Jesus Christ.

Most of us aren't completely satisfied with where we are spiritually. (This holy dissatisfaction should characterize the lives of all believers.) In every corner of the world believers yearn for a closer walk with God. This yearning is best expressed in the prayer of the psalmist, "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for you, O God."<sup>1</sup>

Through spiritual formation our thirst for God will be satisfied in increasing measure, because it is the life of Jesus within which satisfies it.

True Christians want to grow. We want to grow in our faith. We want a closer walk with God—a greater awareness of God's presence in life's joys and sorrows. We want to become more disciplined and self-controlled. We want to become more trusting, more joyful, and more at peace.

Many of us desire a more consistent devotional life. We want freedom from fear and anxiety. We want to beat some stubborn habit. Some want to overcome a besetting sin. We all want to become more fruitful, more productive. We want our relationships to be blessed and fulfilling. We want to consistently manifest the life of Christ before others. Most Christians I know want to change, but many don't know how to change. Many feel stuck! Many secretly despair of ever being different than they are. *Spiritual Formation* offers a roadmap for the change we want and need.

The change we yearn for will take place through discipleship, or what we are calling in this course "spiritual formation." Other related terms are "growth in holiness" and "progressive sanctification." Spiritual formation involves the "renovation of the heart"<sup>2</sup> and is both a crisis and a process. It requires both pivotal change (dramatic moments of change) and slower incremental change.

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**"A lot of people want to change... but many of them do not believe it is possible. After years of trying and failing, they lead a Christian life of quiet desperation."**

**James Bryan Smith**

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1 Psalm 42:1

2 A term used by Dallas Willard

## KEY SCRIPTURE PASSAGES RELATED TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION

**2 Corinthians 3:18**, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, **are being transformed into the same image** from glory to glory (little by little), just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

**Galatians 4:19**, “My little children, for whom I labor in birth again **until Christ is formed in you.**”<sup>4</sup>

**Colossians 1:28**, “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present **every man perfect in Christ Jesus.**”<sup>5</sup>

**Ephesians 4:13-14**, “Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the **measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ**; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.”<sup>6</sup>

From these scriptures, as well as many others, we draw the term “spiritual formation.”

- » According to these passages, what is the ultimate purpose of the Christian life? What are some of the means of reaching this goal mentioned in these passages? According to the Ephesians passage, what are some of the results?

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION DEFINED

**Spiritual formation is the gracious process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ for the sake of others.**<sup>7</sup>

Let’s break down this definition into its three parts—the “gracious process,” the “image of Christ,” and “for the sake of others.”

### Spiritual Formation is a Work of Grace

In a sense there is nothing we can do to transform ourselves into Jesus’ likeness. Yet there is much we must do to make ourselves completely available to God’s transforming grace. **Grace is opposite to earning but is not opposite to effort.**

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3 Emphasis and parenthetical text added.

4 Emphasis added.

5 Emphasis added.

6 Emphasis added.

7 Adapted from M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 12

Around the world, certain churches emphasize grace without human effort. We will emphasize grace in this course. We will make clear that every advance in the Christian life is a miracle of grace. But grace involves a cooperative effort between the Holy Spirit and the Christian.

As an example of this cooperative effort between grace and effort, consider the way the scriptures were written. We know that “all scripture is given by inspiration of God.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, all scripture is a miracle of grace. God inspired men to write, he empowered them to write, and he preserved their writing. And yet, our Bible was not a product of effortless grace. Without men putting forth much effort in meditation, gathering information, checking sources, organizing thoughts, and writing, we would have no Bible.<sup>9</sup> Our scriptures came through inspiration with perspiration!

Paul said something similar about his ministry: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”<sup>10</sup>

## Spiritual Formation is a Process

- » In the four key spiritual formation passages above, underline the words “glory to glory,” “until,” and “till we all come.”

These passages speak to us of a process and ongoing activity. Paul speaks of the process of planting, watering, and growing.<sup>11</sup> He speaks of growing in love,<sup>12</sup> in faith,<sup>13</sup> and in knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Conformity to Christ’s image is a wonderful, though sometimes slow and erratic, journey punctuated by moments of profound leaps forward. We should not be discouraged when we fail but allow failure to humble us and train us.<sup>15</sup>

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**“In the final analysis, there is nothing we can do to transform ourselves into persons who love and serve Jesus except make ourselves available to God to do that work of transforming grace in our lives. Our part is to offer ourselves to God in ways that enable God to do that transforming work of grace.”**

**Robert Mulholland Jr.**

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8 2 Timothy 3:16

9 Luke 1:1-4

10 1 Corinthians 3:6

11 1 Corinthians 3:6-7

12 Ephesians 4:16

13 2 Corinthians 10:15

14 Colossians 1:10

15 Psalm 103:8-11; Hebrews 12:5-6

Spiritual formation happens at a different pace for every believer. The pace is affected by the intensity of the believer's desire. The scriptures teach, "Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled."<sup>16</sup> Not every believer cultivates the same intensity of hunger and thirst.

### **Spiritual formation is a process because it involves a change of mind.**

God has not created us as robots or machines. We are complex human beings created with the capacity to think, feel, and choose. Spiritual formation begins with the progressive transformation of the mind, leading to the transformation of our affections and natural transformation of our behavior.

My friend, Blake Jones, reminded me recently that when Paul talks about being transformed by the "renewing of the mind,"<sup>17</sup> the word "renewing" carries the idea of renovation or remodeling. We could think of a home remodeling project. Many of us have clean spiritual homes and even theologically strong homes, but still there are rotten boards that need to be replaced, crooked places that need to be straightened, and unattractive places that need to be beautified. Most of us need some new pictures of God and ourselves hung on the walls too! "That kind of remodeling is a process," Blake said. "It's not like watching video clips of a house make-over so that in ten minutes you see the old and the new. It is changing our mind in real time!"

### **Spiritual formation is a process because it involves making better choices.**

We will not bear the image of Christ in ever increasing glory automatically, but by persistent pursuit.<sup>18</sup> I often tell young people that the first step to a closer walk with God is to "get out of bed in the morning!" I have found that we will never find success by following the lazy currents of our nature but by swimming upstream by the grace of God. As the saying goes, "If you always do what you've always done, you'll always be what you've always been!"

"But **put on** the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision** for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."<sup>19</sup>

### **Spiritual formation is a process because we are shaped by life experiences.**

Experience doesn't come all at once but a little at a time. Much of this experience is painful. A.W. Tozer reminds us that, "It is doubtful whether God can use a man greatly until first he wounds him deeply." Everyone appreciates affirmation. But it is the seasons of difficulty,

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16 Matthew 5:6

17 Romans 12:1-2

18 Jeremiah 29:13

19 Romans 13:14, emphasis added.

the harsh winds of trial and adversity, the unjust words of a foe, and the dark night of the soul which shape us most profoundly.

One of my daughters declared very dramatically the other day, “I just can’t wait to grow up!” We all know the feeling. But God is not in a hurry when it comes to our spiritual growth. Just as a father delights in his children at every stage of their maturity, so our heavenly Father delights in us today—just as we are, not as we will someday be! This is probably one of the hardest truths for us to believe and accept.

One author states,

The New Testament is full of the idea of growth.... Miracles, as the extraordinary speeding up of process, show that God is powerful enough to do whatever he wants however he wants. Growth, as the ordinary way things happen in the world, shows the way God has typically chosen to work in the world. If we insist that spiritual development occurs only in crisis events, we limit God and disregard his sovereign choice.<sup>20</sup>

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**Christian growth can be likened to the growth of Chinese bamboo. The seeds of this plant get watered for five years with little growth, but in the fifth year Chinese bamboo grows 90 feet in 6 weeks!**

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## Spiritual Formation: Being Conformed to the Image of Christ

- » In the four key spiritual formation passages circle the words: “into the same image,” “Christ is formed,” “every man perfect in Christ Jesus,” and “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

### The image of God: God’s purpose for the Christian

Man was created in the image of God: “So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”<sup>21</sup> Man was created as a reflection of God’s character and as his beloved representatives in the world he had made. Theirs was a blessed and fruitful life.<sup>22</sup> Theirs was a life of selfless, intimate, joyful, and uninhibited fellowship with their Creator and with one another.<sup>23</sup>

When Adam and Eve fell through sin, the image of God was marred (though not destroyed). They became self-conscious, self-centered, and separated from God’s fellowship. But, from

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<sup>20</sup> Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 31

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>22</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 2:25, Genesis 3:8

that very hopeless moment, God began to implement his gracious plan to restore the people he loved back into his image.<sup>24</sup>

**God’s purpose, though, is not just forgiveness but full restoration of the image of God.** Forgiveness—restoration of fellowship—is instantaneous, while the restoration of the image of God is a process.

God’s purpose for every believer is to be who we were created to be—people who bear the image of Christ, who is the image of God; people who manifest his beautiful character and who live moment by moment as his representatives in the world. But how do we get there? This course has been designed as a roadmap for your journey.

### **Jesus Christ: the image of the invisible God**

“The Son is **the image of the invisible God**, the firstborn over all creation.”<sup>25</sup>

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of **Christ, who is the image of God.**”<sup>26</sup>

“The Son **is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being**, sustaining all things by his powerful word.”<sup>27</sup>

These verses remind us that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In Jesus we see perfectly the kind of people God created us to be. Jesus is the perfect example of spiritual maturity.

### **The image of Christ is spiritual maturity.**

The image of Christ is what the Bible means by spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity, or spiritual perfection, is simply “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

Paul encouraged believers in Rome to think differently about their sufferings, because all things are working together to conform us to the image of Christ.<sup>29</sup> “All things” includes ministry, family life, sickness, poverty, prosperity, conflict, persecution, calamity, success, grief, and loneliness. God’s purpose for everything is to make us like Jesus.

Jesus is the perfect man and our great example. The New Testament is full of beautiful portraits of Jesus. We see him fasting and praying in the desert, reclining at a table with

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24 Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 2:10, Ephesians 4:24

25 Colossians 1:15, *New International Version*, emphasis added.

26 2 Corinthians 4:4, *New International Version*, emphasis added.

27 Hebrews 1:3, *New International Version*, emphasis added.

28 Ephesians 4:13

29 Romans 8:28-29

sinner, holding children on his lap, squatting on a sandy beach baking fish for his disciples, snapping a whip and standing up for the spiritually oppressed, witnessing to a thirsty woman at a well, feeding the hungry, walking down the road to Emmaus with two discouraged disciples and expounding the scriptures, and surrendering to the cross. These portraits and many more give us insight into the kind of Christians we are to become.

Christian discipleship is being conformed to Jesus' humility,<sup>30</sup> his humble love of immature disciples,<sup>31</sup> his redeeming love for sinners,<sup>32</sup> his meekness,<sup>33</sup> his perfect balance of grace and truth,<sup>34</sup> and his joyful endurance in suffering,<sup>35</sup> his obedience unto death,<sup>36</sup> his fullness of the Spirit,<sup>37</sup> his victory over evil,<sup>38</sup> and much more.

Christian discipleship is being conformed to Jesus' priorities as well—his preaching of the gospel,<sup>39</sup> his making of disciples,<sup>40</sup> his defense of the oppressed,<sup>41</sup> his ministry to society's forgotten poor,<sup>42</sup> and much more.

### **The image of Christ is seen in his virtues.**

In Ephesians, Paul commands Christians to follow the example of Jesus by being “imitators of God as dear children.”<sup>43</sup> Let's think for a few moments about the virtues of Jesus Christ we must imitate (examples: love, kindness, gentleness, self-control, etc.).

- » Look up the following references and see if you can list at least eight virtues of Jesus which God wants to form in us.<sup>44</sup>

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30 Philippians 2:5-11

31 John 13:34-35

32 1 John 4:10-11

33 Matthew 11:29

34 John 1:17

35 1 Peter 2:21

36 Philippians 2:8

37 John 14:16

38 1 John 3:8-9

39 Mark 1:38; Luke 4:18

40 Mark 3:13-19

41 Matthew 21:12-14; Luke 4:18

42 Mark 3:10-11, Mark 6:36-44; Matthew 25:34-40

43 Ephesians 5:1

44 Answers are in the last footnote of this lesson (page 22)

SCRIPTURE	VIRTUES
Matthew 11:29	
Hebrews 1:9	
1 Peter 2:21-24	
Ephesians 4:32	
John 13:5	
John 13:34	
Luke 23:34	

- » Discuss these virtues as a group. Why do we tend to emphasize some Christian virtues and not others?

### What the image of Christ looks like in believers

There is a powerful portrait of the image of Christ in Colossians 3:10-17. In this passage Paul describes the image of God, which has been created in us, but which must also be put on.

- » Read Colossians 3:10-17 together and try to discover the characteristics of the new self. Write these characteristics in the space provided.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW SELF



This life of the Lord Jesus is the only life which will satisfy God's holy requirements for his children. Neither our righteousness nor our best efforts will ever satisfy God's righteous demands or merit his blessing.<sup>45</sup>

## Spiritual Formation is for the Sake of Others

Sharing in the beautiful life of Jesus Christ brings us to an ever-increasing enjoyment of God. It is not an enjoyment we arrive at alone, nor is it one we enjoy alone. "We are being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others within the body of Christ and for the sake of others outside the body of Christ."<sup>46</sup> Believers who bear the image of Jesus Christ are always seeking to bring broken people into this same joy because that's what Jesus did. True spirituality is not found in isolation from a broken world but in giving our lives to heal the broken.<sup>47</sup> This is where his glory will shine through us. This is where his fragrance will emanate from us.<sup>48</sup> This is what the life of Jesus reveals to us.<sup>49</sup>

**The outcome of spiritual formation will be a life totally governed by divine love.** Conformity to Christ is conformity to Christ-like behavior, not just his inner character. Conformity to Christ is loving God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>50</sup> There is no greater measure of spiritual formation than sacrificial love!<sup>51</sup> Jesus' relationship with his Father always led to serving those in need—the outcasts, the unloved, the sick, the hungry, the spiritually oppressed. He said that this kind of love would characterize those who inherit his kingdom too.<sup>52</sup>

Superficial spirituality leads to devotion without concern. But if worship doesn't lead us to obedience or make us more generous to those in need, then it's not true worship. If prayer doesn't make us more patient, tender, and compassionate toward others, then perhaps our prayer life is not being patterned after the prayer life of Jesus.

## SPIRITUAL FORMATION HAPPENS THROUGH BEHOLDING JESUS

The following verse is fundamental to being formed into the image of Jesus:

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45 Luke 17:10; Romans 3:12

46 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 168

47 John 17:15; 2 Corinthians 4:11

48 2 Corinthians 2:15

49 Matthew 11:19

50 Luke 10:27

51 Romans 5:8

52 Matthew 25:34-36

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>53</sup>

**To “behold” means to fix one’s spiritual eyes upon or to earnestly contemplate.** But what are we to earnestly contemplate? The “glory of the Lord.” This verse shows us that we are to earnestly contemplate the person and redeeming work of Jesus Christ,<sup>54</sup> revealed in the word of God. All our hope for change is in looking to Jesus.

**As we look unto Jesus, the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of Jesus with ever increasing glory.**<sup>55</sup>

As we look with faith to the incarnation, the same Spirit of humility begins to work in us. When we kneel by faith with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, the same Spirit of surrender and relinquishment to the will of the Father keeps removing parts of us we have not surrendered.

When we stand by faith with Jesus before the Sanhedrin, Pilate, and Herod, then the Spirit of poise, self-control, and confidence keeps changing us. When we carry the cross with Jesus and stumble under its weight, the same Spirit of patience and perseverance matures in us.

When we identify with Jesus on the cross and hear him speak words of forgiveness, mercy, and love, that same Spirit of grace becomes more developed in us. When we die daily with Jesus by faith and hear him say, “It is finished,”<sup>56</sup> the same Spirit of perseverance enables us to finish the work God has given us to do! When we rise with Jesus by faith, we know that the same victorious power that raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in heavenly places far above all principalities and powers is at work in and through us.

If our eyes are fixed on the cross, we cannot be ruled by pride, self-gratification, or worldly pleasure. If our eyes are on Jesus, we cannot hate, cannot harbor bitterness or resentment, cannot forsake sacrifice, cannot murmur or complain, cannot let sin reign, nor live in spiritual defeat.

If our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we cannot turn back, cannot despair, cannot fall, cannot be defeated, and cannot be separated from the love of God. As I look to the gospel, its power becomes increasingly powerful in me. What a treasure we have in Jesus and in the gospel!

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53 2 Corinthians 3:18

54 Compare 2 Corinthians 3:18 with 2 Corinthians 4:6, as well as John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

55 2 Corinthians 3:18

56 John 19:30

Church tradition, as good as it may be, has no power to change us. Godly men have no power to change us. When you consider a godly man or woman who has impacted their generation, you notice that they are Christ-centered, not man-centered. Martin Luther wasn't Lutheran, but a Christian. John Calvin wasn't Calvinistic, but a Christian. John Wesley wasn't Wesleyan, but a Christian. It is treasuring Christ and his gospel that makes people great!

## **We Become What We Behold**

We are often too distracted. This often limits the Holy Spirit from bringing about the changes he wants to make in our lives. Pastor John Piper says it very well:

The Spirit is not working this transformation in us without reference to Jesus. Not while we watch endless hours of empty, trifling TV; not while we dribble our hours away aimlessly exploring the world wide web; not while we set our minds on things that ignore Christ. No. The Spirit moves and works and frees in a very definite atmosphere, namely, where we are “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord Jesus” (2 Corinthians 3:18). The Spirit exalts Christ. The Spirit opens the eyes to Christ. The Spirit applies the image of Christ to our soul. If we choose not to focus on Christ, if we go our own way and preoccupy ourselves with other focuses in life, then let us not say, “Where is God?” when we bear the painful fruit of our bondage to sin and experience the law of God as a burden rather than a joy. He has told us the path of freedom. If we spend our days and evenings looking elsewhere, we will probably stay bound up in all our enslavements.<sup>57</sup>

When we push away worldly distractions, stop looking too much at ourselves, stop comparing ourselves with one another, the Holy Spirit will have a chance to work.

- » Discuss John Piper's quote: How could we get distracted from allowing the Spirit to work in our lives? How should your habits change?

## **VITAL TRUTHS WHICH MUST BE EMPHASIZED IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

### **1. Spiritual formation is both inward and outward transformation.**

As we will see in the following lessons, spiritual formation involves our physical bodies. God wants to be glorified in our body, which is the temple.<sup>58</sup> But spiritual formation begins in the heart. Spiritual formation is far more than behavior modification. Rather, we know that spiritual formation is happening when, not just our outward deeds change, but our inner disposition changes as well—when we naturally do what Christ would do in our situation.

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<sup>57</sup> Sermon by John Piper on 2 Corinthians 3:18

<sup>58</sup> Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Dallas Willard reminds us that

Spiritual formation is not behavior modification... [but rather] the process of re-shaping or redeveloping the inner [man] until it has, to a substantial degree, the character of the inner dimensions of Jesus himself—his mind, his heart, his peace, his joy. In spiritual formation you actually come to have these.<sup>59</sup>

## **2. Spiritual formation takes place by the means of grace.**

In this course, we will talk about some of the means God uses to form us into the image of Christ. These means are many and will be discussed much more in the following lessons.

- » Try to list together some of the means God has used, or is currently using, to bring about spiritual maturity in your Christian life.

Just as a tree can grow into a healthy, productive one only by means of rain, sunlight, tribulation (causes the roots to deepen), and nutrient rich soil, so we will become healthy, productive Christians by employing every means God has provided. Many believers are stunted in their spiritual growth simply because they ignored some of the vital means of that growth. For example, a Christian who is faithful in public worship but untrained in private prayer is not going to experience the fullest joys of the Christian life. We will discuss this in greater depth in a later lesson.

## **3. The motivation for spiritual formation is the enjoyment of God.**

For all eternity the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been in intimate, joyful fellowship. The purpose of creation was to form mankind in God's image and bring us into fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The earliest sound directly referred to in the Bible is "the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day."<sup>60</sup> I love that. Why was he walking in the garden? He had come to commune—to fellowship—with the man and woman he had created. The earliest expression of faith and godliness in the Bible was simply "he walked with God."<sup>61</sup>

- Enoch walked with God.
- Noah walked with God.
- Abraham walked with God.
- Israel was to walk with God.

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<sup>59</sup> From notes taken from a message Dallas Willard preached at Wheaton College.

<sup>60</sup> Genesis 3:8

<sup>61</sup> Genesis 5:22, Genesis 6:9, Genesis 17:1; 1 Samuel 2:30; 1 Kings 2:4, 1 Kings 8:25, 1 Kings 9:4; 2 Chronicles 7:17

This thought carries over into the New Testament as well.<sup>62</sup> John reminds us that the purpose of God in redemption is to bring us back into fellowship with believers, with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.<sup>63</sup>

“Walking with God.” “Fellowship with God.” What beautiful and meaningful expressions which remind us that **the life that pleases God is not one that is complicated but one of grace-filled fellowship—a life of simple relationship.**

**God’s objective and priority is to form us into the kind of people who routinely and easily obey him because he is Lord, because we treasure him, and because he is our teacher and friend.**<sup>64</sup> Any teaching which takes away this simplicity is not the teaching of the Bible: “But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.”<sup>65</sup>

Over the last several years, my father has had a lot of physical challenges, including a heart attack and two strokes. Because of these setbacks I have become the caretaker of my parents’ property—mowing, trimming, etc. Sometimes I’m in a hurry to get the work done, but Dad just wants me to sit awhile and talk with him. He’ll bring me a glass of water and say, “Son, can you sit and talk awhile?” I can’t resist, especially when I recall that I may not have this opportunity for many more years. Dad doesn’t care nearly as much about my work for him as my fellowship with him. I believe this is how God feels about us. He wants to bring us into his inexpressibly joyful communion.

“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good”<sup>66</sup> must be our motivation in every religious discipline and activity. Spiritual formation isn’t just an intellectual pursuit but an experiential one. In lessons that follow, we’ll be discussing things like prayer, fasting, meditation, service, and so on. It’s vital to keep our eyes on the goal—the enjoyment of God. Our goal isn’t simply more knowledge and information but intimate fellowship. Over 200 years ago, Jonathan Edwards said:

The difference between believing that God is gracious and tasting that God is gracious is as different as having a rational belief that honey is sweet and having the actual sense of its sweetness.<sup>67</sup>

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62 Luke 24:15; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6

63 1 John 1:3

64 Dallas Willard, “Dallas Willard | Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation.” At <https://www.youtube.com/>. Accessed January 18, 2021.

65 2 Corinthians 11:3

66 Psalm 34:8

67 As quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 108

## THE CHALLENGES OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Spiritual formation is made more challenging because we've already been formed by various influences. There are many forces that have shaped us into the people we are today. We've been shaped in profound ways by the home we were raised in. Our culture, church tradition, life experiences, and our own choices have all had an enormous influence on what we believe, what we value, how we feel, how we communicate, and how we behave.

Because we live in a broken world, my guess is that you've had both good and bad experiences with all of these formative influences. Many of us are damaged. The most important question we will attempt to answer in *Spiritual Formation* is: "Starting today, what are the most important forces, influences, and choices which will form me into the person God wants me to be?" I believe this course will help us answer this question.

- » It's very important that as we go through these lessons you become aware of the negative and positive influences that have shaped your life. Take a few minutes to list some of the most important things that have shaped your understanding of God and the Christian life. Be very honest. Share one or two of these with your group if you can.

## HINDRANCES TO GUARD AGAINST AS WE PURSUE SPIRITUAL FORMATION

There are several reasons many Christians struggle to be formed into the image of Christ. Let's look at some of them.

### 1. We must guard against legalism.

Legalism attempts to earn acceptance with God by keeping the rules. But legalistic people are also self-reliant—seeking righteousness, not by grace, but by strict devotion and discipline. Legalism relies on will power. The Bible tells us that "will-worship" is of "no value against the indulgence of the flesh."<sup>68</sup>

Remember, prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, or anything we do in spiritual formation is only effective because of the gracious work which has been, and is being, done for and in me through the gospel. The great danger in any spiritual discipline is the danger of placing confidence in those disciplines, rather than in the grace of God that is being poured into my heart and life by the Holy Spirit because of the finished work of Jesus Christ.

## 2. We must guard against cheap grace.

Spiritual carelessness (cheap grace), turns God's grace into a license to sin.<sup>69</sup> Many Christians today misunderstand the relationship between God's grace and human effort. To them, any teaching on works is legalistic. But the New Testament is filled with teaching which emphasizes effort rooted in faith.<sup>70</sup> In the Christian life, we "work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do his good pleasure." We work out, and God works in. We don't work for our salvation, but we must work it out in daily life.

Spiritual formation into the image of Christ is by grace, but it requires a lot of hard work as well. The hard work is in "holding our lives in God's environment"<sup>71</sup> where God's grace does its effective work.

## 3. We must guard against sensationalism.

There are certain churches that emphasize sensational, highly subjective, and emotional experiences with an almost complete disregard for a thoughtful, ordered, prayerful, scripture-oriented Christian life. Believers caught up in these movements are not likely to grow to maturity because they have been trained to expect only quick and easy solutions to any spiritual need. To believe in spiritual maturity through process is not to limit the power of God but simply to acknowledge the normal spiritual processes God has established.

## 4. We must guard against perfectionism.

Christians struggle with transformation when they confuse the perfection of the heart—perfect love—with absolute perfection. Jesus calls us to Christian perfection<sup>72</sup> and a decisive mortification of willful sin,<sup>73</sup> but the scriptures make it clear that conforming to the character and disposition of Jesus is a lifelong process. Godliness must be understood more as a journey than a destination.<sup>74</sup>

- » Discuss these hindrances as a group. How have you seen these in the lives of Christians? How have they been manifest in your own life?<sup>75</sup>

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69 Romans 6:1; Jude 1:4

70 Philippians 2:12-13; 2 Peter 4:3-11

71 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 105

72 Matthew 5:48

73 Colossians 3:5

74 Philippians 3:12-14

75 Virtues of Jesus from the scripture study in this lesson: Gentleness, meekness, gladness (joy), patience, kindness, tender-heartedness, humility, love, sinlessness, being forgiving, being without deceit.



## PAUSE FOR A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Perhaps we should pause for a moment of reflection. Is your spiritual life progressing? Is the life of Jesus operating in and through you in increasing measure? Are you conscious of thinking, loving, and serving more like him today than in past months?

We are being formed spiritually when the beautiful life of Jesus is operating in us in increasing measure. This formation is by the Holy Spirit—through faith, a renewed mind, and vigorous effort—resulting in fruitful Christian service.

## LESSON 1 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Memorize the definition of *spiritual formation* presented in this course.
2. Memorize 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Galatians 4:19.
3. Take a test based on the material from this lesson. The memorization assigned above is included in the test.
4. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
5. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
6. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
7. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
8. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.



## LESSON 1 TEST

1. What is the definition of *spiritual formation*, as taught in Lesson 1?
2. List four key scripture passages related to spiritual formation.
3. Finish this statement: Grace is opposite to \_\_\_\_\_, but is not opposite to \_\_\_\_\_. Explain.
4. The outcome of spiritual formation will be a life governed by what?
5. What does it mean to behold the glory of the Lord?
6. Why is spiritual formation a process?
7. What four hindrances must we guard against as we pursue spiritual formation?

## LESSON 2

# THE JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

## HOW THE IMAGE OF CHRIST IS FORMED IN US

### LESSON 1 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points of Lesson 1. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 1.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand and explain three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation.
2. Appreciate the ministry of the Holy Spirit in spiritual formation.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

While I was working on this course, a young man poured out his heart to me. He is a sincere Christian. He has a clear testimony of conversion and believes that he has fully surrendered his will to the Lordship of Christ. He studies the scriptures, has a fairly consistent devotional life, and I see clear evidence that he knows and fears God. But this young man struggles to fully overcome a particular besetting sin. “Why hasn’t this temptation gone away? I pray, I read the Bible, and yet total victory escapes me. Is there something wrong with me?” he asked. “I feel so isolated, so alone in my struggle. I think of myself as a second-class Christian!”

As we shared together over some weeks, it became clear to me that my friend was a sincere believer; but he needed to renew his mind in some areas. His thinking about God and the Christian life were not completely aligned with the Word of God. My friend also seemed to believe that if his heart were holy, then purity and obedience should be easier. Because of

some missing spiritual safeguards and some missing disciplines, my friend was not experiencing total victory.

» How would you counsel my friend? How can a true believer overcome a besetting sin?

While we know that the Holy Spirit can, and does, transform our hearts in instantaneous moments on our spiritual pilgrimage, we also know that he brings us to full maturity through processes—processes involving the renewing of the mind, spiritual discipline, and a healthy relationship with other believers.

To teach that spiritual formation is a process does not take away from those extraordinary moments of revival. Many devoted followers of Jesus have experienced divine moments beyond their new birth. These moments are often defined in various ways, such as: “the baptism of the Holy Spirit,” “entire sanctification,” “the rest of faith,” “perfect love,” “the infilling of the Holy Spirit,” and so on. Just as miracles don’t destroy the normal laws of nature, these extraordinary moments or seasons in our journey, when spiritual growth accelerates more rapidly, don’t dismiss the normal processes of maturity God has put in place.

Spiritual growth is usually patterned after physical growth. Infants don’t become adults overnight but follow a God-ordained process of maturity. The same thing is true of our spiritual growth. Both physical and spiritual children have growth spurts.

## THE BIG IDEA

Formation into the image of Jesus Christ must be built upon a solid biblical foundation. In this lesson, we will seek to establish a solid foundation upon which to build a life that pleases God and a life, both inside and out, which bears the image of God. Not having this foundation, many are spiritually weak.

## INTRODUCTION

### Spiritual Formation Is More Than Superficial Change

So much of what we call transformation is merely superficial change, like putting a small bandage over a deep, infected wound. For periods of time we might be able to act right and suppress bad attitudes and behavior; but eventually someone or something bumps against that sore spot, temptation becomes too strong, and we show who we really are.

An Asian pastor once confessed how the Lord revealed this to him through one of his fiercest persecutors. Over the years a wicked tribesman had done everything he could to hinder the work of God. He had thrown rocks into their worship services, shot bullets through the parsonage walls, and ransacked the church. In the midst of this, my pastor friend and

his congregation prayed for their tormentor and endured his persecution. “I thought I had genuine love and forgiveness,” this pastor told me, “until one day in a surprise encounter on a curvy mountain road my anger boiled over. I’m ashamed to say it, but I rammed his motorcycle with my truck and threatened him! That’s when I knew I didn’t have as much love as I thought I had. That’s when I knew that I was relying too much on my own strength, and that I had not yielded a part of my life to the Holy Spirit’s control. The Lord used this to humble me and to change me. When I humbled myself before my congregation and before my persecutor (even bought him a new motorcycle), the Lord filled my heart with real love and power.”

**God wants to do more for us than put a bandage over our wounds. He has more for us than superficial change.**

To be formed in the image of Jesus Christ is to have his character—his virtue—deeply engraved on our souls. Dennis Kinlaw reminds us, “To be formed into the image of Christ is not simply to learn how to imitate him, but to have his mind or attitude.”<sup>76</sup> God wants to so transform us that our natural response in any circumstance is his response.

When Christ’s love is fully formed in us, obedience won’t be a burden. When his righteousness is fully formed in us, doing what we know to be right won’t be a strain. When his peace and joy are formed in us, we will remain steadfast through the fiercest storms of life.

## **Lasting Change is Possible**

The good news is that change is always possible—not by simply wishing for it, but by using the process for change God has revealed to us. When we learn to think differently, adopt different practices, and learn to interact differently with people, spiritual change will come naturally.

## **THE JOURNEY OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION**

In this course we will look at our journey of spiritual transformation into the image of Christ. We will consider three aspects of the journey:<sup>77</sup>

1. **A renewed mind** – which sets our direction (Philippians 2:5; Romans 12:1-2).
2. **Spiritual training** – which sets our pace (1 Timothy 4:7; 1 Corinthians 9:27; Hebrews 12:11).

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<sup>76</sup> Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 1998), 14

<sup>77</sup> Adapted from James Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press), 24

**3. Participation in Christian community** – which edifies us on our journey (Ephesians 4:13).

- » Read these passages and try to define the following phrases: “Let this mind be in you,” “Exercise yourself,” and “till we all come... to a perfect man.” What do these phrases mean?

A renewed mind involves assurance of salvation, knowing God, knowing ourselves, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual training involves adversity, practicing the spiritual disciplines, and personal discipline. Christian community involves (at least) understanding who we are as the family of God and connecting with each other for edification, accepting one another, and accountability. All this is by the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

A SPIRITUAL FORMATION ROADMAP			
Aspect	 <p><b>A RENEWED MIND</b></p>	 <p><b>SPIRITUAL TRAINING</b></p>	 <p><b>CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY</b></p>
<b>In our Journey...</b>	Sets our direction.	Sets our pace.	Edifies us.
<b>Scripture(s)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Philippians 2:5</li> <li>• Romans 12:1-2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 Timothy 4:7</li> <li>• 1 Corinthians 9:27</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ephesians 4:13</li> </ul>
<b>What is involved</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assurance of salvation</li> <li>• Knowing God</li> <li>• Knowing ourselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Suffering/ adversity</li> <li>• The spiritual disciplines</li> <li>• Personal discipline</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding the nature of the church, and connecting with other members for edification</li> <li>• Acceptance</li> <li>• Accountability</li> </ul>
<b>Means</b>	By the Holy Spirit		

## A Renewed Mind—Which Sets Our Direction

Spiritual formation must begin with a renewed mind, “For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.”<sup>78</sup> Notice that the heart is where a man thinks. The mind and heart are one in the scriptures. This is where transformation must begin. The mind is the control center of one’s entire life. Everything we are and become flows from the control room.<sup>79</sup> Jesus said, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders.”<sup>80</sup> He also said, “He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive.”<sup>81</sup> In the first section of this course, we’ll work on conforming our thoughts about salvation, God, and ourselves to the Word of God. This renewing of our mind is vital to the image of God.

...and be **renewed** in the spirit of **your mind**.<sup>82</sup>

...and have put on the new man who is **renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him**.<sup>83</sup>

Dr. Dennis Kinlaw teaches,

The three laws of Christian discipleship are:

1. Find out who Jesus is. Learn his adequacy for every human need.
2. Find out who you are. Realize your inadequacy for serving in God’s kingdom, no matter how earnestly you try.
3. Find the Holy Spirit’s power to displace your human weakness with the fullness of Christ.

When we do these things, we begin to think differently; we have different emotions; our entire outlook is changed.<sup>84</sup>

Romans 12:2 commands, “And be not conformed to this world, but be **transformed by the renewing of your mind**.”<sup>85</sup> Everything we are and become flows from the control room.

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78 Proverbs 23:7

79 Matthew 15:19

80 Mark 7:21

81 John 7:38-39

82 Ephesians 4:23, emphasis added.

83 Colossians 3:10, emphasis added.

84 Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 1998), 68

85 Emphasis added.

**Biblical knowledge is vital to transformation.**

The Bible continually challenges us to pursue knowledge and to receive instruction. We must “grow in the grace and **knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>86</sup> This is why Paul prayed ceaselessly for the Ephesians that the “eyes of [their] **understanding** would be enlightened.”<sup>87</sup>

When I was in Bible school, our president, Dr. Robert Whitaker, spoke often to us students about developing a Christian mind. He admonished us often to “Think as a Christian!” He knew we were Christians, but he also knew that the minds of his students were still unconsciously shaped like the world in some areas.

In order for our minds to be properly formed, there are things we must learn and things we must unlearn. We must receive good information and dispel misinformation. This is almost always a process—a process of filling my mind with the truth. It is also a process of cleansing my mind of improper and destructive thoughts about God, myself, the world around me, and the Christian life. It is not easy to hear the voice of God and the voice of truth over the noise of the culture, sometimes even the church, or even the noise in my own heart. But every voice in my head and heart which is not speaking truth must be silenced.

Be careful! Deconstructing or dismantling an unhealthy understanding of God and ourselves can be a dangerous process unless it is thoroughly biblical and absolutely humble. In this process, arrogance will tempt us to form our own ideas about God. In pride, we may reject an image of God that is like something we despise, yet still not have the right image of God.

**Humility is the key to understanding.**

In our quest to think rightly about God, the people of God are our companions, the scriptures are our authority, humility must be our attitude, and the Holy Spirit will be our helper. “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.”<sup>88</sup>

Humility means that I give up control and yield to God’s revelation no matter what it may cost me. This is really the only way to spiritual transformation. There are great temptations in our spiritual journey to reject truth because of what we might lose in the process. We are afraid of offending our family, culture, or traditions. We don’t want to be labeled, rejected, or ostracized. We are tempted to comply just to please people, rather than God. Remember, the Bible says, “The fear of man brings a snare.”<sup>89</sup>

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86 2 Peter 3:18, emphasis added.

87 Ephesians 1:18, emphasis added.

88 James 4:6

89 Proverbs 29:25

## Faith is the key to experiencing truth.

Appropriating (receiving) God's Word by faith brings the Word of God to life in us. To really know something biblically will impact my whole life.

Biblical faith is more than knowledge; it is trust and commitment. At this very moment you are probably trusting a chair. That means you have learned enough about chairs in general and, perhaps, even your chair in particular, that you are willing to commit the full weight of your body to it. This is what the Bible means by faith. This is what the Gospel writers mean when they say things like: "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'your sins are forgiven you.'"<sup>90</sup> What did Jesus see when he saw faith? What did faith look like? Jesus saw that the paralyzed man's friends had enough trust in him to carry their friend to him with the expectation of healing. Jesus saw men who committed to what they knew to be true about Jesus. He saw their action and responded with forgiving, healing, transforming grace! This is the power of faith.

As we trust the Word of God, he changes us into the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. We certainly can't form ourselves into the image of Christ. Robert Mulholland Jr. states,

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**"The memorization of scripture has been a spiritual discipline that God has used greatly in my life and the lives of my friends who are also practicing it, whether in exposing and renewing my thinking on certain matters, fighting temptation, or in preparation for future challenges."**

**Maricka Herrer,  
missionary**

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Scripture is also clear in its witness to the fact that only God can liberate us from our bondage, heal our brokenness, cleanse us from our uncleanness and bring life out of our deadness. We cannot do it by ourselves. Thus, spiritual formation is the experience of being shaped by God toward wholeness.... Self-reliance is deeply ingrained within us.... God is the initiator of our growth toward wholeness, and we are to be pliable clay in God's hand.<sup>91</sup>

We are powerless to produce love, joy and peace in our own character. In order for the process of spiritual formation to happen in our lives, we must trust and commit to what God has promised and declared. This is the faith which pleases God.<sup>92</sup> Faith opens the door to the blessings and privileges of the atonement of Jesus Christ and takes hold of them. Faith

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90 Mark 2:5

91 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 16

92 Hebrews 11:6



makes everything Jesus provided for us not only accessible to us but real in us. True faith responds to the truth one has received and thereby activates the promises of God. Through trust and commitment to God's Word, the Holy Spirit begins to transform our character and to empower us to live as Christ.

But there's more.

## Spiritual Training—Which Sets Our Pace

Spiritual formation will absolutely involve spiritual training. As Paul challenges Timothy, "Exercise yourself toward godliness."<sup>93</sup> He himself said, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection; lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified."<sup>94</sup>

### Spiritual training must be added to sound doctrine.

John Wesley believed that the goal of the Christian life was love for God and man, but that the way we grow in love is through spiritual discipline. He believed that the reason Christianity had "done so little good in the world," or why it wasn't having maximum impact, was due to three things:

1. Absence of sound doctrine
  2. Lack of accountable discipline
  3. Neglect of self-denial<sup>95</sup>
- » Why are each of these—doctrine, discipline, and denial—necessary to an effective Christian life and testimony?

Wesley divided the disciplines of the Christian life into two primary sections: **works of piety** and **works of mercy**.<sup>96</sup> Here is an excerpt from one of Wesley's sermons:

"But what good works are those, the practice of which you affirm to be necessary to sanctification?" First, all works of (devotion) such as, public prayer, family prayer, and praying in our closet; receiving the supper of the Lord; searching the scriptures, by hearing, reading, meditating; and using such a measure of fasting or abstinence as our bodily health allows.

Secondly, all works of mercy, whether they relate to the bodies or souls of men; such as, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, entertaining the stranger, visiting those that are in prison, or sick, or variously afflicted; such as, the endeavoring to instruct

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93 1 Timothy 4:7

94 1 Corinthians 9:27

95 Matt Friedman, *Discipleship* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 2017), 40

96 John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *John Wesley's 52 Standard Sermons*, paragraphs 9, 10

the ignorant, to awaken the stupid sinner, to quicken the lukewarm, to confirm the wavering, to comfort the feeble-minded, to encourage the tempted, or contribute in any manner to the saving of souls from death. This is the repentance, and these the “fruits meet for repentance,” which are necessary to full sanctification. This is the way wherein God hath appointed his children to wait for complete salvation.

The Word of God is clear that we need more than a conversion experience to be formed into Christ’s image. In following lessons, we will show that apart from ongoing training, our mistaken thoughts about God and ourselves, our untrained attitudes and appetites, and our damaged emotions will defeat our best intentions to become Christ-like. In this section of this course, we’ll discuss the key role that training and spiritual discipline plays in our formation into the image of Christ. I believe you will find this a most practical section.

### **Spiritual training comes in a number of forms.**

God has many different means by which to train us. **Adversity**, or suffering, is one of God’s most powerful tools to shape us into his image. Also, the classic **spiritual disciplines**—including prayer, meditation, solitude, fasting, simplicity, sacrifice, worship, fellowship, confession, and submission; as well as **personal disciplines**—gaining control of the tongue, taking thoughts captive, controlling our appetite, managing time, and establishing personal convictions—are God’s means of shaping our character. These will be explored in later lessons.

Through spiritual training, thinking and behaving like Christ in every circumstance of life gradually becomes easier and more habitual. Through disciplined training, Christ’s image in us becomes natural and permanently etched in our character.

When my wife, Becky, and I were in Bible school, we lived in a little apartment next to an elderly Christian couple, Mr. and Mrs. Foust. What a testimony of patience and joy they were to us! Mrs. Foust was a complete invalid whose health had been declining for ten years, but her husband cared for her day after day with tenderness, affection, and radiant joy. In those days, I compared myself to men like Mr. Foust and many of my seasoned professors. Their character seemed so high and out of reach for me. Would I ever possess their quality of love, courage, and patience? What I didn’t realize was how many years, even decades, these men had practiced the Christian life. They had traveled further because they had been in training so much longer.

Spiritual discipline is vital to success in the Christian life, and without it we should not be surprised when we fail in a moment of temptation. This is why Paul admonished Timothy to “exercise yourself toward godliness.”<sup>97</sup> Peter also urges us,

Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness

brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>98</sup>

What he is saying is that the virtues of Christ will not be fastened to our character except through diligent effort.

### **Spiritual training brings freedom and delight begins.**

When, by the Holy Spirit, we've trained ourselves to be completely satisfied with God, we are truly free. When we're free from simply following the impulses of our bodies—if we've learned to submit every natural appetite to God, for a greater enjoyment of him—we are free. When we are without material things, or even suffer, but are still contented with Jesus, we are free. Paul's self-discipline had produced this kind of freedom. He writes:

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.<sup>99</sup>

Through the soul training of adversity, the disciplines, and personal discipline, our souls will be set free to be and to do what pleases God. An artist's brush strokes become free and easy through training. The athlete competes with skillful motions because of countless hours spent in physical conditioning, practice, and constant repetition. The teacher speaks with ease and confidence because of time spent in prayer and in the mastery of his topic. The musician performs as freely and beautifully as her years of practice have prepared her for. And the mature Christian manifests the life of Christ in the most challenging circumstances of life because day after day, month after month, and year after year, he trains himself toward it, by the grace of God.

### **What happens when discipline is missing?**

When discipline is missing, the artist becomes less skilled, mistakes are more common, and his art is less satisfying. The athlete becomes less agile, moves less freely, stumbles more often and under-achieves. When discipline is missing in the Christian life, we are unskilled in our Christian walk. We stumble more often. Our relationship with the Spirit is sporadic. Mistakes are more common, life less satisfying, relationships less grace-full, and our walk with God is less fruitful.

We don't hear much talk about a disciplined Christian life in this generation. Why? Because we want our spirituality easily and quickly. Some Christians want spiritual magic! We want

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98 2 Peter 1:5-8

99 Philippians 4:11-13

to wave our hands in the air and have all the spirituality we need. Like spoiled children, we have very little appetite for anything hard—anything too demanding, rigorous, or painful. We forget Jesus' call to his disciples: "If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."<sup>100</sup>

Disappointment with the Christian life is not the fault of the Christian life but our own faulty expectations. Too often we wait for God to instantly transform us into godliness! However, God is not interested in spiritual magic but in raising up conditioned spiritual soldiers, conditioned spiritual workmen, and conditioned spiritual athletes—men and women who can win the fight, complete their God-given assignments, and win the race. Later in this course, you will be instructed in both classic and personal disciplines and encouraged to implement them in your daily life, all for the sake of becoming more like Christ.

## **Participation in Christian Community— Which Edifies Us on Our Journey**

Spiritual formation must involve the Christian community (engagement in a local church fellowship). It is impossible to overestimate the key role the body of Christ—his church—plays in our spiritual formation. It is impossible to overestimate how spiritually impoverished and deformed Christians become who are not enriched and beautified by the body of Christ.

Through participation in the family of God, our character is formed. Through the life of the church, I gain the practice I need to become skillful in living the life of Jesus Christ. No man is an island; anyone who isolates himself from the nurture, fellowship, ministry, protection, and discipline of the people of God cannot fully share in joyful union with God. God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and has dwelt together in perfect harmony and fellowship for all eternity. As people made in his image, we were made for one another. We were made for relationships. We were not made to isolate ourselves from one another, but to nurture one another toward the image of Christ.

I read about a pastor who visited a farmer who hadn't attended Sunday services for several weeks. As they sat together in front of a fireplace, the man told the pastor that he didn't feel like he needed church. "I can talk to God better out in the field," he said. The pastor said nothing; but while the farmer continued to talk about how he didn't need the fellowship of other Christians, the pastor rolled a burning log out of the fire, away from the other burning logs, and let it sit alone on the hearth. Very soon the log began to cool, and then the fire went out! The farmer understood the unspoken message and came to church the next Sunday!

We will never become what God wants us to be alone. The example, spiritual fellowship, counsel, and gifts of the body of Christ are vital to healthy spiritual formation. Christian community helps to form me in at least these ways:

- Christian community provides me with a spiritual family, without which I have no place to belong, no true acceptance, no care, and no encouragement.
- Christian community provides me with biblical instruction, without which I cannot be nourished in God's Word.
- Christian community often provides the pressure I need to seek change.
- Christian community provides me with spiritual accountability.
- Christian community provides the support and strength I need to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil.
- Christian community provides me with practical opportunities to serve and to exercise my spiritual gifts.
- Through Christian community, the Great Commission is carried out.

## **The Journey of Transformation Is the Work of the Holy Spirit**

Formation into the image of Jesus Christ is only possible by the aid of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

### **1. The Spirit convicts.**

And when he has come, he will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.<sup>101</sup>

### **2. The Spirit cleanses and empowers.**

And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.<sup>102</sup>

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.<sup>103</sup>

### **3. The Spirit confirms our faith in Christ.**

Now he who keeps his commandments abides in him, and he in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.<sup>104</sup>

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101 John 16:8

102 1 Corinthians 6:11

103 Acts 1:8

104 1 John 3:24

In him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.<sup>105</sup>

#### **4. The Spirit conforms us to Christ's image.**

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.<sup>106</sup>

#### **5. The Spirit crucifies the deeds of the body.**

For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.<sup>107</sup>

I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.<sup>108</sup>

#### **6. The Spirit communicates.**

So he came by the Spirit into the temple. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law.<sup>109</sup>

#### **7. The Spirit controls.**

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.<sup>110</sup>

#### **8. The Spirit makes us aware of our adoption by God.**

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!"<sup>111</sup>

#### **9. The Spirit makes us charitable.**

We can't even love on our own but need the love "poured out" by the Holy Spirit.<sup>112</sup>

As we seek to be formed into the image of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is to us what the ocean is to the fish! To a fish, the ocean is essential for life. To a fish, the ocean is everything—his

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105 Ephesians 1:13

106 2 Corinthians 3:18

107 Romans 8:13

108 Galatians 5:16

109 Luke 2:27; see also Luke 4:1

110 Ephesians 5:18

111 Galatians 4:6

112 Romans 5:5

breath, his food, his drink, his home! The ocean is where a fish plays and hunts and spawns. If the fish were to decide that he'd rather be on the beach, he wouldn't last long.

To be in the Spirit simply means that he has been sent by Jesus to be our indwelling source of life and power and illumination and wisdom, and outside of him we are dead—just as the fish is dead who dwells outside the ocean! Without the Holy Spirit, the image of Christ will never be formed in us.

## CONCLUSION




A renewed mind, spiritual training, and Christian community: these three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation will enable us to be formed into the image of Christ.

### LESSON 2 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Study the Spiritual Formation Roadmap table thoroughly. As your test for this lesson, you will reproduce the table from memory and explain the Spiritual Formation Roadmap to the class.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 2 TEST

From memory, fill in all of the missing words in the Spiritual Formation Roadmap table, complete with scripture references. Then explain the Spiritual Formation Roadmap to the rest of the class.

A SPIRITUAL FORMATION ROADMAP			
Aspect			
In our Journey...			
Scripture(s)			
What is involved			
Means			





## LESSON 3

# THE FORMING POWER OF BIBLICAL ASSURANCE

### LESSONS 1 AND 2 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review Lesson 1 and Lesson 2 with these questions: What is the goal of every Christian? What are the three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation discussed in Lesson 2? Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 2.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why assurance of salvation is important.
2. Know the building blocks of assurance.
3. Be able to articulate the gospel clearly—the foundation of assurance.
4. Be able to answer the question: What is living faith?
5. Understand the witness of the Holy Spirit.
6. Pass the Ten Tests of Assurance.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

Have you ever been lost? I have. I'll never forget the time in the Philippines when a group of us missionaries and national pastors lost our way. We had concluded a Bible conference in a part of the Cordillera's where there were no roads and decided to hike back out in the cool of the evening. The trek should have taken us four or five hours. After mistakenly taking a wrong path, however, we wandered around in the rain forest through the night for more than eleven weary hours. About halfway through the night, at least one adult member of

our team sat down and cried! The rest of us certainly felt like it. The physical and emotional toll of being lost is beyond description.

Being lost, or even feeling lost, produces fear, insecurity, weariness, and defeat. Assurance, on the other hand, produces confidence, peace, and power. This is the effect of knowing! In the Christian life, spiritual certainty leads to enduring faith, spiritual confidence, and victorious kingdom living. Therefore, the journey of spiritual formation begins with assurance.

## THE BIG IDEA

The image of God can be renewed in us only if the living presence of Jesus dwells in us.

After many years of ministry, I have discovered that many believers struggle with assurance. When the enemy steals our assurance of salvation, he will also steal our confidence and erode our faith. To struggle with assurance does not necessarily mean that a person is not saved, but it does mean that they are much more vulnerable to the attacks of Satan and of conscience. A lack of assurance will lead to timidity and fear rather than power and love and self-discipline.

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”<sup>113</sup>

So, if we claim to be children of God, what is the basis of our claim? How do we know that we are who we claim to be? This is a vital question that you must know the answer to; for the enemy of our soul will do everything he can to accuse you,<sup>114</sup> devour you,<sup>115</sup> and to wreck your faith. Paul counsels us to test ourselves to see if we are of the faith.<sup>116</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

### **Spiritual Formation Is Only for Those Made Spiritually Alive by the Holy Spirit**

The instant true faith is present in the heart of the believer, conformity to the image of Christ begins. We are becoming holy. If we are not becoming holy, then Christ is not in us and our profession of faith is empty.<sup>117</sup>

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113 2 Timothy 1:7

114 Revelation 12:10

115 1 Peter 5:8

116 2 Corinthians 13:5

117 Ligonier Ministries, “Conforming to the Image of Christ.” (Originally published in *Tabletalk Magazine*.) Retrieved from <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/conforming-image-christ/> September 18, 2020.

However, being formed into the image of Christ is only for those who have already been made alive in Christ by the Holy Spirit. Growth cannot happen without life—Jesus’ life! Spiritual formation cannot give us a new nature. Spiritual formation into the image of Christ is only possible because we have his new nature.

When the scriptures call us to “walk just as he walked,”<sup>118</sup> or to “be imitators of God,”<sup>119</sup> or to “follow in his steps,”<sup>120</sup> they are not commanding this to spiritually dead people but to children of God who have been redeemed and made alive in Christ, and in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells.

Just as we wouldn’t think of walking into a graveyard and commanding dead corpses to become Christ-like, so we must not think that we can become Christ-like apart from new birth.

### **An example of new birth from Ephesians 4:24-25**

Spiritual new birth opens the door to spiritual formation into the image of Jesus Christ. When Paul tells the Ephesian Christians to “put on the new man,” he goes on to say, “**which was created** according to God in true righteousness and holiness.”<sup>121</sup> In other words, **because God has created you into new men and women who are righteous and holy, behave like it.** Paul follows this with, “**Therefore,** putting away lying, let each of you speak truth to his neighbor, for we are members of one another.”<sup>122</sup> The reason we can tell the truth is that we who were once dead in sins have been created spiritually by God. We already have the life of God within.

### **Another example of new birth from 2 Peter 1:3-7**

Peter reminds us that through personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we are “given all things that pertain to life and godliness,”<sup>123</sup> and have been made “partakers of the divine nature,” and “escaped the corruption of the world.”<sup>124</sup> It is this divine nature implanted in our souls which makes the following possible:

But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.<sup>125</sup>

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118 1 John 2:6

119 Ephesians 5:1

120 1 Peter 2:21

121 Emphasis added.

122 Emphasis added.

123 2 Peter 1:3

124 2 Peter 1:4

125 2 Peter 1:5-7

Virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, and godliness are all characteristics of the Lord Jesus which we may share in because we already have received the *seed* of the divine nature.

The question is, “Do you have God’s seed in your soul?” Are you born again?

### **An illustration from sports**

I enjoy the game of golf, though I am not a very skilled player. What if it were possible for the world’s number one professional golfer to enter into my body? And what if I willingly yielded control of my mind and body to his control? Would that make a difference in my game? Certainly!

Through faith in the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ has come to indwell us by the Holy Spirit,<sup>126</sup> both as individuals and as the whole body of Christ.<sup>127</sup> This indwelling means that the same power is at work in us as was at work in Christ.<sup>128</sup> This makes conformity to the image of Christ possible for every believer.

## **Spiritual Formation Involves the Cultivation of the Divine Nature within but Cannot Produce That Nature**

We don’t produce the nature of God within our own hearts, but we must produce the conditions by which his nature will grow to maturity.

We can’t produce the nature of God in ourselves, for it has been planted in us by grace through the Holy Spirit. But, we must produce the conditions and plant the seeds by which the nature of God—the life of Jesus—will grow to maturity in our character.

We can’t produce the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.<sup>129</sup> Paul said that this fruit is “the fruit of the Spirit,” not our fruit. But, we must exercise ourselves to do the walking necessary for the Holy Spirit to produce it. “Walk in the Spirit,” Paul urges us.<sup>130</sup> Walking speaks of a conscious choice, of attentiveness to the Spirit’s direction, and to a degree of effort.

The farmer has no power to produce even one kernel of corn, but everyone knows that a farmer is a very busy man. He fertilizes and cultivates the soil. He plants the seed. He pulls up the weeds which threaten to suffocate the young seedling. In short, the farmer does every-

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126 John 14:16-18

127 1 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 6:15

128 Ephesians 1:19, Ephesians 3:20

129 Galatians 5:22-23

130 Galatians 5:16

thing he can to create the conditions for an abundant harvest. Every Christian is the farmer of his own soul. If the spiritual virtues of love, patience, kindness, and self-control are not growing to maturity in our character, it is not God's nature within that is defective, but the attentiveness of the farmer. How attentive are you to the cultivation of God's seed within you?

## **Two Deadly Extremes to Avoid: Eternal Insecurity and Unqualified Eternal Security**

I would like to acknowledge two deadly extremes circulating today: (1) eternal insecurity (a Christian can never be secure) and (2) unqualified and unconditional eternal security (a Christian is secure even when his life bears no fruit). Both extremes are destructive to the gospel and to spiritual formation.

I believe there were some elements of eternal insecurity in the denomination I grew up in. The biblical emphasis on true repentance, careful obedience, heart purity, and godly behavior, when it was not carefully balanced with the biblical teaching of grace, led some to unhealthy introspection and despair. We were sometimes led to believe that any sin after salvation could cause one to lose his salvation, and little hope was offered to those struggling with the besetting sins of spiritual youth.

I remember after one particular school revival, where most of my friends and I had gotten saved again, we determined to try our best to "stay saved this time!" What we meant was that we wouldn't sneak and watch bad movies on the neighbor's television, argue with our siblings, disregard the school rules, disobey Mom and Dad, or think bad thoughts! We would do our best not to sin! We would be very, very careful, because as far as we knew salvation was a very fragile thing which could be easily lost. Though we put forth a valiant effort to be true Christians, after about two weeks we finally decided that it was just too hard and gave up! We even felt a sense of freedom now to misbehave, and we knew that there would be other revivals where we could get saved all over again. Maybe someday we'd be good enough to stay saved, we thought; but deep inside we doubted it.

When faith and assurance is in oneself and not in Christ's merit and accomplishment at the cross, the result will be insecurity. When one's faith is in his righteous works, rather than Christ's righteousness at work in him, he will falter. When good works, rather than grace, become a means of salvation rather than the fruit of salvation, the good news will become bad news. Constant self-evaluation apart from Christ-centered faith leads to defeat, then despair, and then to spiritual shipwreck. Eternal insecurity is as deceptive and destructive to faith as unqualified, unconditional eternal security.

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***Spiritual Formation  
will help us learn how  
to cultivate the soil  
of our hearts that  
the image of Christ  
may grow up in us.***

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On the opposite extreme there is unqualified eternal security, so-called “salvation” or “forgiveness” without regeneration. The Bible absolutely teaches that believers are secure, and that their security rests, not in themselves, but in Christ’s finished work. But there are multitudes today who have been taught that one can be justified or forgiven without being regenerated or made new. They are taught this even though the scriptures are abundantly clear that trust in Christ brings “newness of life”<sup>131</sup> to them that were dead. Because of this erroneous teaching, many are careless concerning righteousness, numb to conviction, and blind to their true spiritual condition.

One radio conversation between a popular Bible teacher and a caller illustrates this sad reality. The caller said something like this: “Sir, I accepted Christ when I was a child, but I drifted away from the church and for many years now I’ve been living a life of immorality. I’ve been on drugs, committed adultery many times, and even spent time in prison. Do you think I’m still saved?” To this the Bible teacher replied, “Well, if you truly accepted Christ when you were a child, then no matter how wicked you’ve become, you are indeed on your way to heaven and you can never get off that road.” That was it. No warning. No loving rebuke. Just encouragement.

After I heard this conversation serious questions came to my mind:

- How could anyone biblically justify offering assurance to a man living in willful sin?
- Do biblical authors ever offer assurance of salvation to one presently living in disobedience?
- Do the writers of the New Testament ever seek to assure one practicing sin?

Never! In fact, Jesus warns: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven.”<sup>132</sup>

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**“Flowers do not bring spring, but you cannot have spring without flowers. It is not the birds that bring the summer, but you have no summer without birds. It is not righteousness that saves me, but salvation brings righteousness.”**

**A. W. Tozer**

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131 1 John 5:12; Ephesians 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17

132 Matthew 7:21

Paul urges professing Christians to assume nothing: “Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.”<sup>133</sup>

Many professing believers do not fully understand the gospel. They believe that God has forgiven them through Jesus’ death on the cross, but they can’t explain how. A person can be saved without a full understanding of the gospel; confidence and assurance will be strengthened through knowledge. Because they lack understanding, many Christians find themselves unable to resist the accusations of the Enemy. They are sometimes overcome by doubt and despair. This is not how God intends us to live.

- » Take the Assurance Test on the next two pages and evaluate how well you understand the gospel. (You will want to make copies of it, instead of writing in your book.) Feel free to use your Bible.

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133 2 Corinthians 13:5



## ASSURANCE TEST

### HOW WELL DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE GOSPEL?<sup>134</sup>

1. Which phrase says it best? (Choose one phrase and offer biblical evidence)

- Saved by grace through faith, kept by works
- Saved by works, kept by works
- Saved by grace through faith, kept by grace through faith

» Why did you choose that answer? Explain to your group.

The Bible clearly states that all men must be saved (Acts 4:12). The following questions will help us understand why we must be saved.

2. We must be saved because we are \_\_\_\_\_ (Romans 3:10, 23; Isaiah 53:6).

3. What are three consequences of sin for the sinner?

- Sin \_\_\_\_\_ us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2)
- Sin places us under the \_\_\_\_\_ of God (Ephesians 5:5-6)
- Sin results in \_\_\_\_\_ (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1)

4. How does faith in Jesus' death and resurrection undo these consequences of sin?

- God made Jesus to be \_\_\_\_\_ for us (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).
- As our substitute, Jesus was \_\_\_\_\_ from God because of sin (Matthew 27:46).
- Jesus bore the \_\_\_\_\_ of God on our behalf (Isaiah 53:6-7).
- By faith in his resurrection, Jesus makes us spiritually and eternally \_\_\_\_\_ (Ephesians 2:6; 1 Peter 1:3).

5. What are some of the clearest signs that we have received new life by faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

- We have the witness of the \_\_\_\_\_ that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).
- We have a desire to know and \_\_\_\_\_ God's Word (John 8:31; 1 Peter 2:2-3; 1 John 2:3-4).
- We have a \_\_\_\_\_ for Jesus and for others (John 8:42, John 13:35; 1 John 3:14).

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<sup>134</sup> Answers at the back of this course (page 261).

- Though we still need to be pruned, we bear spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ (John 15:8; Galatians 5:22-23), and though some may still struggle with besetting sin (1 John 2:1; Hebrews 12:1), we overcome willful and habitual \_\_\_\_\_ (1 John 2:29). John Wesley put it like this: “Sin remains, but it does not reign.”

6. Why did Jesus have to shed his blood? (Hebrews 9:22; 1 Peter 1:18-19)

Because by God’s decree sin cannot be \_\_\_\_\_ without the shedding of sinless \_\_\_\_\_.

7. Why is it significant that Jesus became a man? (1 Timothy 2:5)

As both man and God, Jesus became the \_\_\_\_\_ between God and man. He represented both a holy God and sinful men. He became the second Adam who did not fall through sin, and therefore qualifies as the perfect sacrifice in our place.

8. What role do works play in our salvation? (James 2:17; Titus 3:8; Ephesians 2:10)

Good works are the \_\_\_\_\_ of the new birth.

9. What must you do to be saved?

- \_\_\_\_\_ that you are a sinner and \_\_\_\_\_ (Romans 6:23; Acts 3:19)
- \_\_\_\_\_ the gospel (Acts 16:31; Ephesians 2:8)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9)

10. We are not only saved by faith in the finished work of Christ but kept by \_\_\_\_\_ as well (1 Peter 1:5).

## THREE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ASSURANCE

There are three building blocks of assurance we want to discuss now: **Faith in the finished work of Christ**, affirmed by **the faithful witness of the Holy Spirit**, and **the fruitful walk of the Christian**.

In the following pages, we'll examine these more closely.

### We Find Assurance through Faith in the Finished Work of Jesus Christ Alone

The solid foundation of saving faith is not rooted in the changeableness of our emotions, the fallibility of our experiences, or the inconsistency of our spiritual performance but on God's unchangeable and eternal work of redemption.

Feelings and experiences are wonderful in the Christian life, but they are also inconsistent, diverse, and unreliable. Even false religions can provide spiritual experiences, for "the angel of light"<sup>135</sup> is a master counterfeiter.

Righteousness is the result of salvation, but even the greatest saints have experienced moments of failure. Our salvation is based on something much more reliable than ourselves, our emotions, and our experiences: the truth of the gospel.

We are told that when a pilot flies through clouds, he must not trust his senses, but his instruments. In the same way, when believers pass through spiritual storms, we must not trust ourselves, but the Word of God.

My father told me of a hunter who became disoriented in the forest; though he had a compass, he would not trust it. Sadly, after several days of searching, authorities found him dead. The Word of God is the compass of salvation we must trust.

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**"It is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure; that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of assurance."**

### Westminster Confession of Faith

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135 2 Corinthians 11:14

## What is Christ's finished work?

What do we mean by the finished work of Jesus Christ? It means I must be saved through his name alone,<sup>136</sup> that Jesus died as my substitute, paying the penalty of my sin which was death.<sup>137</sup>

- Jesus became my substitute man. Since man sinned, man had to pay the price. Jesus became man (the God-man) to take man's place in judgment and to reconcile man to God.<sup>138</sup>
- Jesus shed his sinless blood as the atonement for sin.<sup>139</sup>
- Jesus bore our sin in his own body, becoming the perfect sin sacrifice.<sup>140</sup>
- Jesus became separated from his Father and bore the wrath our sins deserved, so that we would not have to be eternally separated from God.<sup>141</sup>
- By faith in Jesus' death for sin, our old life of sin passed away with him.<sup>142</sup>
- By the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, we, too, have been raised to newness of life.<sup>143</sup>
- By his resurrection, Jesus conquered sin, death, and every evil power; and by faith, this same resurrection power is at work in us.<sup>144</sup>
- By the resurrection, the Holy Spirit imparts new life to those who were dead in trespasses and sins.<sup>145</sup>
- Christ in us is "the hope of glory."<sup>146</sup>
- Salvation means that we have become a partaker of the divine nature<sup>147</sup> and that our life is now hidden with Christ in God.<sup>148</sup>

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136 Acts 4:12

137 2 Corinthians 5:21

138 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:19

139 Hebrews 9:22

140 1 Peter 2:24; Isaiah 53:5-6

141 Galatians 3:13; Matthew 27:46

142 Romans 6:6

143 Romans 6:4

144 Ephesians 1:19-21

145 Ephesians 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17

146 Colossians 1:27

147 2 Peter 1:4

148 Colossians 3:3

Those who believe the gospel are saved by faith alone in this message, not by their efforts to please God.<sup>149</sup> The faith that saves us is the same faith which preserves to the end.<sup>150</sup>

We must come to the place in our Christian life where all our confidence for all eternity rests in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross alone. Good works are the fruit of salvation but never the source, just as a husband's acts of kindness toward his wife are never the basis of their marriage covenant but the fruit of it. In our Christian lives, as in our human relationships, our love is imperfect, our performance often flawed, and our experiences sometimes disappointing.

I'll never forget the story one of my professors in Bible college told about two of his students. This lovely couple fell in love, eventually were engaged, and a date was set for the wedding. The wedding came, the ceremony was beautiful, and their vows were repeated with sincerity and emotion. A few hours later, this newly married couple became terribly sick with food poisoning (as I recall the story) and spent their honeymoon in the hospital!

"Was the couple any less married because of how they felt in the days after their wedding?" my professor asked our class. Of course, we knew the answer. Marriage, like salvation, is based on an unchangeable promise, or covenant, and not on unreliable emotions and experiences.

### The nature of faith

If salvation is by faith, it's vital to understand the nature of this faith. The Word of God clearly teaches that faith which saves is a living faith. Faith is trusting Christ now! Living faith trusts Christ's work of redemption today. Living faith permitted God to save in the past and to keep on saving us in the present. Living faith will show evidence. Dead faith is faith without works—the faith that even demons have.<sup>151</sup> We see living faith in the following verses:

Let us draw near with a **true heart in full assurance of faith**, having our **hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience** and our **bodies washed** with pure water.<sup>152</sup>

Who are **kept** by the power of God **through faith** for salvation ready to be revealed at the last time.<sup>153</sup>

From these passages, and many others, we learn the following about living faith:

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149 Ephesians 2:8-9

150 1 Peter 1:5

151 James 2:14-20

152 Hebrews 10:22, emphasis added.

153 1 Peter 1:5, emphasis added.

### 1. Living faith is sincere—it comes from “a true heart.”

A sincere believer enjoys a clear conscience. He is not a sinless believer, but one who has been “sprinkled from an evil conscience.”<sup>154</sup>

A sincere believer is a humble believer. He is no longer hiding or covering sin. If the Word of God convicts him of missing the mark spiritually, he confesses it and refuses to live in hypocrisy.<sup>155</sup> A sincere believer receives the painful discipline of God as from a loving Father.<sup>156</sup> This pain is also a sign of true life.

A sincere believer practices obedience.<sup>157</sup> A professing believer who habitually disobeys God is called a liar.<sup>158</sup>

### 2. Living faith produces assurance—“full assurance of faith.”

Assurance begins with knowledge of the gospel<sup>159</sup> which is the basis of assurance. Understanding and assurance is a strong defense against doubt, fear, temptation, and the accusing lies of the devil.<sup>160</sup>

### 3. Living faith is faith which is preserved by the power of God—“kept by the power of God through faith.”

This word *kept* means to defend as in a castle or fortress. God’s divine power through faith defends, preserves, and will ultimately lead us to heaven. Believers with living faith look to Jesus as the “author and finisher” of that faith.<sup>161</sup> He is the One who started a good work of salvation in them and will bring it to completion.<sup>162</sup>

Let’s be very, very clear: all grace for this spiritual journey comes from God. He is “able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.”<sup>163</sup> God only needs a channel of genuine faith to pour his grace through. Through God’s power, appropriated by faith, we receive the grace which preserves our souls unto eternal life.

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154 See also Acts 23:1, Acts 24:16; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19

155 Matthew 6:12

156 Hebrews 12:5-11

157 John 8:31, John 15:10

158 1 John 2:3-4

159 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Colossians 2:2

160 Ephesians 6:17

161 Hebrews 12:2

162 Philippians 1:6

163 Jude 1:24

#### 4. **Living faith is faith which perseveres. If keeping depends upon faith, then faith is always present tense.**

Jesus and every New Testament writer plainly taught that true faith is faith which perseveres:

**If ye continue in the faith**, grounded and steadfast, and are **not moved away** from the hope of the gospel.<sup>164</sup>

The just shall live by faith; but **if any man draw back**, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.<sup>165</sup>

**Holding faith**, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck.<sup>166</sup>

Biblical faith is a present tense faith which clings to Christ as its only hope of salvation. Especially in those moments when we fail, we must plead the cross, even as we repent. If moving away, drawing back, or letting go of faith in the gospel were not a frightening possibility, why would the New Testament writers warn us so strongly? We must examine our faith.

#### **The result of saving faith**

Living faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ brings us into union with him. When we are saved we are spiritually united with Christ and become part of his body, or church. The moment we are saved, a number of wonderful things happen.

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**“For it requires the same merit and power of Christ’s blood to keep us clean as it did to make us clean.”**

**Adam Clarke**

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» Have the students read the verses corresponding to these points. Which one of these truths is most precious to you right now?

1. **We are justified.** Through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus, God the Father now freely declares us righteous—just as if we’d never sinned.<sup>167</sup> The Bible also teaches that at the moment of saving faith God “imputes righteousness apart from works.”<sup>168</sup>

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164 Colossians 1:23, emphasis added.

165 Hebrews 10:38, emphasis added.

166 1 Timothy 1:19, emphasis added.

167 Romans 3:24, Romans 5:9

168 Romans 4:6

2. **We are made alive.** Through Christ's death and resurrection, we are made spiritually alive, or born again.<sup>169</sup> Through the cleansing of Christ's blood<sup>170</sup> and the renewing of the Holy Spirit,<sup>171</sup> the guilt and stains of our sin are washed away.
3. **We are sanctified.** God now calls us holy! In other words, he sets us apart unto himself. We now belong to him alone.<sup>172</sup>
4. **We are reconciled to God.** Through the sacrifice of himself, Jesus brought a holy God and sinful man back together. Now we are no longer enemies of God, but friends.<sup>173</sup>
5. **We are adopted into God's family.** God has made us his own sons and daughters with all the rights and privileges of this Father-child relationship.<sup>174</sup> Through faith in the finished work of Christ, we become heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.
6. **We are promised an inheritance.** This inheritance will not fade away and is reserved in heaven for us.<sup>175</sup>

We aren't aware of all this grace the moment we are saved; but as we grow in our understanding, these truths will become more and more precious to us, and we will become more and more faithful to this new identity when we focus on it.

### **Living faith then yields assurance.**

A certain man once wrote to John Wesley claiming that believing one could lose salvation could lead believers into despair. This man exclaimed to Wesley, "If [this be] so, then farewell all my comfort." To this the passionate heart of Wesley responded:

My comfort stands, not on any opinion, either that a believer can or cannot fall away, not on the remembrance of anything wrought in me yesterday; but on what is today, on my present knowledge of God in Christ, reconciling me to himself; on my now beholding the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; walking in the light as he is in the light, and having fellowship with the Father and with the Son. My comfort is that through grace I can believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Spirit doth bear witness with my Spirit that I am a child of God. I like comfort in this and in this only, that I see Jesus at the right hand of God, that I personally for myself, and not another, have a hope full of immortality, that I feel the love of God shed

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169 Ephesians 2:5; John 3:3

170 1 John 1:9

171 John 3:1-8; Titus 3:5-6

172 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

173 Colossians 1:21-22; Romans 5:10

174 John 1:12-13

175 1 Peter 1:4, 1 Peter 5:4



abroad in my heart, sin being crucified to me. My rejoicing is this, the testimony of my conscience, that in simplicity and sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God I [live my life] in this world. Go and find, if you can, a more solid joy; a more blissful comfort this side of heaven. If you take up with any other comfort short of this, you lean on the staff of a broken reed, which will not only not bear your weight, but enter your hand and pierce you.

What Wesley is saying is that true saving faith is not past, but present. It is alive. Biblical faith is a daily looking to Jesus and a daily experience of his grace. Do you have this faith?

## **We Find Assurance through the Faithful Witness of the Holy Spirit**

The second building block of biblical assurance is the witness of the Holy Spirit.

For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.<sup>176</sup>

Biblical assurance comes through the witness of the Holy Spirit that we are now sons and daughters of God. This is the internal confidence and spiritual consciousness that we have been forgiven and born of God.

The biblical concept of redemption and adoption is a wonderful truth. Slavery was a sad reality in New Testament times. But we are told that through the payment of a determined price, slaves could be redeemed and become free men. After purchasing the freedom of a slave, the redeemer could then adopt him or her as his very own child and heir of all he possessed. Adoption completed the redemption process.

The Bible says that when we were still unconverted we were slaves. Our master was sin. By shedding his own blood, Christ paid the price of our redemption from sin, breaking its power to enslave us, and has adopted us as his very own sons and daughters. By faith we are now “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”<sup>177</sup> The confirmation of this spiritual transaction is what the Bible calls the witness, or testimony, of the Holy Spirit. It is an inner awareness that we are now a beloved child of God.<sup>178</sup> God is no longer an enemy or stranger, but One whom we know increasingly as “Abba Father!”—one with whom we relate at a most intimate level.<sup>179</sup>

An intimate relationship with God is one of the most important building blocks of spiritual formation. Are you enjoying this testimony of the Holy Spirit? Have you ever realized how

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176 Romans 8:15-16; 1 John 4:13

177 Romans 8:17

178 1 John 4:13

179 Galatians 4:6

much God wants you near him? Do you understand the price God was willing to pay so that you and I could be close to him? Do you know how much God wants to bless you and to lavish his grace on you?

## **We Find Assurance through the Evidence of a Fruitful Christian Walk**

The third component of biblical assurance is a fruitful walk with God. Though we are saved by grace through faith alone and kept by grace through faith alone, yet saving faith is never alone. Every true believer will be able to identify clear evidence in their character and life. True believers will show their faith by their works:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus **for good works**, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.<sup>180</sup>

But do you not know, O foolish man, that **faith without works is dead**?<sup>181</sup>

Jesus taught that a fruitful Christian life is the evidence of true discipleship.<sup>182</sup> If one's life is not characterized by fruitfulness it is a sign of spiritual death.

## **THE FRUIT OF SAVING FAITH: TEN PRACTICAL TESTS OF ASSURANCE**

The following are ten tests<sup>183</sup> by which we may examine ourselves to see whether or not our faith is truly alive and bearing fruit.<sup>184</sup> While the finished work of Christ is the root of salvation, these ten questions help us examine the fruit of salvation:

### **1. What do I do in secret?**

Saved people experience a radically changed secret life. Salvation changes what you look at on the internet and what you do when no one is looking. If your secret life hasn't radically changed, you may not be a changed person. In the saved man or woman rises a longing for a pure heart!<sup>185</sup>

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180 Ephesians 2:10, emphasis added.

181 James 2:20, emphasis added.

182 John 15:8

183 Adapted from a message by Pastor Tim Conway, "Am I Saved? 10 Tests of Assurance - Tim Conway." Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/> September 18, 2020.

184 2 Corinthians 13:5

185 Psalm 139:23-24

## 2. Is there real repentance?

Salvation produces a humble, repentant heart—not just at the moment of conversion, but whenever God convicts you of missing the mark spiritually. Peter, already a disciple for over three years, wept tears of grief after denying the Lord.<sup>186</sup> When Paul rebuked the Corinthians for wrongdoing, godly sorrow led them to repentance—a zealous turning from sin and a running to God!<sup>187</sup>

## 3. Do I have a love for Jesus?

Salvation produces a strong affection for Jesus. Jesus said that if God is your Father you will love him.<sup>188</sup> No one has to wonder if they're in love with someone, especially God. Love is that which thrills the soul. It's that which we think about when we wake up in the morning and go to bed at night. It's that which drives us. It's that which makes us willing to sacrifice. It's that which we live for.

## 4. Do I love people?

The apostle John writes that the person who does not love people in very practical ways (like sharing our possessions) and with cross-like love is not of God.<sup>189</sup>

## 5. Am I obedient to God's Word?

Obedience to the Word of God is one of the clearest signs of new birth. Jesus said that we are true disciples when we obey his Word.<sup>190</sup> And he said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father in heaven."<sup>191</sup> Does God's Word have authority on your life? Or, is it easy for you to ignore it?

## 6. Where is my mind?

Salvation produces a change in one's thought life. In Romans, Paul says that those who live according to the sinful flesh (non-Christians) set their minds on the things of the sinful flesh. This is death! But those who live according to the Holy Spirit (true Christians) set their minds on the things of the Spirit. This is life and peace.<sup>192</sup> Do you find yourself thinking more and more of God, of scripture, and of heavenly things? A Spirit-filled thought life is a discipline, but it is also a result of a new nature.

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186 Luke 22:62

187 1 Corinthians 7:9-11

188 John 8:42

189 1 John 3:10, 16-19

190 John 8:31

191 Matthew 7:21

192 Romans 8:5-6

## 7. Are my idols being eradicated?

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God promised to sprinkle clean water on sinners, cleanse them from all their filthiness and idols, give them a new heart and a new spirit, replace their heart of stone with a tender heart, and put his Spirit within them so that they will keep his Word.<sup>193</sup> Has he done this in your life? Is he still doing this in your life? God is jealous for your love and affection; and if you are his child, he is eradicating everything which competes for that love.

## 8. Am I a new creation?

Do others see changes in me? Becoming a Christian is passing from spiritual death to spiritual life. No one rises from the dead without it becoming known! You are not raised from the dead unless other people have noticed the change God's grace has wrought in you.

## 9. Do I trust Christ?

A heart which radically trusts Christ is strong evidence of salvation. True believers trust Christ not only for eternal salvation but for everyday life, like food and clothing.<sup>194</sup> Do you find yourself willing to get out of the safe zone and walk to Jesus on the water, even when others misunderstand and misrepresent you? Do you trust him? Decisions you make show whom you trust—money, the arm of flesh, or Christ.<sup>195</sup> If you are a believer, then you are making decisions regarding your finances, your family, your health, your job and many other things which non-believers regard as foolish.<sup>196</sup>

## 10. Do I see people in a new way?

True believers will see people differently. Paul said that from now on we no longer see people according to the flesh—according to their social or economic standing—but according to their spiritual standing—as people whom God loves and for whom Christ died and rose again.<sup>197</sup> Just as we no longer regard Christ as just an ordinary human being, so we now see

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**“Even as an oak sapling is an oak, so a baby Christian is a Christian. But just as it would be ridiculous to call a bramble bush an oak tree, so it is ridiculous to call a man a Christian who has none of the characteristics of a Christian.”**

**Unknown**

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<sup>193</sup> Ezekiel 36:25-27

<sup>194</sup> Matthew 6:25

<sup>195</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17

<sup>196</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:27

<sup>197</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

our fellow believers for who they are—new creations reconciled to God. Do you see men differently than you once did?

## PAUSE FOR A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

Here are some spiritual formation questions to consider:

- Are you trusting right now in the finished work of Christ? Is your hope built on his sacrifice alone?
- Do you need to repent of trusting in your own efforts and righteousness to make yourself acceptable to God? Your own performance?
- Have you allowed your unreliable emotions or an awareness of failure to steal your confidence in the gospel?
- Do you enjoy the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit that you are a child of God?
- Are you learning more and more about the privileges and responsibilities of your relationship with God?
- Do you see the fruit of saving faith in your life? If you were charged in a court of law of being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Perhaps right now would be a good time for you to bow before the Lord. If you lack faith, believe and receive the gospel. Ask the Lord to help you trust Christ completely. If you've become aware of unbelief and sin, repent and ask the Lord for grace and mercy. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.<sup>198</sup>

### LESSON 3 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Review the Assurance Test this week and give the test to at least three professing Christians before next class meeting. Be prepared to talk about the results of the tests during next week's class.
2. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
3. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
4. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
5. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
6. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
7. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 3 TEST

1. Retake the assurance test.
2. What are the three building blocks of assurance discussed in this lesson?
3. What are six results of saving faith?
4. Name some of the fruits of true salvation.

## LESSON 4

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH KNOWING GOD

### LESSON 3 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Discuss the main points of Lesson 3. Ask students who are willing to share their written personal prayers from Lesson 3. Also review the three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation discussed in Lesson 2.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Know where to look to discover who God is.
2. Understand three important ways God reveals himself.
3. Understand how important knowing God is to spiritual formation.
4. Be able to articulate some of the key attributes of God.
5. Understand how Jesus perfectly reveals the nature of God.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

Ever since man's sin in the Garden, he has been tempted to believe the worst about God. But we will never be compelled to love or imitate a God we do not trust. Some sincere believers find it difficult to pursue Christlikeness because they do not see in Jesus the beauties that others see.



## **Victims of Calamity**

When natural disasters, acts of terror, or widespread disease strike a nation, some spiritual leaders claim that these are the outpourings of God's wrath and judgment. Many Christians struggle with this view of God, especially since many believers suffer along with unbelievers.

## **Bible School Students**

Several Bible school students met weekly with their college president for small group discipleship. During one of these evenings, their president and mentor asked the students this question: "If Jesus were to walk through the door right now and look directly at you, what, do you believe, would be the expression on his face?" The students were surprised by the question, but it caused them to think. A couple of them believed Jesus would look at them with disappointment. His expression would say, "You can do better." At least one student believed Jesus would look angry. One young woman started to cry and became so emotional she couldn't answer. Only one student believed that if Jesus walked through the door he would be smiling!

## **A Young Wife and Mother**

Trying to teach and mentor Trisha, a new Christian, toward an established and fulfilling Christian life was not going to be easy. She had grown up in an abusive, broken home and with very few positive role models. In her late teens, she had come in contact with a group of professing Christians who made her feel like family but who also brain-washed her in an extremely distorted, graceless form of Christianity.

Under this influence Trisha never felt that she could measure up. Rather than experiencing the joy of salvation, she constantly fought doubt, despair, and shame. She became very spiritually confused. She did not know how to separate the essential doctrines of the Bible from the non-essential doctrines of her church. When she couldn't take the pressure anymore, Trisha broke from that church and began attending the church I was pastoring. In a very tired and despondent voice one Sunday, she stood and testified, concluding her testimony with this very sad but revealing statement: "I'm just trying my best to stay saved!" To Trisha God is very demanding; serving him is a burden, and he is impossible to please.

When I tried to instruct Trisha in the truth of the gospel and in the doctrine of God's grace, she seemed to view me with suspicion. I think she wondered if I was one of the worldly pastors her first church family had warned her about. Perhaps I was offering her a cheap version of the Christian life. Maybe being a Christian was meant to be really hard, and I was just trying to make it easy!

## **A Believer in Pain**

A very poor farmer's wife I met in a small village in Asia was suddenly afflicted with mysterious sores all over her body. She suffered unspeakable pain for weeks. None of the remedies prescribed by her doctor were effective. One day, a prosperity evangelist held a crusade near her village, and her family took her to meet him. He proclaimed that since sickness and suffering are a result of sin, it is always God's will to heal physically. He preached physical healing as a blessing every believer could claim, even demand, as their rightful inheritance! He preached that those who had enough faith, and would give an offering, would receive immediate healing. Out of desperation, this poor woman gave all she could and believed sincerely for healing and prayed fervently. She wasn't healed. Why? She didn't know. Maybe she wasn't worthy in God's sight. Her faith was wounded. She felt abandoned by God.

## **An Elderly Christian**

I know an elderly Christian who is tortured by thoughts about God. She believes that the bad things which happen to her are a result of God's punishment for failure to obey all his inner promptings. Once she felt like God told her to attend a certain revival; but because she and her husband were not feeling well, they chose not to go. When she fell and broke her arm a few days later, she was sure it was God's punishment for "disobedience." This precious lady lives with tremendous anxiety.

## **A Farmer in Asia**

I was recently told of a Christian farmer in the Philippines who confessed his anger and confusion to his church family. "I don't understand it!" he exclaimed. "Why is it that my onion crop is sickly and meager, while my non-Christian neighbor's is healthy and bountiful? God seems unfair! Since I am a Christian, shouldn't God be prospering my onions more than my neighbor's onions?"

## **A Group of Teenagers in Mexico**

A group of teenagers in Mexico are forbidden from playing sports on church property. "This is sacred ground!" they are lectured from time to time, "and if you must play sports, you'll have to do it away from God's house!" The leaders of this congregation, as well as the teens, are confused about spirituality. Many of the teens who have grown up in this local church are turning away from God.

- » What do the individuals in these stories seem to believe about God? How is their view of God shaping their lives?

## IT MATTERS WHAT WE BELIEVE ABOUT GOD

Without doubt, the single greatest influence in our spiritual formation is our view of God. Your view of God is greatly impacting your life right now. It is impacting your view of yourself. It is impacting your relationships with others. It is impacting your relationship with God. Read carefully these words from A.W. Tozer:

Nothing twists and deforms the soul more than a low or unworthy conception of God. Certain sects, such as Pharisees, while they held that God was stern and austere, managed to maintain a fairly high level of external morality; but their righteousness was only outward.... The God of the Pharisee was not an easy God to live with, so his religion became grim and hard and loveless....

How good it would be if we could learn that God is easy to live with. He remembers our frame and knows that we are dust. He may sometimes chasten us, it is true, but even this he does with a smile—the proud, tender smile of a Father who is bursting with pleasure over an imperfect but promising son who is coming every day to look more and more like the One whose child he is.<sup>199</sup>

What we believe about God matters.

- Job's friends thought God always prospers the righteous and punishes the guilty, so they judged and condemned their suffering friend as wicked.<sup>200</sup>
- King Saul thought God would be more impressed with sacrifices than obedience, so he lost his kingdom.<sup>201</sup>
- King David thought God's laws were only suggestions, so he became angry with God for killing Uzza.<sup>202</sup>
- The Pharisees thought holiness before God could be obtained by doing *more*, so they became *more* conservative and *more* sacrificial, but also *more* spiritually proud and abusive.<sup>203</sup>
- Average people in Jesus' day believed that calamity and sickness were always God's curse for personal or family sin, so they blamed birth defects and falling towers on the victims.<sup>204</sup>

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199 A.W. Tozer, "God is the Most Winsome of All Beings" in *Renewed Day by Day (Volume 1)*. Retrieved from <https://dailytozer.wordpress.com/2012/09/01/god-is-the-most-winsome-of-all-beings> September 12, 2020.

200 Job 22:4-5 and Job 36:11-12

201 1 Samuel 15:15, 22-23

202 1 Chronicles 13:7-11

203 Matthew 23

204 John 9:3; Luke 13:2, 5

- Even the disciples believed that Jesus was sectarian, so they condemned godly workers who were not part of their team.<sup>205</sup>

It really does matter what we believe about God!

## THE BIG IDEA

The question we want to help answer in this lesson is: How do we begin developing a healthy view of God? How do we develop ears to hear God more distinctly and eyes that see him more clearly?

God is eternally the same, but our vision has been impaired by clouds: clouds of tradition, clouds of misconception, clouds of sin, clouds of pride, and sometimes clouds of spiritual abuse. We have developed our image of God through information we pick up from our families, our church, and our surrounding culture. Not all that we learn is wrong, of course, but some of it is. So, in every life, the image of God is obscured in some way. The enemy of our souls has seen to it. Spiritual formation can help remove everything which hides the true face of God.

When I was a boy, my family lived in the beautiful state of Washington for a period of time. One of my favorite memories of those days happened as we visited Mt. Rainier, a majestic 4,392 meter mountain, the peak of which, on a clear day, could be seen for probably a hundred miles!

One day as my father drove our family through the foothills at Mount Rainier's base, we were disappointed that we hadn't been able to see the peak all day because it was obscured by clouds. I remember looking wistfully out the window in the back seat of our brown station wagon just hoping for a glimpse of it when, all of a sudden, the clouds parted, and there it was! It was unspeakably glorious! To this day I cannot find the words to describe the awesome sight of that mountain peak suspended in the blue sky two kilometers above us.

It is a wonderful day in a believer's life when the clouds disappear and he catches sight of God—God revealed most perfectly and beautifully in Jesus!

In this lesson, we will learn that a clearer, healthier view of God will be formed in a number of ways:

1. **By meditating on God's revelation of himself**, especially in his creative acts and in the scriptures. The effort to empty our minds of wrong images of God is futile unless we are constantly filling our minds with truth. It is the fresh winds of truth that push the clouds away.

2. **By looking at Jesus**, who is God's full revelation of himself to man. We will train ourselves to see God in the person, teaching, and redemptive work of Jesus. We will learn that seeing God in the face of Jesus is vital to a well-formed view of God.
3. **By experiencing God personally**. We will learn that God most often reveals more and more of his beauty as we walk with him. All through history God has chosen to reveal the truth about himself in the context of relationship.

Then, we will learn to daily take captive every thought and make it obedient to the truth he has revealed about himself.

## GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF

There are many ways in which God reveals himself to man. He reveals himself every day in the beauties and wonders of the world he has both created and sustains. The heavens declare his glory and the work of his hands.<sup>206</sup> Earth's fascinating variety of creatures, its majestic mountains and flowing springs, its teeming oceans and abundant vegetation, its intricate design and fascinating mysteries all say something about his wisdom,<sup>207</sup> his power, and his divine nature.<sup>208</sup> Jesus' own mind was intrigued by the world he had made, and he constantly referred to it in his teaching.<sup>209</sup> But in this lesson we will focus primarily on God's more perfect revelation.

### God Reveals Himself in the Scriptures by His Attributes

It's important for us to study the ways God has chosen to describe himself. Take the following passage as an example:

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness."<sup>210</sup>

This passage is one of the best places in all of scripture to catch a glimpse of the glorious attributes of God. In this passage, Moses, God's friend,<sup>211</sup> asked to see God's glory! It is a bold request. God responded,

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206 Psalm 19:1

207 Psalm 104:24. This whole chapter is a beautiful depiction of God as both creator and sustainer of his world.

208 Romans 1:20

209 Matthew 6:26-29 as an example

210 Exodus 34:6

211 Exodus 33:11

I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim the name of the LORD to you.... So it shall be, while my glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with my hand while I pass by.<sup>212</sup>

Though Moses was only given a glimpse of God's back, and not his full glory—his face—that day,<sup>213</sup> yet the revelation of God was so holy and beautiful and compelling that it caused Moses to “bow his head toward the earth and worship.” Rather than cause Moses to run away, this vision of God caused Moses to plead for God to go with his people, to “pardon our iniquity and sin,” and to “take us as your inheritance.”<sup>214</sup> Moses wanted to belong to *this* God!

- » As you reflect prayerfully on the following attributes of God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, ask yourself the question: Is the God Moses saw the God I know in my mind and heart?

### 1. LORD – *Yahweh*

Moses learned that God is “LORD, the LORD God.” When LORD is written in capitals, it indicates the personal name for the God of Israel—*Yahweh*. *Yahweh* is the God who loves, provides for, defends, and disciplines his inheritance.

### 2. Compassionate or Merciful

*Yahweh* is a compassionate God, meaning that he genuinely cares about humans and holds toward them a tender attitude of concern and mercy.

### 3. Gracious

*Yahweh* called himself “gracious,” meaning that he does things for people they do not deserve and goes beyond what might be expected to grant truly kind favor toward people.

### 4. Slow to anger

*Yahweh* described himself as “slow to anger,” meaning that he has patience with people's less-than-satisfactory behavior and failures, including their moral failures. *Yahweh* is the God of the second chance!

### 5. Love

*Yahweh* declared himself to be great in love. The Hebrew word *hesed* is used 175 times in the Bible in reference to God. It speaks of his undeserved, unshakable love and kindness. It is a word which speaks of the compassionate, undying, loving devotion of one member

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212 Exodus 33:19, 22

213 Exodus 33:23

214 Exodus 34:9

of a covenant relationship to another. However unreliable humans may be in their relationship to God, he can be counted on in every situation and at all times to be completely faithful to his promises!

## 6. Truth

*Yahweh* described himself as “abounding in truth,” meaning that whatever he says is correct, reliable, and may be trusted even to the extent of life and death issues, or indeed eternal life and death issues.<sup>215</sup>

- » Take some time to meditate on these attributes of God and ask yourself if this looks like the God you have in your mind. Does God seem as wonderful to you as he did to Moses?

## JESUS, GOD’S FULL REVELATION OF HIMSELF

### Jesus is the Glory of God

- » Read John 1:14-18 thoughtfully.

In this text, John is telling us that the glory of God Moses could not see, and was not permitted to see, we have seen in the revelation of Jesus:

And the Word [who “was with God” and who “was God”<sup>216</sup>] became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory.... And of his fullness we have all received.... No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.<sup>217</sup>

In these verses, John is teaching the astounding truth that Jesus is the full revelation of the glory of God and that Jesus, the one who was in the “bosom of the Father,” or the one who is united with and who knows the Father intimately, has come to our world to make him known to us; not just that we might know about him, but that we might know him intimately.

The name *Father* is more perfectly revealed in the gospels. The New Testament reveals that through faith in Christ, God becomes our Father—a name for God used only 15 times in the Old Testament, but 245 times in the New! As a name of God, it stresses God’s loving care,

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215 D. K. Stuart, *Exodus* (Volume 2), (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 715–716

216 John 1:1

217 John 1:1, 14, 16, 18



provision, discipline, and the way we are to address God in prayer. Through Jesus, we are brought into fellowship with Father God!<sup>218</sup>

In Jesus, God gave more than his names and attributes. He gave us himself! He gave us one we could see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and touch with our hands.<sup>219</sup>

## Jesus Makes God's Nature Clearly Visible

For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of **the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ**.<sup>220</sup>

» What do you think the phrase, “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” means?

What this verse means is that God has illuminated the heart of every true believer to see in Jesus every attribute, every excellency of God. In Jesus the glory of the triune God is seen in flesh and blood.

The understanding that God is fully revealed in Jesus will be the most spiritually formative influence in our lives when we fully grasp it. Why? Because in times of confusion about God and his ways, we will learn to turn to the life and teaching of Jesus for answers.

The fullest revelation of God is not in his creation, his names, or his attributes. These are wonderful and true revelations. But **the fullest revelation of God is in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ**. Those who truly grasp and receive this amazing truth will be put on a path of freedom, healing, and wholeness.

Everything God is, Jesus is. Every attribute of God is also an attribute of Jesus. Every name of God is the name of Jesus. Whoever Jesus is, God is. Therefore, any concept of God in my mind that is not consistent with the person, redemptive work, and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ, as taught in the Word of God, is a counterfeit God.

The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same. But only in the incarnation, only in the gospel can God be clearly understood.

Jesus reveals that God is holy love—that he is good, patient, trustworthy, generous, faithful, holy, just, and so much more.

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218 Matthew 7:11; James 1:7; Hebrews 12:5-11; John 15:6, John 16:23; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians 2:18, Ephesians 3:15; 1 Thessalonians 3:11

219 1 John 1:1

220 2 Corinthians 4:6, emphasis added.



- » Take a few moments to think about the formative influences in your life. How do you think your family, church, and culture have shaped your understanding of God? Yourself? Are there things my family or church teach about God which are not consistent with the life and teaching of Jesus?

## Jesus Is God's Interpreter

When I travel overseas I often need an interpreter. Why? Not because other languages don't make sense, but because they don't make sense to me! My brain hasn't learned how to interpret the various sounds and expressions, so I need someone who does understand them to interpret them for me. I have found that the best interpreters are people who not only understand my language and culture, but people native to the culture and language I want to understand. Native speakers can understand and interpret their culture in ways that outsiders cannot. In the same way, God's prophets, priests, and poets were divinely inspired to explain the nature, ways, and will of God. They did the best they could. But only God can fully reveal and explain God; that's why Jesus, the God-man, heaven's native, came. In him, and through him, God could at last be heard, seen, and touched in flesh and blood. Through him alone, sinful man can be reconciled to God.

## A Personal Journey

"The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing... destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself."<sup>221</sup>

I am blessed to have had a wonderful, godly upbringing. My childhood was filled with really good, godly saints, including my parents, who loved me, instructed me in God's Word, and who provided wonderful examples to follow. Unfortunately, a few preachers and teachers I heard as a young person taught a distorted gospel. Their messages produced confusion, a distrust of balanced, biblical teachers, and a degree of spiritual insecurity (even a few struggles with false guilt and shame).

I remember the period of my early walk with God when I said, "Father, I can't make sense of all these voices and opinions! My church teaches one thing, and other churches teach another. One Bible teacher says one thing, and another teacher seems to contradict him. Who has it right, God? I want to know the truth!"

During this season of searching for answers, it slowly began to dawn on me that one of the primary reasons God sent his Son into the world was to clear up my confusion about God. From childhood I had been taught that Jesus is God, but I hadn't fully understood that Jesus

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221 Dallas Willard, as quoted in James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 75

came to fully reveal what God is like. The Holy Spirit began to quicken certain passages in my heart, passages like the following:

- **“He who has seen me has seen the Father;** so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”<sup>222</sup>
- **“He is the image of the invisible God,** the firstborn over all creation.”<sup>223</sup>
- **“For it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness should dwell.”**<sup>224</sup>

**It finally began to sink in that Jesus truly is God in the flesh, the full and final revelation of God, and that I could trust him to help me understand God and his ways.** I began to understand now that God had been progressively revealing himself throughout biblical history, but that Jesus was, and is, the full and perfect revelation of God in flesh and blood.<sup>225</sup>

I understood that all through Old Testament history God taught mankind about himself, and especially about his redeeming love. He spoke through the creation of the world; through the Garden of Eden; through his evening walks in that garden with Adam and Eve; through the promise of a Savior, even after their fall; through the tunics of skin made by God for a covering; through the ark of Noah with a single door; through his covenant with Abraham and his descendants; through the deliverance of his chosen people from slavery through the Red Sea; through his awesome presence on Mount Sinai; through his holy law; through his beautiful tabernacle with all its redemptive symbols, anointed priesthood, blood sacrifices, and glory; through his judgments on rebellion; through his miraculous provisions of manna and water from the rock which was struck; through his victories over wicked nations; through his Land of Promise; and through his messages of judgment and hope through his prophets and poets of Israel. Every time God spoke, he was pointing sinful man to a sinless Savior who would redeem fallen man and restore him to fellowship with God. So, the only way to truly understand anything in the Bible is to know Jesus. Jesus is the one everything and everyone points to. He is the beginning and the end of everything.

As the Lord Jesus became my focal point as a young man, little by little the clouds of confusion began to lift. With the Holy Spirit’s help, I began to test the teachings I had heard, as well as my own understanding of God, with the question: **Is this teaching and belief consistent with the truth about God which Jesus reveals?**<sup>226</sup>

I would also ask myself: **What did it mean for the disciples to follow Jesus two thousand years ago? What does it mean to follow Jesus now?** Little by little, the confusing,

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222 John 14:9, emphasis added.

223 Colossians 1:15, emphasis added.

224 Colossians 1:19, emphasis added.

225 Hebrews 1:1-3

226 An expression borrowed from James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009)

conflicting voices of men began to fade; and I began to hear the voice of the Shepherd. By the grace of God and the counsel of godly mentors, I began to rediscover the beauty and simplicity of following Jesus Christ.

## **God Is Revealed in the Narratives of Jesus**

There are portraits of Jesus in the gospels that help us frame our understanding of what God must be like. In one portrait, we find him reclining at a table with sinners. In another portrait, we see happy little children climbing up on his lap, without a shred of fear. In another portrait, we see him squatting on a sandy beach along the shore of Galilee cooking fish for his weary and worn disciples. I also love the biblical portrait of Jesus walking with and teaching the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Then, there are the many portraits of Jesus during Passion Week: washing the feet of his disciples, breaking the bread and pouring the wine, falling on his face in the garden, standing silent before his accusers, and hanging willingly on the cross. Each one of these portraits is meant to say something about who God is in his redeeming love.

The most important lessons we will ever learn about God we will learn most clearly from the narratives of Jesus—from his teaching.

- Jesus reveals that God loves sinners.
- Jesus reveals that God is generous.
- Jesus reveals that God is not harsh, impatient, unkind, or angry with disciples if they fail.
- Jesus reveals that a real disciple is one who takes up his or her cross daily and follows Jesus.
- Jesus reveals that God's love for his children is unconditional.
- Jesus reveals that salvation can never be earned but is always by grace through faith in him.
- Jesus reveals that many of those who are unknown in this life will be famous in eternity.
- Jesus reveals that the greatest in God's kingdom is the one who serves.
- Jesus reveals that grace is opposed to earning but not to effort.
- Jesus reveals that we can never impress God by our good works but only with our dependence on him.
- Jesus reveals that God isn't keeping a record of how many times he's forgiven us, and that he will always forgive a repentant soul one more time.

- Jesus reveals that God chastens and corrects, but never punishes, those who love him.
- Jesus reveals that God is never surprised by our failures.
- Jesus reveals that God treasures our love for him and for people far more than our sacrifice.
- Jesus reveals that God does allow his children to suffer, and even die, especially when it serves his redemptive plan.
- Jesus reveals that God hates sin so much that he sent his one and only Son to die as our sin bearer.
- Jesus reveals that death has no power over God!

These are just a few of the lessons Jesus makes clear as we get to know him.

- » Think over the painful stories at the beginning of this lesson and discuss how what you have learned in this lesson could help these who struggle with a wrong concept of God.

## **EXPERIENCING GOD PERSONALLY**

While our experiences must always be measured against the Word of God, yet God wants to reveal himself in the context of daily life.

In the Bible, Abraham and Sarah learned about God's faithfulness as they walked with God in faith and struggled with conflicts, famine, and fear. Jacob learned about God's purifying grace as he faced the consequences of his own deceptive nature (the consequences being his brother's army of 400 men) and wrestled with God for a blessing. Joseph came to know the depth of God's forgiving love as a forced slave in Egypt. Young David learned of God's power in weakness as he ran toward Goliath with a sling and five stones. Hannah learned that God responds to humble, desperate prayer. Jesus learned obedience through the things he suffered. The disciples learned of God's hatred for sin while they watched the passion of Jesus; they learned of his amazing grace and divine power as they fulfilled the Great Commission.

Just like these, we will learn most about God as we walk daily with him. There are many beauties in God we will never see until the eyes of our heart are opened through difficulty, through some challenging place on our journey with him. There are many painful truths about ourselves we will never see until we encounter trouble. So don't be in a hurry. Never despair. Every step in our walk with Jesus is an adventure intended to form us into his

likeness.<sup>227</sup> If we have eyes to see and ears to hear, then every test, every misunderstanding, and every experience will become our teacher.

We will never be formed in the virtue of love simply by reading about it or hearing a sermon about it or by attending a love conference. The knowledge gained through reading, anointed preaching, and conferences is important; but experience is the best teacher.

I know that God is sovereign because in a crisis moment in our family's journey we became profoundly aware of it. While on a very brief visit to the USA from the Philippines, our five-week-old son, Jesse, was diagnosed with cancer. We were not supposed to be in the USA at that time, but I had been asked to testify in a criminal trial to a random street crime I had witnessed a year earlier. If we had not been back in the USA, we would not have had the medical help Jesse needed. In the car on the way to my wife's parents' home, our hearts were flooded with praise and a profound awareness of God's sovereignty. The detailed way in which God had ordered our steps, timed Jesse's birth, moved mountains at the US Embassy in Manila, and prepared us for that moment was comforting beyond description.

I know that God holds all power, for we have experienced it. One night while serving the Lord overseas, my wife and I were both awakened in the middle of the night by a terrifying evil presence in our room! Just then, our eight-year-old son, Timothy, came into our room holding his throat and whimpering that he felt something choking him. We were shaken! I reached for my Bible in desperation, opened it to Psalm 91, and began to read, "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty (El Shaddai)...." By the time I had finished the chapter, the peace of God had completely dispelled the darkness, and Timothy was asleep on the floor.

We must experience God! For our sake, and for the sake of our children and grandchildren, we must come to know who God is through personal experience.

- » Ask students to share ways they have experienced God. Be sure to measure every experience by the clear revelation of the scriptures.

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227 Romans 5:3

## LESSON 4 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 4 TEST

1. How can we form a healthier view of God?
2. Briefly define the name and attributes of God given in Exodus 34:6.
3. Offer scripture references which show that Jesus is the full revelation of God.

## LESSON 5

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH AWARENESS OF SELF - PART 1

### LESSON 4 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points of Lesson 4. Ask students who are willing to share their written prayers from Lesson 4. Also review the three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation discussed in Lesson 2.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand vital spiritual truths which will help us know ourselves.
2. Understand the characteristics of pride.
3. Be able to define brokenness and the characteristics of broken people.
4. Apply the truths in this lesson to his or her life.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### A Young Pastor

I once asked a young pastor of a growing church, “What is your greatest challenge in the ministry?” “Myself!” he replied without hesitation. I appreciated his honesty.



## Someone Preparing for Ministry

A Christian young man has been studying for pastoral ministry but often finds himself in conflict with his fellow classmates and even his professors. He has wondered why. He has wondered why he can't seem to find the inner peace he longs for. Only recently has he begun to see the pride of his heart—especially his stubbornness and self-seeking. He's finally facing the truth about himself. He wants freedom from this self-centeredness and all the inner turmoil it has brought to his soul and is asking God to purify his heart.

## A Wife and Mother

A Christian wife and mother found herself chafing against God's call to give up her career for the sake of her family. Then, she found the secret of joy in yielding her plans for the richer, fuller plan of God! The profound joy she experiences today in caring for her little ones and husband is beyond description.

## A Couple

A Christian couple found themselves in almost continual conflict with one another. Their affection was dying, and their marriage was in crisis. Through searching the scriptures and godly counsel, they began to see the ugly nature of their self-centered hearts against the beautiful nature of God's self-giving love. As they repented, God rekindled their love!

These snapshots remind us that humble believers receive transforming grace. We live in a time in history when the body of Christ is in desperate need of a revival of righteousness. In the United States, too many so-called Christians think and live just like the unsaved world. Many young people are fighting secret, losing battles with “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life”—including sexual immorality, materialism, and conformity to the world.<sup>228</sup> In Africa and Asia we have discovered many professing Christians who are mixing biblical Christianity with ancestral worship and animistic superstitions.<sup>229</sup> Churches and families around the world are too often destroyed by conflict. Much blame can be laid at the feet of pastors and missionaries who teach and live a form of godliness but deny its cleansing, transformational power.<sup>230</sup>

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228 1 John 2:16

229 In one country I visited I was asked to lay hands on a cluster of bananas and to pray for them so that barren women in the church could eat them and “their wombs will become fruitful.” I prayed for the women but not the bananas! In many countries sensual worship has replaced reverence, the preaching of the Word, and prayer.

230 2 Timothy 3:5

Can we be holy, as God has called us to be?<sup>231</sup> Can we be transformed? Can we love the LORD with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves?<sup>232</sup> Can we live the Jesus life? We can if we are willing to face ourselves.

## THE BIG IDEA

Self-awareness—the knowledge of myself—is absolutely critical to formation into the image of Christ. To truly know oneself is to know that the unsanctified self is one’s greatest enemy.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING OURSELVES

How well do you know yourself? Dennis Kinlaw writes:

Every human person faces two questions that determine the course of existence. The first question deals with the nature of God. Who is he and what is he like? The second most important question that a person ever faces is the question of who you and I are and what we are like. If we understand the nature of God, and if we understand the nature of ourselves, there is a good chance that we will be able to live meaningful and effective lives in terms of service.<sup>233</sup>

Knowing ourselves begins with a willingness to see ourselves as we are. But, knowing ourselves as God knows us is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit. The scriptures teach, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”<sup>234</sup> Proverbs also warns us, “He who trusts in his own heart is a fool.”<sup>235</sup>

- » Let’s begin with the prayer that through this lesson the Lord will give us a greater understanding of ourselves. Let Psalm 139:23-24 guide us in this prayer.

In this lesson and the next, we will be looking at eight vital truths that will help us know ourselves better.

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231 1 Peter 1:15-16

232 Luke 10:27

233 Dennis Kinlaw, *Malchus’ Ear* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 2017), 56

234 Jeremiah 17:9

235 Proverbs 28:26

## VITAL TRUTH 1

### New birth leads to an awareness of pride.

Through spiritual new birth, we have been washed; and the Holy Spirit has come to live within us.<sup>236</sup> We are new creations in Christ Jesus—the old is gone and the new has come.<sup>237</sup> Our desires have changed. Our attitude toward sin has greatly changed. In an instant, we moved from darkness to light; the Bible now describes us as “sanctified saints.”<sup>238</sup> We have a righteous standing before God. Though we may still miss the mark spiritually and struggle with besetting sin,<sup>239</sup> yet we experience victory over habitual sin.<sup>240</sup> If we sin, we feel grief and conviction we never experienced before conversion.<sup>241</sup> Real transformation has taken place, and people around us notice the change.

Beware of the person who testifies to being saved, but who continues to practice willful sin.

- » Read Matthew 7:21-23. What does Jesus say about the person who calls Jesus “Lord, Lord” but does not do, or practice, the will of his Father? What will he say to them on the day of judgment?

Even though our hearts have been made new, the old nature now wars against the new. Many times, this inner battle takes new believers by surprise. They thought the sense of joy and peace would always be in their hearts. They are discouraged to find old attitudes and desires battling the new.

What is this old nature? How should we define it? The one word which comes as close as any other in defining the nature of sin is *pride*. “Pride is the greatest sin because it is the living heart of all sins.”<sup>242</sup>

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236 Titus 3:5-6; Romans 8:1-2, 9-11

237 2 Corinthians 5:17

238 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1

239 Hebrews 12:1

240 Romans 6:1

241 John 16:8

242 Peter Kreeft, “It Takes Humility to Know How Proud We Are,” *High Calling*, January-February 2017, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/JanFeb2017-High-Callinglr.pdf> September 12, 2020.

## VITAL TRUTH 2

**Pride—an unbroken will—is the greatest enemy of spiritual formation.**

Nothing will hinder our pursuit of holiness more than pride—the love of self. Pride is the essence of original sin—a turning to one’s own way,<sup>243</sup> “a self-willed rejection of [divine] control.”<sup>244</sup>

Pride is the sin which caused Lucifer to be cast out of heaven<sup>245</sup> and the first man and woman to be cast out of the garden of Eden.<sup>246</sup> They responded to the appeal, “You will be like God.” By partaking of the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve exerted their will over God’s will, indulged their flesh, and then tried to cover their own nakedness.

Pride was the sin of Babel which led to the confusion of languages and the scattering of nations. “Come, let us build ourselves a city and... let us make a name for ourselves,” they said.<sup>247</sup> Pride, manifest in self-interest, is what caused conflict in New Testament congregations, and even in church leaders who sought their own interests rather than the interests of Christ.<sup>248</sup> Pride is the disease we were born with, the cancer of the soul. God hates it!<sup>249</sup> He resists it!<sup>250</sup> He wants to cleanse it from our hearts.

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**“The life which  
is unexamined is  
not worth living.”**

**Plato**

*“The Apology of Socrates”*

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When I was in Africa, I heard about a man who walked around with meat in his pocket and wondered why the dogs wouldn’t leave him alone! Pride is the meat in our spiritual pockets that will bring pain, defeat, and even death. It must be cleansed.

Theologians sometimes refer to man’s sinful nature as a bent toward sin or, more specifically, a bent toward self—or that which I think is right and good and pleasing to me! “The purpose of redemption is to undo our self-centered orientation—to turn us outward; so that we are interested not only in ourselves, but in the well-being of others.”<sup>251</sup>

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243 Isaiah 53:6

244 Quote from Alexander MacLaren, “Commentary on Isaiah 53”

245 Isaiah 14:12-14

246 Genesis 3:5

247 Genesis 11:4

248 Philippians 2:21

249 Proverbs 6:16-17

250 James 4:6

251 Dennis Kinlaw, “The Mind of Christ,” *High Calling*, January-February 2017, 1, 9. Retrieved from <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/JanFeb2017-High-Callinglr.pdf> September 12, 2020.

If you really think about it, every sin and conflict in our lives is rooted in the soil of pride. Lust, a critical spirit, unforgiveness, greed, and stubbornness all spring from the poisonous waters of pride. Before we can partake fully of the life of holiness, we must come to see this problem in our own hearts.

- » Read Galatians 5:19-21. Discuss as a group how the sins of the flesh mentioned in this passage originate with pride. Are you willing to evaluate your own heart? How about your relationships? Are you willing to be ruthlessly honest about the pride which is the source of so much trouble?

In the wilderness, Satan tempted Jesus to gratify his natural desires, bypass the cross, and seek earthly glory. In essence, Satan was tempting Jesus to commit the original sin—to indulge self, preserve self, and exalt self. But Jesus remained pure in heart!

Pride manifests itself in self-centeredness or self-interest. Self-interest often defeats our best efforts and best intentions to live the free, wonderful life of holiness. This is the self which seeks to exert itself against the Word of God and wars against the Spirit of God. This carnal self can be described in the following ways:

- **Self-fulfillment** – Seeking personal happiness apart from God.
  - **Self-gratification** – Seeking what feels good apart from what glorifies God.
  - **Self-promotion** – Seeking honor from men more than the honor of God.
  - **Self-sufficiency** – The tendency to trust ourselves rather than God.
  - **Self-pity** – The feeling that we deserve better than we’re getting.
  - **Self-preservation** – Seeking what I believe is best for my life rather than abandoning myself to the wise and beautiful plan of God.
  - **Self-will** – The bent toward choosing my will over God’s authority.
- » Look up the following verses in the Gospel of Mark and notice how self-interest (pride) was at the core of every sin and weakness in these lives: Mark 8:33, Mark 9:19, 33, Mark 10:14, 37, and Mark 14:66-68.

Every believer must be brought to an awareness of self-centeredness which remains in the heart. John Wesley reminds us of the “fatal consequences” of denying this reality. Ignorance of this inner battle “tears away the shield of weak believers, deprives them of faith, and so leaves them exposed to all the assaults of the world, flesh, and the devil.”<sup>252</sup>

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252 John Wesley, from his sermon, “On Sin in Believers.”

Like the disciples, we must be brought face to face with ourselves. Dennis Kinlaw says, “The best among us are no better than the worst. The strongest are no better than the weakest.... The best of the flesh is not enough.”<sup>253</sup> As long as one believes he can live a holy life on his own, God will let him struggle. As long as one refuses to see herself as God sees her, she will continue to fail.

In 1792, a new Presbyterian missionary by the name of John Hyde sailed for India. While on board, he opened a letter from a highly respected family friend which read: “I shall not cease praying for you, dear John, until you are filled with the Holy Spirit.” John’s pride was hurt, and he reacted in anger at the implication that he wasn’t filled with the Holy Spirit:

My pride was touched, and I felt exceedingly angry, crushed the letter, threw it into a corner of the cabin, and went up on deck. I loved the writer; I knew the holy life he lived. And down in my heart was the conviction that he was right, and I was not fitted to be a missionary....

In despair, I asked the Lord to fill me with the Holy Spirit, and the moment I did this the whole atmosphere was cleared up. I began to see myself and what a selfish ambition I had. It was a struggle almost to the end of the voyage, but I was determined long before the port was reached that, whatever the cost, I would be really filled with the Holy Spirit.<sup>254</sup>

After he arrived in India, John attended a street meeting where the preacher emphasized the power of the gospel—not only to forgive sin but to give victory over it, so that one need not go on sinning.<sup>255</sup> John was convicted as he realized that although he had been preaching such a gospel, he was a stranger to its power. There was a besetting sin in his life which caused him to stumble spiritually. John went to his room and prayed, “Either thou must give me victory over all my sin, and especially over the sin that so easily besets me; or I shall return to America to seek there for some other work. I am unable to preach the gospel until I can testify to its power in my own life.”

In simple faith, he looked to Christ for deliverance. Later he said, “He did deliver me, and I have not had a doubt of this since. I can now stand up without hesitation to testify that he has given me victory.” John Hyde came to be called “Praying Hyde” for his passionate prayers to reach lost souls. A few years before his death at age forty-seven, John felt clearly led to ask God for one soul a day; by the end of that year, the Lord had added over 365 converts to the church. The next year, John was led to ask for two souls a day; and the next year, four. Each request was granted. John points to both the secret and result of revival when he said, “What we need today is a revival of holiness.”

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253 Dennis Kinlaw, *Malchus’ Ear* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 2017), 80

254 Edwin & Lillian Harvey, *They Knew Their God (Volume 1)*, (1974), 105-111. Also available at <http://www.actsamerica.org/biographies/2011-04-Praying-Hyde.html>.

255 1 John 1:9

Pride always blocks the favor of God, but he blesses the humble.

### VITAL TRUTH 3

**Self-centeredness wars against the Spirit who forms us into the image of Christ.**

In the heart of the believer, there is a battle for supremacy. This battle is described in Galatians like this:

But I say, walk in the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.<sup>256</sup>

John Wesley states,

I do not suppose that any man who is justified is a slave to sin: yet I do suppose sin [self-centeredness] remains (at least for a time) in all who are justified.... The usurper is dethroned. [Sin] remains where he once reigned; but remains in chains. [Though he wars] yet he grows weaker and weaker; while the believer goes from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.<sup>257</sup>

The battle between self-centeredness (“flesh”) and Spirit is a common experience among Christians. Wesley continues,

There is in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles... termed by St. Paul, the flesh and the Spirit. Hence, although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet in a degree they are carnal. Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil. And to this agrees the constant experience of the children of God. While they feel the witness in themselves, they feel a will not wholly resigned to the will of God. They know they are in him; and yet find a heart ready to depart from him, a proneness to evil... and a backwardness to that which is good.... Although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still remains (though subdued) and wars against the Spirit. So much more, let us use all diligence in “fighting the good fight of faith.”<sup>258</sup> So much the more earnestly, let us “watch and pray”<sup>259</sup> against the enemy within. The more carefully let us take to ourselves and

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256 Galatians 5:16-17

257 John Wesley, from his sermon, “On Sin in Believers.”

258 1 Timothy 6:12

259 Matthew 26:41



“put on the whole armor of God; that... [we] may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand.”<sup>260</sup>

## Self-Interest Leads to Degrees of Failure

- » Read Galatians 5:16-24 and discuss what happens when the Holy Spirit and the flesh oppose one another. Are you willing to discuss how this battle has played out in your life?

Every true disciple of Jesus has experienced this inner battle for control. When the Holy Spirit is winning and leading, the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is being produced in my life. But if pride is allowed to exert its will, even for a moment, there will be some degree of failure: “...sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these...”<sup>261</sup> Because a believer has been given a new nature, and because the indwelling Holy Spirit constantly is warring against self-sins of the heart, they will never dominate the life of the true Christian;<sup>262</sup> but until a believer learns to live under the complete control of the Holy Spirit, there will be momentary defeats.

**Even Christians who live in the completeness of the Holy Spirit’s control, at any given moment, will find that there are areas of pride that will need to be revealed throughout his or her lifetime.** I’ll never forget how I found myself struggling as a missionary. There were problems, and hardly noticing, I began to react in unchristlike ways. I remember how difficult it was for me to admit my problem. The Lord spoke to my heart and said, “Son, you’re an angry man.” “Lord, I’m not angry,” I thought. “I’m a missionary who’s left everything to follow you to this country.” The Lord spoke to my heart again and said, “Well then, you’re an angry missionary!” Accepting this humbling truth, rather than justifying myself, became yet another pivotal moment in my journey.

## Self-Interest Is the Source of Conflict

- » Read James 4:1-8. What was the cause of the inner turmoil and conflict among believers to whom James was writing? Why were they not getting their prayers answered? Why does James call these Christians “adulterers and adulteresses”?

Until the battle between flesh and Spirit is resolved, we’re like married men and women who still entertain romantic thoughts for a former lover. We’re not having a physical affair, but our affections haven’t been crucified until we’ve become wholly devoted to one spouse.

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260 Ephesians 6:13

261 Galatians 5:19-21

262 1 John 2:3-4, 1 John 3:7-9



As you look at the above biblical example, I think you will clearly see that the root cause of turmoil in the heart and conflict in the church is pride in the hearts of its members. Because of pride, God was resisting them. “God resists the proud.”<sup>263</sup>

This common struggle, and the problems it causes, is illustrated in the following story. In the history of a large group of churches I serve in the Philippines there is this almost unbelievable story: A pastor was sent by national church leaders to pastor a particular congregation. However, the previous pastor refused to vacate the parsonage because a few of the church members wanted him to stay.

For a while, the new pastor and the old pastor were living in the same parsonage, pastoring the same congregation! The new pastor was the official pastor, called, chosen, appointed, and supported by the national leaders. The old pastor was kept in position by the sympathies and stubbornness of a few of the members. One can imagine what confusion this caused! It could not continue. Who will preach the sermon? Who will they look to for counsel? Whose authority will the congregation follow—the old pastor or the new? The congregation would have to choose. Either they would keep the old pastor and lose the blessings and benefits of the national church, or they would win the blessing of the national leaders by yielding to their authority. Thankfully they chose to submit to the national leaders, and the congregation went on to do great things for God.

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**“Give me one hundred  
preachers who fear  
nothing but sin and desire  
nothing but God, and I  
care not a straw whether  
they be clergymen or  
laymen, such alone will  
shake the gates of hell  
and set up the kingdom  
of heaven upon earth.”**

**John Wesley**

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The conflict between the old man and the new man is an experience every believer has known. The old man has been put to death, though he tries desperately to hold his position, exercise control, and retain influence. He has no authority but tries to make you believe that he does. The new man has been redeemed by the blood of Christ. The new man has been called, chosen, and created by him in righteousness and holiness. The new man has been sealed with the Holy Spirit and has now been made the dwelling place of God, and God will never rest until the old man is ousted from the throne of your heart.

As long as the old man is allowed to remain; as long as you keep feeding him; as long as you insist on giving him even a corner in which to occupy, he will bring unrest, inner conflict, and destruction. He has to die. If we choose to feel sorry for him and give him even the smallest room, from there he will wage war against the Spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, and holiness.

The questions every generation of earnest believers must answer are these:

- Is the life of constant struggle with self-interest the best life I can hope for? Or, has God provided a way for self-interest to be purified from my heart so that **the will of God** and **love for God** is supreme?
- Is it possible to love God with all my heart, mind, and strength and my neighbor as myself?
- Can I come to the place in my walk with God and man that I do nothing through selfish ambition or conceit, but always esteem others better than myself and seek their interests over my own?<sup>264</sup>

## PAUSE FOR A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

I'm asking everyone right now to be very honest with themselves and to do some personal evaluation. Take a few minutes to quietly ask yourself this question: What really is the cause of \_\_\_\_\_? Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see yourself. Feel free to use the following questions as a guide:

- Am I easily offended?
- Am I resentful when others are promoted over me?
- Are children afraid to come near me?
- Am I overly sensitive to criticism?
- Are people afraid to share their opinions around me?
- Do I feel morally or spiritually superior to others?
- Do I listen to people, or do I do most of the talking?
- Do I raise my voice to make my point rather than thoughtful, respectful reflection?
- Do I offer solutions and opinions before hearing all the facts?
- Do I bring up the faults of others to try to make myself look good?
- Do I try to win arguments by saying, "God told me"? (When you do this, you place yourself in a position of moral and spiritual superiority.)
- Do I judge others by their outward appearances?
- Do I save the best and the biggest for myself?
- In my heart, do I consider myself better than others?

## VITAL TRUTH 4

**After regeneration, death to self is the next step to experiencing the fullness of God and the life of holiness.**

Jesus said that anyone who desires to be his disciple must completely disregard his own interests and take up his cross daily and follow him.<sup>265</sup> The cross was not the beautiful polished symbol Christians sometimes wear around their necks today, but a Roman instrument of death. When a criminal was executed by the cross, there wasn't a chance they were coming down alive. A criminal would hang until their life-blood ebbed away and every breath was gone. When Jesus commands every disciple to take up their cross daily, he simply means that our old prideful, lustful, stubborn selves must be decisively nailed to the cross of Christ, so that our new redeemed selves might live the Jesus life. Death to self means that our old will, our plans, our old concern for reputation, our old ways of thinking, our old pursuit of pleasure, our old carnal desires are fastened to the cross of Christ. Now, we completely live to him!

» Read Matthew 16:24 together.

The way of death to self is the way to a life of abundance!<sup>266</sup> Probably no one who comes to Christ for forgiveness of sins is fully aware of how completely committed God is to our death! Many great men and women throughout church history have come to understand this truth:

**Martin Luther:** "God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a man is nothing, God can make nothing out of him."

**Charles Haddon Spurgeon:** "I have now concentrated all my prayers into one, and that one prayer is this, that I may die to self, and live wholly to him."

**Richard Baxter:** "Self is the most treacherous enemy.... Of all other vices it is the hardest to find out, and the hardest to cure."

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer:** "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

**J.I. Packer:** "Jesus Christ demands self-denial, that is, self-negation, as a necessary condition for discipleship. Self-denial is a summons to submit to the authority of God as Father and of Jesus Christ as Lord.... Accepting death to everything that carnal self wants to possess is what Christ's summons to self-denial is all about."

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<sup>265</sup> Matthew 16:24

<sup>266</sup> John 12:24

**George Mueller**, known for his great faith and his ministry to thousands of orphans in nineteenth century England, was asked the secret of his fruitful service to the Lord. “There was a day when I died, utterly died,” he answered. As he spoke, he bent lower and lower until he almost touched the floor. “I died to George Mueller—his opinions, his preferences, his tastes, and his will—died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends—and since then, I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”<sup>267</sup>

Other biblical terms for death to self are “broken” and “contrite”:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.<sup>268</sup>

### **Misconceptions about Brokenness<sup>269</sup>**

1. **Brokenness is always being sad and gloomy.** We sometimes imagine broken people as those who never smile or laugh. In reality, biblical brokenness produces freedom and a deep sense of joy and peace.
2. **Brokenness is thinking badly about oneself.** (Examples: “I’m no good! I’m a worm!” There can be a false humility here.)
3. **Brokenness is being deeply emotional.** “Unfortunately, countless people have shed buckets full of tears and yet never experienced a moment of true brokenness.”<sup>270</sup>
4. **Brokenness is being deeply hurt by tragic circumstances.** One may experience many hurts and still be very proud.

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<sup>267</sup> D.W. Ekstrand, “Dying to Self.” Retrieved from <http://www.thetransformedsoul.com/additional-studies/spiritual-life-studies/dying-to-self> September 12, 2020.

<sup>268</sup> Psalm 51:17, *English Standard Version*

<sup>269</sup> Most of the following insights on brokenness are gleaned from Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Brokenness, Surrender, Holiness* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 43-45.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid*, 49

## Brokenness as the Bible Defines It

### Broken:

Brokenness is the absolute shattering of my self-will—the absolute surrender of my will to God. It is saying “Yes, Lord!”—no resistance, no chafing, no stubbornness—simply submitting myself to his direction and will for my life.<sup>271</sup>

**Contrite:** That word suggests something that is crushed into small particles or ground into powder, as a rock is pulverized. “What is it that God wants to pulverize in us? It is not our spirit he wants to break, nor our essential personhood. He wants to break our self-will.”<sup>272</sup> This is similar to a cowboy who wants to break a horse, not to hurt it or maim it, but to make it submissive to his commands.

True brokenness is the breaking of my self-will so that the life and spirit of the Lord Jesus may be released through me... the stripping of self-reliance and independence from God... the softening of the soil of my heart... honesty before God... humility before others.<sup>273</sup>

## Characteristics of Broken People

How do we know that we have a “broken and contrite heart”? The following characteristics are only perfectly found in Jesus, but they will be increasingly true of Spirit-filled Christians:

- Broken people have a teachable spirit.
  - Broken people are willing to yield to others.
  - Broken people fear God more than man.
  - Broken people have a submissive spirit.
  - Broken people accept God’s opinion over culture and tradition.
  - Broken people do not promote themselves and are not afraid of the lowest seat.
  - Broken people graciously accept honor without pride.
  - Broken people confess their faults and do not feel the need to protect their image.
  - Broken people obey God in little things.
  - Broken people wait on the Lord before making decisions.
  - Broken people walk by faith and not by sight.
  - Broken people pursue holiness rather than happiness.
- » What do you think would happen if more of us would truly die to self? Evaluate yourself with this list. What do you think would be different in your home? Church? Ministry? Allow time for anyone who wants to share with the group.

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271 Ibid, 44

272 Ibid.

273 Ibid.

## VITAL TRUTH 5

### **Death to self, leading to a holy life, requires decisive surrender.**

The death Jesus calls us to will not happen without our deliberate, decisive obedience. We will not grow into it, though surrender will probably not happen for many of us without a period of struggle. How clever Satan is. He has convinced multitudes of believers that the normal Christian life is one of struggle against the will of God, and that they should not expect decisive victory. Struggle is common, but not normal. The life of Jesus, operating in us by faith, is the normal Christian life.

The history of both human and spiritual warfare reveals that in every successful war there are strategic decisions which lead to decisive turning points. Without decisive victories on the battlefield, resources are wasted and lives are lost. Oh, how this generation of believers needs some decisive victories!

### **Jesus, the Man, Became an Example of Decisive Victory**

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the human Jesus struggled to take up his cross; but before he left the garden, he had renewed his surrender to the will of his Father.<sup>274</sup> He is God's standard of what is normal.

We see that:

- In the garden, Jesus, the God-man experienced a period of very real struggle. He did not have a sinful nature, but the demands of obedience weighed heavy upon his humanity.
- Jesus was led by his Father to a decisive moment of surrender, where the only way forward was to yield his will to the sovereign will of God.
- The moment of victory came when Jesus prayed, “nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done.”<sup>275</sup>
- From the moment of surrender, Jesus rose to face loneliness, betrayal, injustice, humiliation, and death with grace and courage. From that moment of surrender, Jesus experienced divine power.

As Jesus was led to a moment of decisive surrender to the will of his Father, so Jesus will lead each one of us to a moment of decisive surrender. God will come to each one of us and say, “Child, here is where I want you to lay down your life.” The decisive choice to die then with Christ will lead to a life of spiritual abundance.

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274 Luke 22:42

275 Luke 22:42

From the foundation of the world, Jesus was the Lamb of God slain for sin. In one sense, the work of redemption was already accomplished in the mind of God; and victory was already sure. Yet, the plan of redemption was not automatic, but had to be worked out in time. So it is with us. The scriptures are consistent and clear that God calls every believer whom he has redeemed to “present your (redeemed) bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”<sup>276</sup>

## Abraham: An Example of Decisive Surrender

One day, God asked Abraham and young Isaac to take a walk with him—a walk which would lead to Mount Moriah, the mountain of Christ’s death, and to Abraham’s full surrender of himself to God. This was a pivotal moment in Abraham’s relationship with God and the greatest test of his life.<sup>277</sup> God was very clear with Abraham from the very outset of the journey: “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”<sup>278</sup> Abraham did not resist. After a difficult three-day journey, he bound his love to the altar and raised the knife... and died to Abraham.

Ultimately, God did not want Abraham’s sacrifice—Isaac—but his surrender of Isaac.<sup>279</sup> God provided the perfect and complete sacrifice (Jesus), instead of Isaac; through humble surrender, Abraham would share in that sacrifice. God didn’t need a sacrifice. Centuries later, King David, longing for heart cleansing, would pray,

For you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with burnt offering. **The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.**<sup>280</sup>

Truly, there is nothing we can offer God, or do for God, that will make up for who we are and what we’ve done. We cannot remove the guilt and stains from our hearts. Only God can do this. All we can do is come to God in brokenness and surrender and receive his grace.

Again, God didn’t want to kill Isaac; he wanted Abraham to let go of him, to give up control, to let go of any competing love. “(God) said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing **you have not withheld** your son, your only son, from me.’”<sup>281</sup> In other words, “It’s not the boy I want, but you Abraham! I just wanted to know that you are wholly mine and that even this precious life belongs to me.”

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276 Romans 12:1

277 Genesis 22:1

278 Genesis 22:2

279 Genesis 22:12

280 Psalm 51:16-17, *English Standard Version*, emphasis added.

281 Genesis 22:12, emphasis added.



In a very real sense, when Abraham raised the knife in obedience to God, it was Abraham who died, not Isaac. Abraham died to his right to own Isaac, the child of promise. This was God's intention all along.

In the same way, God gives us eternal life through faith in him; and then he asks us to offer this life back to him as a living sacrifice—to raise the knife and say, “Lord, this life isn’t mine, but yours! Do with me and in me whatever you choose, even if it appears humanly foolish! I’ll go where you want me to go, do what you want me to do, say what you want me to say, and be what you want me to be.” This is only difficult because of that selfish part of our natural life which grasps, which holds back and wants to retain control. This is the part of our nature Jesus dealt with at the cross. This is the part of our nature he must cleanse in order to fill us with his Spirit and to bestow the full blessings of his kingdom upon us.

God will only ask us to put to death that within us which resists his sovereign control and his absolute authority, that part of us—the flesh—which wars against him and pushes his hands away. This is the part of our nature which cannot be redeemed and will never be subject to God’s authority.

God would rather use the gifts and blessings he has given us for his glory than to take them away. But we cannot know what part will stay on the altar with Christ, or what part will rise up from the altar, until we have offered our all without reservation to God. We lift the knife of full surrender. He chooses what lives and what dies. This is what it means to be a living sacrifice.

Have you experienced decisive surrender? What love in your life has God asked you to die to?

## LESSON 5 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 5 TEST

1. Name the five vital truths for knowing ourselves taught in this lesson.
2. Give four of the manifestations of self mentioned in this lesson.
3. What are six of the twelve characteristics of broken people in this lesson?
4. Explain in your own words how Jesus is an example of decisive surrender.

## LESSON 6

# SPIRITUAL FORMATION THROUGH AWARENESS OF SELF - PART 2

## LESSON 5 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the five vital truths from Lesson 5. Also, review the three aspects of the journey of spiritual formation. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 5.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand vital truths for knowing ourselves.
2. Understand the gracious results of biblical brokenness.
3. Be able to talk about how the life of Jesus is able to be manifest in the spiritually broken.
4. Know how to cultivate Christlikeness.

## SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

My father-in-law has a beautiful Bradford pear tree in his front yard. A beautiful tree... with a slightly leaning trunk. I remember that soon after it was planted, 15 years ago, my family and I came to visit. The first thing I noticed was that whoever planted it wasn't careful to plant it straight. I thought about digging around the roots and pushing it straight, but never put forth the effort. While the tree has grown from a sapling into a pretty large tree, it still leans as it was planted. Time hasn't straightened it. Years of sun, wind, and rain haven't caused it to grow straight. As the tree grows taller and the branches wider, the weight im-

balance could eventually cause the beautiful Bradford to topple over. Perhaps not. Perhaps it will just always be a tree which leans a little.

People, like trees, often grow as they were planted. Our crooked places can be straightened and our rough areas smoothed. This is what grace is all about! Nothing is more important in our Christian life than the cultivation of a tender heart, a teachable spirit, and humble obedience to God's Word. Leaning people, like leaning trees, are harder to straighten when they have allowed the soil of their hearts to harden through the seasons of life.

In the last lesson, we began teaching that in order to be the Spirit-filled man or woman God has called us to be, we must be convinced of eight vital truths. In this lesson, we will build on these.

## THE BIG IDEA

Self-awareness—the knowledge of myself—is absolutely critical to formation into the image of Christ. To truly know oneself is to know that the unsanctified self is one's greatest enemy.

## VITAL TRUTH 6

**Death to self is only possible by grace through faith.**

We must be careful to understand death to self as a work of grace. Too many Christians are trying to become righteous by killing their sinful nature. But we cannot put the sinful nature to death on our own. Nor can we live the holy, resurrected life on our own. Only God can accomplish these in us. Our discipline and willpower are not nearly enough to defeat pride, with all its self-centered manifestations.<sup>282</sup> Self, like roots of a giant tree, has wrapped itself around every decision, every good deed, every action, every sacrifice, and every relationship in my life. Only grace can break its bondage. Where is this grace found?

### **Grace Is Found in the Power of the Cross and Resurrection, Appropriated by Faith**

Only the cross can break self-centeredness. This is the consistent message of the New Testament. Look again at Galatians 5:24. Here Paul speaks of the cross and its vital part in a victorious, Spirit-filled life when he says, "And those who are Christ's have **crucified the flesh** with its passions and desires."<sup>283</sup> The word "crucified" points to the cross.

Earlier in his letter to this Galatian church Paul testified that **provision was made** at the cross for victory over self-interest, and that he was **presently living in that reality**:

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282 Colossians 2:23

283 Emphasis added.

I have been **crucified with Christ**. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I **now** live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.<sup>284</sup>

There seems to be a contradiction here. How can a man be both dead and alive at the same time?

- » In what sense can a person be spiritually dead and yet spiritually alive at the same time? How important is faith in this passage?

When Paul said, “I have been crucified,” he was simply saying that the old spiritually dead self—the old prideful, self-centered Paul—was conquered at the cross, through identity with it. The “I” that was raised to life and now lives is the resurrected, victorious “I” in which Jesus lives and reigns supreme. This is the life under the control of the Holy Spirit. This is the life in which one’s own interests are disregarded, and Christ’s interests are first. Paul’s testimony reveals that sharing by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus is the key, not just to forgiveness of sins, but death of self.<sup>285</sup>

Many Christians are living defeated lives because they are trying in themselves to defeat an enemy which can only be defeated at the cross. They are always looking within, but rarely looking to Jesus. The true story is told of Hiroo Onoda, a Japanese soldier, who remained on the Island of Lubang, Philippines, until 1974, twenty-nine years after the end of WWII, because news had not reached him that Japan had surrendered.<sup>286</sup> During these many years Mr. Onoda engaged in clashes with local Filipino residents, killing thirty people! People tried to convince him that the war was over, but he was not persuaded until his former commanding officer came to see him and presented him with official orders.

Just like Hiroo, too many believers are fighting losing battles with the flesh because news has not reached their hearts that the old prideful, self-centered self has been defeated at the cross. One of the secrets of grace is to rejoice in the cross!

## Grace Is Found in the Indwelling Presence of Jesus

In Galatians 2:20-21, Paul makes it clear that crucifixion with Christ is only part of God’s remedy. Being crucified with Christ makes us ready for the fullness of Christ, the one who alone is full of humble, self-giving love: “Christ lives in me... who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul describes his life now as “Christ lives in me.” This is the secret to holy living!

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284 Galatians 2:20-21, emphasis added.

285 Notice also Galatians 6:14-15.

286 “Japan WW2 Soldier Who Refused to Surrender Hiroo Onoda Dies.” Published January 17, 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-25772192> September 12, 2020.

Dennis Kinlaw states, “Becoming like Christ is a work of grace. It only occurs as Christ lives in us, not as we strive to be like him.”<sup>287</sup>

Sadly, many today are not experiencing the life of Jesus because they’re not living in the awareness of his indwelling presence. Others are not cultivating his fellowship as they should or living in his strength.

- » In John 15, what did Jesus say was the secret to a fruitful life? Discuss what it means to abide in Christ.

## Grace Is Found in the Indwelling Presence of the Holy Spirit

Self-emptying makes room for the full indwelling and control of the Holy Spirit. This is what Ephesians 5:18 means: “And do not be drunk with (under the control of) wine... but be filled with the Spirit.” Jesus lives in us through the Holy Spirit but can operate fully in us only as we die to ourselves.<sup>288</sup> According to Galatians 5 and many other New Testament passages, his indwelling presence is the key to a victorious, Christ-like life. Notice how Paul says it: “But the fruit **of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience.”<sup>289</sup> The point here is that spiritual fruit is the Spirit’s fruit, not mine! You and I are seeds that fall into the ground and die;<sup>290</sup> but as we die, and keep dying, he is the one who gives us life and who causes us to grow and bear fruit. Sometimes we forget this and wear ourselves out trying to be good! But only God can make me good.

God’s way of making me good is often painful. Like impurities mixed with gold, pride and all of its manifestations have become fastened in my nature; only the Holy Spirit can refine it. How does he do it? John the Baptist proclaimed that Jesus would “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”<sup>291</sup> A believer’s heart, like gold, can’t be cleaned from the outside because the dirt is inside, mixed in with the righteousness of God. It has to be melted and refined by the fire of the Holy Spirit.

According to Peter’s testimony, this is the cleansing experienced by the disciples at Pentecost:

So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and made **no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.**<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Dennis Kinlaw, “The Mind of Christ,” *High Calling*, January-February 2017, 1, 9. Retrieved from <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/JanFeb2017-High-Callinglr.pdf> September 12, 2020.

<sup>288</sup> John 14:16

<sup>289</sup> Galatians 5:22, emphasis added.

<sup>290</sup> John 12:24

<sup>291</sup> Matthew 3:11

<sup>292</sup> Acts 15:8-9, emphasis added.

Let us rejoice in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit who continually sanctifies our hearts.

## VITAL TRUTH 7

**The life of Christ in us is the fruit of death to self.**

Death to self is not the end but the beginning of a life of surrender to Christ. The reason seeds are buried in the soil is not just so they will die, but so they will live in a way they never dreamed of!

**The Christian life is a life in which the character of Jesus is becoming more and more radiant.** This is what it means to be holy. Any profession of holiness or teaching of holiness not consistent with his life and teaching is not true holiness. “The only way the world will know Christ is through us. Therefore, there must be a correspondence between our lives and the one we represent.”<sup>293</sup>

- Holiness is not power.
- Holiness is not separation from the world.
- Holiness is not doing right things.
- Holiness is not spiritual gifts.

These are the fruit of holiness, but true righteousness is the life of Jesus. The result of dying to self will always be the life of Jesus manifest in and through us.

When Jesus’ life is in us, we will be characterized by:

- Generous, self-giving, sacrificial love<sup>294</sup>
- Empowerment and direction of the Holy Spirit<sup>295</sup>
- Gentle and sincere behavior<sup>296</sup>
- Deepening spiritual insight.<sup>297</sup>
- Freedom from fear and anxiety.<sup>298</sup>
- Fellowship with God and fellow believers<sup>299</sup>

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293 Dennis Kinlaw, “The Mind of Christ,” *High Calling*, January-February 2017, 9. Retrieved from <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/JanFeb2017-High-Callinglr.pdf> September 12, 2020.

294 James 1:27; 1 John 3:16

295 Ephesians 5:18; Acts 2:4, Acts 4:31

296 James 3:16-17

297 Matthew 5:8

298 Psalm 37:37; Isaiah 26:3; Matthew 11:28-30

299 1 John 1:6-7



- Victory over besetting sin<sup>300</sup>
- Increasing humility<sup>301</sup>

If I found myself in a place where I had to choose one page of the Bible from which to learn about the character of a holy life, I think Philippians 2 would be my choice. It is truly one of the most revealing chapters in the Bible about the mindset we are to have and the life we are to live.

- » From Philippians 2, make a list of the qualities of selfless holiness found in Jesus. Share these with your group.

One who is consumed with self-interest is a slave to appearances and reputation and cannot serve his fellow man in humble ways.

Dr. Dennis Kinlaw tells the following story of Samuel Brengle, a man who became a powerful evangelist and one of the most influential leaders of the Salvation Army:

During Samuel Brengle's senior year at Boston University, he was offered the pastorate of a wealthy congregation in South Bend, Indiana. He had an opportunity to begin his ministry at the top of the social roster. But, he felt that God was calling him to join the Salvation Army, so he crossed the Atlantic and presented himself to General William Booth (the founder of the ministry).

"We don't want you. You're dangerous," Booth said. "Dangerous? What do you mean?" Brengle asked. "You have too much education. You would not be willing to subordinate yourself to one of the officers here where converted drunks and prostitutes are the staff leaders." "Please give me a chance," Brengle said. So Brengle was put to work as a bootblack (one who shines boots) for the Central Salvation Army Corps in London. In an unfinished basement, on a dirt floor half-submerged in water, Brengle began cleaning mud off the boots of converted street bums who were now soldiers in the Army.

One day he seemed to hear an inner voice that said, "You're a fool!" "What do you mean?" Brengle asked. "Remember that man who buried his talent in the earth?" the inner voice said. "Think of all the training you've had. You're just throwing it away." Brengle sank in depression and began to pray, "Lord, have I failed you? Did I miss your leading?" And the Lord replied, "Remember, Sam, I washed their feet!" That muddy basement became an anteroom to heaven as Brengle sensed the reassuring

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300 Hebrews 12:1

301 Philippians 2

presence of the Lord. From that day forward, he knew he was called to spend himself for others. Only the Holy Spirit can make this kind of sacrificial thinking possible.<sup>302</sup>

Be careful about any idea of holiness which does not match the humble life of the Lord Jesus.

## VITAL TRUTH 8

**A life of death to self and surrender to Christ requires cultivation.**

The cleansing of the heart is not the end of our pursuit. We are like pilots who have aligned our plane with the runway but will need to make countless corrections before the plane has landed.

The Christian's spiritual death to self is a living death—a constant dying.<sup>303</sup> Our sacrifice is a living sacrifice—a constant sacrifice. Word pictures like “death to self” are only meant to teach us spiritual realities, but we must be careful not to stray from God's Word. A pure heart is not the end of our quest for holiness. A pure heart and a surrendered will better equip us for the journey, but we have a lifetime of climbing to do!

The Spirit-filled life is a life of growth and progressive sanctification. By the Spirit of God we are being changed from “glory to glory.”<sup>304</sup> The following is practical advice for those who desire a deepening life of holiness.<sup>305</sup>

In the following article my friend Dr. Phil Brown offers some very helpful, biblical advice on pursuing holiness.

## SIX STEPS IN PURSUIT OF HOLINESS

Hebrews 12:14 charges us, “Pursue holiness!”<sup>306</sup> The holiness we must pursue is God's holiness, which is perfectly seen in Jesus, who was separated from all sin, blameless, pure, and righteous.<sup>307</sup>

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302 Dennis Kinlaw, “The Mind of Christ,” *High Calling*, January-February 2017, 9. Retrieved from <http://www.francisasburysociety.com/wp-content/uploads/JanFeb2017-High-Callinglr.pdf> September 12, 2020.

303 Luke 9:23

304 2 Corinthians 3:18

305 1 Corinthians 6:11

306 This entire section was written by Dr. Phil Brown.

307 Hebrews 1:9, Hebrews 4:15, Hebrews 7:26

### 1. Lay aside every weight.<sup>308</sup>

Marathon runners shed every ounce that slows them down. If there is anything that is hindering your pursuit of holiness, you must lay it aside! Media, money, music, pride, relationships—it doesn't matter what it is. If it's impeding your progress in holiness, it's past time to get rid of it. Have you laid aside every weight in your pursuit of holiness?

### 2. Lay aside the easily ensnaring sin.<sup>309</sup>

Weights aren't the only things to be laid aside. The easily ensnaring sin must go, too. What is this sin? It's the one to which you most easily fall prey. All believers easily fall prey to self-centeredness, the primary manifestation of our corrupted nature. We lay aside this sin principle by coming to Christ for the cleansing of his Holy Spirit. Yet, even after your heart has been purified by faith, there will be sins in which you may be easily ensnared. We lay these sins aside by doing all that scripture prescribes for guarding ourselves from sin: make use of the means of grace;<sup>310</sup> make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts;<sup>311</sup> flee from temptation by associating with those who pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace and who call upon God out of a pure heart;<sup>312</sup> and walk in the Spirit.<sup>313</sup> Have you dealt with the sin that easily ensnares you?

### 3. Look unto Jesus.<sup>314</sup>

Every runner knows that an unwavering focus on the finish line is a key to winning. A distracted runner is a losing runner. The word translated "looking" means to "direct one's attention without distraction, fix one's eyes trustingly" on someone. We must undistractedly and trustingly fix our soul's gaze upon Jesus. Why? Because he is the model for holiness. A sure way to falter in our pursuit of holiness is to look around and compare ourselves with others. To be holy as Jesus was holy, we must run focused on him. Is your gaze fixed on Jesus?

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**"When our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said 'repent' in Matthew 4:4, he intended that the whole Christian life be one of repentance."**

**Martin Luther**

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308 Hebrews 12:1

309 Hebrews 12:1

310 Psalm 119:11; Matthew 26:41; Ephesians 6:13-18

311 Romans 13:14

312 2 Timothy 2:22

313 Galatians 5:16

314 Hebrews 12:2

**4. Persevere in the fight against sin.<sup>315</sup>**

These verses should jolt us free from any thought of sprinting easily to holy victory. Yes, every weight and the easily ensnaring sin may have been laid aside, but we are in a fight! We do battle as we pursue holiness. The enemy will contest every advance in Christlikeness. There is no age, maturity, or state of grace which exempts us from this clash. The danger of becoming wearied and faint in our minds dogs us all. We persevere by considering Christ's endurance. Our Captain won through the devil's throng. By his grace, we may too! Are you persevering in the fight against sin?

**5. Submit to the Lord's chastening with thanksgiving.<sup>316</sup>**

If we're pursuing holiness, we should not experience God's chastening hand, right? Wrong! That's not the way he works. In fact, God sovereignly permits and ordains hardships, as the case may be, to help us grow in Christ-like holiness. The old adage, "No pain, no gain," speaks truly to our condition. We pursue holiness by humbly accepting Providence's rebukes with thanksgiving, for they testify of his loving passion for us to partake of his holiness. Are you thanking the Father for his holiness-inducing chastening?

**6. Strengthen other believers.<sup>317</sup>**

The world's motto is "every man for himself." Not so with the pursuit of holiness. Holiness must be pursued in community. We grow in Christlike holiness best when we live in structures of mutual accountability and edification. We run the race to holiness best when we link arms with fellow runners. If one stumbles, his partners help lift him to steady pace. Have you linked arms with fellow pursuers of holiness?

**CONCLUSION**

Holiness of heart and life is a journey, and these six biblical principles will preserve our souls through turbulent winds of adversity and temptation and to flourish as citizens of God's kingdom.

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315 Hebrews 12:3-4

316 Hebrews 12:5-11

317 Hebrews 12:12-13

## A PRAYER

Father,

I have seen that the greatest hindrance in my spiritual journey is pride—manifest in self-sin. I'm done with excuses. I'm through blaming others. I wholly offer myself as a living sacrifice to you. With the psalmist I pray, "Create in me a clean heart, O God."<sup>318</sup> With Paul I look to the cross and believe that, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."<sup>319</sup> I trust now in the cleansing and enablement of the Holy Spirit, the one promised by Jesus when he said: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."<sup>320</sup>

Amen.

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318 Psalm 51:10

319 Galatians 2:20

320 John 7:37-38

## LESSON 6 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 6 TEST

1. What are the three vital truths taught in this lesson?
2. What is the key to death of self?
3. Complete this sentence: “Only the \_\_\_\_\_ can break self-centeredness.”
4. Complete this sentence: “Self-emptying makes room for the \_\_\_\_\_ and control of the \_\_\_\_\_.”
5. Name three characteristics of the life of Jesus in a believer.
6. What were the six steps for cultivating or pursuing holiness as taught by Dr. Phil Brown?

## LESSON 7

# THE IMAGE OF CHRIST THROUGH SPIRITUAL TRAINING

### LESSON 6 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the eight vital truths from Lessons 5-6 and the six steps for pursuing holiness from Lesson 6. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 6.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the meaning of 1 Timothy 4:7.
2. Know why spiritual training is necessary to being formed into the image of Jesus.
3. Begin putting the principles learned in this lesson into practice.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

A young believer struggles to persevere in little areas of obedience. God has powerfully transformed his life and healed him of a painful, self-inflicted spiritual wound; and yet, there are areas of ongoing struggle. He struggles to walk by faith. He's seeking to gain mastery over his thought life. He wants to be a more attentive father to his young children. He wishes his emotions weren't so up and down. He wants to be a better steward of his time. He's finding it hard to be contented in his job and finds himself wishing other opportunities would come along. He called me one day and said, "I believe that God is closing every other door for me during this season of my life so that I can learn the discipline of perseverance. My life up to this point has been a series of unfinished projects; I know that if I am ever



going to truly succeed in my relationship with God, I'm going to have to learn to persist and finish what I start. My impatience is a character issue that affects every other area of my life!" I was amazed by my friend's humility and insight. He's going deeper and stronger... through exercise!

## THE BIG IDEA

The big idea of this lesson is that training is crucial to the formation of godly virtue—the image of Christ in us. This training involves adversity, the classic spiritual disciplines (like reading, prayer, fasting, etc.), as well as personal discipline.

Some will argue that my friend mentioned above simply needs the fullness and power of the Spirit in his life. Undoubtedly this is true. But the Holy Spirit cannot fill and empower believers apart from obedience. Just as a harvest of corn or rice is directly related to the faithful cultivation and irrigation of the farmer, so the harvest of spiritual virtue is directly related to the faith-filled efforts of the Christian.

This lesson is calling us to a diligent, earnest, and vigilant walk with God, rooted in faith, and empowered by love.

## PERSPECTIVES ON GODLINESS FROM PAUL AND PETER

Two key passages will help shape our understanding of the role of exercise in spiritual formation.

Paul writes,

But reject profane and old wives' fables, and **exercise** yourself toward **godliness**. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come.<sup>321</sup>

The key words here are “exercise” and “godliness.” How do you think these two concepts are connected?

### Definition of Godliness

- » Discuss this term “godliness” with your group. Let each person offer a definition.

In our day, I don't think we automatically know what godliness is. A glance around our church world reveals a distorted understanding of it. When many people think of a godly

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321 1 Timothy 4:7-8, emphasis added.

person they often think of someone with a solemn personality, someone who always carries a big Bible, speaks with a reverent tone, and spends most of their time going to church.

But godly people come in all shapes, sizes, cultures, and personalities. Godliness is just as comfortable in an old pair of blue jeans as it is in a suit and tie. Godliness does not have a distinct prayer tone or volume. Godliness does not have a particular worship style or musical genre.

**Godliness is the beautiful life of Jesus, produced in us by the Holy Spirit. Godliness is knowing, delighting in, obeying, and walking with God biblically, sincerely, and authentically.** Godliness is for everyone, everywhere, from every culture, race, and walk of life, because godliness is not a thing, but a person. Godliness is the life of the Lord Jesus.

- » Why is it so hard for us to get this right? Why is it sometimes easier for new believers to understand this than for people who have grown up in church?

## Paul's Perspective on Godliness

### 1. Godliness is a journey—"toward godliness."<sup>322</sup>

Let us not be discouraged. Let us remember that God is patient with us, for, "As a Father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him." Perfectionism is an enemy many of us have had to contend with.

### 2. There are many distractions to avoid in our quest for godliness. "But reject profane and old wives' fables."<sup>323</sup>

These fables were fanciful Jewish myths and traditions that involved fruitless speculations, such as the origin of angels and their powers and many other things God has chosen not to reveal. The list of speculations, superstitions, and myths has only grown since then!

### 3. Godliness is achievable through exercise, rooted in faith. "But exercise yourself toward godliness."<sup>324</sup>

Like athletes who compete in Olympic games, we must train ourselves in holiness of heart and life through hard work and perseverance.

We should note that one cannot exercise himself or herself out of willful sin. Willful sin must be "put to death!"<sup>325</sup>

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322 1 Timothy 4:7

323 1 Timothy 4:7. See also 2 Timothy 2:16, 23.

324 1 Timothy 4:7

325 Colossians 3:5

I find it interesting that Paul doesn't encourage Timothy toward a shortcut to godliness, because there are none. New birth is instantaneous and is simply a matter of believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. The development of godly virtue and character requires effort.

#### 4. **Godliness gained through exercise promises a better quality of life now and in the life to come.**

John Wesley comments,

The man that fears, loves, and serves God has God's blessing all through life. His religion saves him from all those excesses, both in action and passion, which sap the foundations of life and render existence itself often a burden. The peace and love of God in the heart produces a serenity and calm which cause the lamp of life to burn clear, strong, and permanent.... Thus, godliness has the promise of, and secures the blessings of, both worlds.<sup>326</sup>

### **Peter's Perspective on Godliness**

In 2 Peter 1:5-7, Peter writes to believers who have "obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (1:1), who have "obtained all things that pertain to life and godliness" (1:3), and have "been given... exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature" (1:4). For "this very reason," they are to "add to their faith":

But also for this very reason, **giving all diligence, add to your faith** virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.<sup>327</sup>

Note: Commentators agree that "partakers of the divine nature" means **renewal or restoration into the image of God!** Adam Clarke comments, "The object of all God's promises... was to bring fallen man back to the image of God, which he had lost."<sup>328</sup> This is God's plan for everyone who trusts in Jesus Christ and in the promises contained in the gospel. God's nature is the river out of which every grace flows, making more and more godliness possible.

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326 John Wesley's notes on 1 Timothy 4:8

327 Emphasis added.

328 Adam Clarke's commentary on 2 Peter 1:4

**1. Peter assures us that while the divine nature is from God, partaking of it more and more is up to us, by his grace.**

Peter makes it very clear that building spiritual virtue on the foundation of saving faith requires every effort. One commentator puts it like this: “The oil and flame are given wholly of grace by God, and ‘taken’ by believers: their part henceforth is to ‘trim their lamps.’”<sup>329</sup>

**2. Every believer must be fully engaged and in total earnest to nurture and cultivate the divine nature which has been planted within them.**

In the original language Peter is very emphatic. What then are some of the godly characteristics Peter exhorts us to add to faith?

**3. Peter lists seven qualities we must add to our faith so that we will be neither “barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>330</sup>**

- **Virtue** – Moral excellence, especially in times of hardship and persecution.
- **Knowledge** – This is discernment of God’s will.
- **Self-control** – This is a proper use of all earthly enjoyments, exercising self-restraint, and never allowing the physical appetites or passions to overflow.
- **Perseverance** – This is patient endurance in the midst of suffering and hardship.
- **Godliness** – A godly person is one who is devoted to God, including his people and his purposes.
- **Brotherly kindness** – To godliness we must add generosity, courteousness, and cheerfulness. Godliness is not dreary, sanctimonious, stoical, or sullen!
- **Love** – Selfless care, not only for the family of God, but all mankind.

## **THE VIRTUES OF CHRIST WILL BE FORMED IN US THROUGH EXERCISE**

I love to walk for exercise. It has helped me stay in good health. It refreshes my mind. And because I am able to pray while I walk, walking draws me closer to the Lord. I walk when it’s warm and when it’s cold. I’ve even walked many times in rain and snow.

The earth is approximately 40,000 kilometers (24,000 miles) around, and I have a personal goal to walk my way around it, in terms of distance! In other words, before I die, I’m hoping to have walked at least 40,000 kilometers for exercise. I started eight years ago; but if

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<sup>329</sup> Jamieson-Fausset-Brown commentary on 2 Peter 1:4-5

<sup>330</sup> 2 Peter 1:8

I stay healthy enough, and if the Lord gives me strength, it will take me twenty-two more. After eight years, walking 6.4 kilometers per day (4 miles), on an average of 25 kilometers a week (16 miles) and 1,287 kilometers per year (832 miles), I've already walked about 10,300 kilometers (6,400 miles). I still have 30,000 kilometers to go, but I hardly ever think of that. I just (mostly) enjoy the daily walk.

A huge goal, like walking around the world, is only attainable a little bit at a time. It only happens by getting up every day and committing to the exercise of walking. And if I keep going, I'll eventually accomplish what once seemed impossible.

The life of spiritual formation is a lot like this. We learn in this lesson that being conformed to the image of Christ is a goal we will attain, not only by renewing our mind, but through what the apostle Paul calls "exercise."

Every godly person I know has had to put forth a lot of effort to be so. Salvation is by grace, through faith; but sanctification—the development of virtue and character—often comes through painful self-renunciation and intentional effort. Paul calls this "pressing toward the goal."<sup>331</sup> Grace, of course, is at work even in our effort.<sup>332</sup>

## Exercise Involves Practice

Becky (my wife) and I have been meditating on the need to cultivate gentleness in our interaction with one another and our children. One day we came across this teaching by one G. D. W. found in Lettie Cowman's devotional, *Streams in the Desert*:

The graces of the Spirit (like patience) do not settle themselves down upon us by chance; and if we do not discern certain states of grace, and choose them, and in our thoughts nourish them, they never become fastened in our nature or behavior. Every advance step in grace must be preceded by first apprehending it, and then prayerful resolve to have it.<sup>333</sup>

Practicing virtue? It's uncommon to find a person who thinks like this, but it's important to understand.

Let's remember that the goal of the Christian life is not just doing right things. Believers can do right things for a lot of wrong reasons—including guilt, fear, and pride. God's objective and priority is to form us from the inside out until we become the kind of people who "routinely and easily obey him;"<sup>334</sup> until our character is transformed; until the fruit of the Spirit becomes a habit.

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331 Philippians 3:14

332 Philippians 1:6

333 Lettie Cowman, *Streams in the Desert* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), June 11

334 Quote from Dallas Willard noted in Lesson 1.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus invites weary and burdened people to unite with him in a restful, easy life of obedience.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke (heavy wooden neck harness) upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is **easy**, and my burden is light.<sup>335</sup>

To Jesus, the yoke can be called “easy” when the inner disposition has been transformed: when the heart is no longer chafing against God’s will but has become “gentle and humble”—terms which in this context speak of acceptance. This is what God wants to do in us.

### Exercise Develops Character

Understanding the role of virtue and character in the Christian life is important. Spiritual failure is often directly related, not to a lack of sincerity or desire or devotion, but to a misunderstanding of the role Christian virtue and character play in our walk with the Lord.

While writing this lesson, my wife and I hosted a couples Bible study in our home. During our fellowship, one young mother expressed her frustrating inability to live a consistent Christian life. “This probably sounds really dumb,” she exclaimed, “but the thought has sometimes crossed my mind that perhaps I’m just not one of God’s chosen, that maybe I’ll never be strong no matter how hard I try!”

Now, maybe we wouldn’t say it just like that, but there are many sincere believers who wonder if the highest levels of devotion to God are reserved for special Christians or super saints! But God is no respecter of persons, and every believer can be formed into the image of Christ. Our problem is often simply a lack of character and an understanding of the role that character plays in our walk with the Lord.

In the same way that rebar (reinforcing bars of steel) strengthens concrete and muscle fortifies the body, character reinforces the virtues of the Christian life. Character fortifies the soul. Character enables love, joy, peace, patience, and all the fruits of the Spirit to be more fixed in our soul. Character enables the believer to abide in Christ and to live in consistent fellowship with and obedience to Jesus. Without spiritual rebar, no matter how earnest and well intentioned we may be, we will crumble against the pressures of life, the winds of adversity, and the waves of temptation.

The divine nature, through the Holy Spirit, is the source of **love**; but the act of loving all people (demonstrating respect and acts of mercy) when they are acting toward us in unlovable ways requires training.

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335 Matthew 11:28-30, *New International Version*, emphasis added.

The divine seed of **gentleness** is planted in our hearts by faith, but gentle responses to harsh accusations and gentle answers to quarrelsome individuals are achieved through the training of the tongue.

The Holy Spirit is the source of **peace**, but learning to keep our hearts in perfect peace in the midst of tense and stressful circumstances requires the training of the soul.

**Self-control** is also the fruit of the Holy Spirit; but temperance in our emotions and appetites requires the practice of self-discipline, especially for those who aren't used to saying "no!" to themselves.

**Patience.** This virtue is also planted in our souls from God. It is a quality of the divine nature. But the ability to wait for that which we long for, to delay pleasure, and to be still will only be fastened in our character through intentional effort.

**Faithfulness** is a characteristic of the divine nature; but being on time, working hard, keeping our word, and following through on our commitments requires vigilant training, especially for those who are prone to laziness.

**Humility** is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; but the act of considering others better than ourselves, of sitting in the lowest seat at the table, and taking the role of a servant is a skill only achieved through discipline.

**Heart purity** is also from the Holy Spirit by faith, but the habit of guarding our heart is gained through diligent spiritual exercise!

The divine seed of **self-control** is from God, but taming my tongue and fully mastering my words comes through practice.

**Joy** is a fruit of the Spirit, but learning to praise the Lord at all times is a trained choice of the will.<sup>336</sup>

Through redemption God gives us all the building materials we will ever need for godly character; but the building of that character, stone by stone,

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**Climbing Mt. Everest is not a challenge one can consider easy. The tallest mountain stands nearly 10,000 meters (30,000 feet) high, at its summit there is 2/3 less oxygen than at sea level. Three hundred climbers have lost their lives attempting to climb it. It costs about \$75,000 and takes 40 days to make the climb! The Christian life demands commitment, too, and is a journey we cannot consider easy!**

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room by room is our daily challenge. Where does grace fit in? Grace is what believers experience when they are busy with training.

## Exercise Involves Adversity, Including Chastening

Adversity trains us. Paul states, “And not only that, but we glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance character; and character hope.”<sup>337</sup> We must look at the difficulty God allows in our lives as his school of virtue.

God’s chastening also trains us. In Hebrews we learn that one must not “despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by him; for whom the Lord loves he corrects and scourges every son whom he receives.”<sup>338</sup> We also learn that this chastening is for our good, “that we may be partakers of his holiness.”<sup>339</sup>

## Exercise Involves Spiritual Disciplines

These disciplines train us. The spiritual disciplines are a means of grace. Through the exercise of these disciplines, the Holy Spirit will free us from the tyranny of self, appetite, materialism, and pride, and bring healing to our souls, forming us into the image of Jesus.

In this course, we will only be able to touch on some of the classic spiritual disciplines. We will categorize them in the following way:

### The disciplines of devotion

- **Solitude** – Spending time alone with God.
- **Meditation** – Savoring the Word of God with a resolve to know and please God.
- **Fasting and self-denial** – Skipping meal(s), exercising moderation, or denying ourselves certain pleasures for a time in order to seek the face of God.
- **Simplicity** – Learning to live with less in order to focus on the most important things.
- **Sacrifice** – Giving our time and resources beyond what seems humanly reasonable in order to cultivate a greater dependence on God.

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337 Romans 5:3-4

338 Hebrews 12:5-6

339 Hebrews 12:10



## The disciplines of activity

- **Prayer** – Holding conversation with God.
- **Worship** – Offering uninhibited praise and adoration to God.
- **Fellowship** – Meeting with other Christians to give and receive care and service.
- **Confession** – Regular honesty and transparency before God and a trusted Christian friend.
- **Submission** – Humbling yourself before God and others while seeking accountability in relationships. Relationships train us. The tools God most often uses to shape us into the image of Christ are other people. Sometimes these tools are very painful. But God also uses the spiritual gifts of other believers for the equipping or training (same word as used in 1 Timothy 4:7) of the saints,<sup>340</sup> until we grow up into the full stature of Jesus Christ.<sup>341</sup>

## Exercise Involves Personal Discipline

Self-renunciation or self-mortification trains us. Self-renunciation has to do with one's commitment to saying a decisive "no" to physical appetites when they become too strong, and especially when they begin to erode one's spiritual life. Paul said it like this:

And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things.... But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection; lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.<sup>342</sup>

There are at least six areas of personal discipline which we will discuss in this course:

1. Tongue
2. Thought life
3. Appetite
4. Temperament
5. Time
6. Personal convictions

Practice, adversity, the spiritual disciplines, and personal discipline: These are the primary training exercises which allow God's grace to flow in our lives. These will help us keep natural desire in check, produce good habits, and allow the Holy Spirit to reign as he wants to and to bring us into conformity to Jesus Christ.

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340 Ephesians 4:12

341 Ephesians 4:13

342 1 Corinthians 9:25, 27

Why is conformity to Christ and his purposes not happening with more regularity among us? Why are there so many silent struggles going on? Why are some among us disappointed with the Christian life? Because too few Christians have joined God's spiritual gym class!

## **GROWTH THROUGH EXERCISE IS GOD'S NORMAL WAY OF FORMING US**

While we know that the Holy Spirit can, and does, transform our hearts in instantaneous moments on our spiritual pilgrimage, we also know that he brings us to full maturity through processes. The miracles of new birth and Spirit baptism are amazing and take care of the heart problems, but they don't automatically solve all our character problems.

To teach that spiritual formation is a process does not take away from those extraordinary moments of revival. Many devoted followers of Jesus have experienced a divine moment of complete consecration and surrender beyond new birth and the cleansing of the Holy Spirit as a result. But just as miracles don't destroy the normal laws of nature, these extraordinary moments or seasons in our journey don't dismiss the normal processes of maturity God has put in place.

### **Spiritual Growth Is Usually Patterned after Physical Growth**

Infants don't become adults overnight, but follow a God-ordained process of maturity. The same thing is true of our spiritual growth.

### **Spiritual Formation Is a Growth Process Because Our Problems Are Deeper Than We Know**

We have been shaped by culture, family, experiences, and failures more than we realize. Not all habits are erased by the miracle of conversion. Some Christian mothers still raise their voices. Some Christian husbands act out in anger on occasion. Christian wives sometimes overspend. Christian men may struggle with the wandering eye or mind. Christians often over-indulge, "over-speak," oversleep, etc. I praise God that he forgives sin, makes us new, gives us the Holy Spirit, works miracles, and casts out demons; but there will always be a need in our lives for training.

### **Spiritual Formation Is a Growth Process Because Certain Habits Are Hard to Break**

If you didn't like to read before you got saved, you're probably a Christian who doesn't like to read. You need to exercise your mind to read. If you tend to be negative or judgmental, you will need to train your attitude toward thankfulness and acceptance. If you were a highly emotional person before you got saved, now you're probably a saved emotional person.

You must now get busy training your emotions. If you were brought up with an abusive father or one who had a very low view of women, then you may still struggle to love and respect. Train yourself. If your mom gave your dad the silent treatment when she didn't get her way, you may still struggle with this bad habit. Get into God's gym! If you've been class conscious or prejudiced, you may still suffer pride of race. Train yourself to think of all people in the way God thinks of them. If you've never received affection, you will need to put forth effort to show Christian affection.

Bad habits—ways of thinking, expressing ourselves, responding to problems—have often dug deep ruts in our character. These are impossible to get out of without the Holy Spirit and training! Apart from ongoing training, we will not, cannot be conformed to Christ. The disciples are an example of this truth,

Then he came to the disciples and found them asleep, and said to Peter, "What? Could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."<sup>343</sup>

What an opportunity the disciples missed to share in the suffering of Jesus and to stand with him in prayer in his final hours. What an opportunity to walk in his steps and to conform to his pattern of life. But the flesh was dominant and untrained. Because of this, the disciples abandoned Jesus in the heat of battle.

Someone will argue, "After Pentecost the disciples never again fell asleep during prayer but were always watchful!" I highly doubt this claim! Pentecost provided the indwelling Holy Spirit, but it did not take away the disciples' need for self-discipline. Peter, the main character in the day of Pentecost story writes to disciples about the need for earnest training. Remember that Peter is the one who assures us that we have received everything we need for a faithful Christian life,<sup>344</sup> but we must add the building block of training.<sup>345</sup>

## ILLUSTRATIONS OF TRAINING FROM REAL LIFE

Professional athletes become skillful through training. They don't wait until they get on the court or on the field; they don't wait for the performance. Soldiers don't wait until they are on the bloody battlefield to learn their weapons. Carpenters become skilled at using their tools through constant use.

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**Sow a thought, reap an act;  
Sow an act, reap a habit;  
Sow a habit, reap a destiny.**

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<sup>343</sup> Matthew 26:40-41

<sup>344</sup> 2 Peter 1:3

<sup>345</sup> 2 Peter 1:5

In the same way that athletes, soldiers, and carpenters become skilled through practice, so Christians become skilled in Christian virtue—patience, kindness, self-control—through constant practice.

## AN EXAMPLE OF SELF-TRAINING

Daniel knew the danger of being enamored by Babylon and forgetting God and his beloved homeland. As he was being led away as a captive, he must have wondered how he would keep his heart and mind from being conformed to Babylon. Somewhere early on in his exile, he made up his mind to train himself in devotion to God and his homeland:

Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, **as was his custom since early days.**<sup>346</sup>

From his early days of captivity, Daniel established daily customs—disciplines which would guard his heart from love of Babylon, keep his heart on his homeland, and preserve his affection for Jehovah.

Daniel's training resulted in amazing visions, spiritual and secular influence, effective prayer; and he had a profound influence on the exiled Jews. Like Daniel, successful Christians are those who train themselves toward godliness.

## CONCLUSION

Do you wish you were a stronger Christian? Young men and women often misunderstand true strength. Strength is not the absence of temptation. Strength is not placid indifference to pain, to beauty, to injustice, to sensual pleasure. Strong Christians are not those who are immune to pride, insensitive to words that cut and wound, see nothing attractive in forbidden fruit, or feel no hunger pains for fleshly indulgences. The best word to describe people who sense nothing, see nothing, feel nothing, and taste nothing, is not strong, but... dead!

True strength is found in:

- The grace to deal decisively with sin and with anything which hinders our spiritual progress
- The grace to get in God's gym every single day to train toward godliness
- The humble courage to build safeguards in those areas where we are most vulnerable to temptation

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<sup>346</sup> Daniel 6:10, emphasis added.

- A commitment to the process of spiritual discipline and strength building
- Spiritual vigilance to daily and prayerfully put on the whole armor of God
- Being filled with the Holy Spirit!

Our son Jesse, who is blind, has a beautiful guide dog named Nala. Nala has taught me a lot about the advantage of discipline and training. In order for her to become useful to her master—protecting and guiding him—she had to first of all endure eight months of rigorous training. And in order for her to continue to be useful, she must live a disciplined life. Her food and water are carefully regulated. Her sleep and free time are managed. She has been trained not to bark or run after cats! She spends almost every moment of the day either guiding or waiting quietly beside Jesse for his next command. Her training is rewarded with lots of affection, nutritious food, and a daily play time! Nala has an enjoyable and rewarding life... because of discipline.

## LESSON 7 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 7 TEST

1. What does godliness mean?
2. What does Paul mean by “exercise yourself toward godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7)?
3. What are the seven qualities Peter says we must add to our faith?
4. What four things does spiritual exercise involve?
5. Name some of the spiritual disciplines we must practice if we would grow in Christian character.

## LESSON 8

# SOLITUDE, MEDITATION, FASTING, AND SIMPLICITY

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF DEVOTION

### LESSON 7 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points from Lesson 7. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 7.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of the classic spiritual disciplines to spiritual formation.
2. Have a better understanding of these disciplines.
3. Begin putting these disciplines into practice.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### Christians Living in Difficult Conditions

Daisy leads a congregation of overseas foreign workers (OFWs) in Paris. To survive financially, almost all of her congregation share small apartment spaces in quite crowded conditions. Most work very long work days with very little time off throughout the year. Can spiritual formation happen even in these difficult conditions?

Most Christians outside the USA live in overpopulated, urban cities. Most live in poverty, trying to survive on \$4 a day or less. Many deal with long commutes, sometimes two to three hours a day. Most live with their extended families, or board away from their families



with others. For these believers, finding a quiet time and a place of solitude is a great challenge; making prayer and meditation on God's Word a daily priority requires tremendous commitment.

## Christians Living Busy Lives

In the West, most Christians live in a very fast-paced material world. It's tough to slow down long enough to become more spiritually minded. They usually have enough space, are living above bare survival, have access to quiet places, and if they simplified their lives a little they could free up time for the spiritual disciplines. Their challenge is often just seeing the value of the disciplines and taking the time to cultivate the presence of God.

## INTRODUCTION

At the front gate of the Marine training camp in Parris Island, South Carolina, is a sign that says, **"Where the Difference Begins!"** What is the difference for a United States Marine? Some of the differences in a Marine are: rigid body posture, a spotless uniform, a sense of focus and determination, personal discipline, physical and mental toughness, a readiness to follow orders, and the ability to function as a member of a combat team. These characteristics are developed during the serious training at Parris Island. The Marines know that their life may depend on the quality of their training. Training is where the difference begins!<sup>347</sup>

- » If an outsider looked at the Christians in your church, what would they list as the main differences between believers and non-believers?

The church, God's army, has been called to "make disciples of all nations."<sup>348</sup> This is more than bringing converts to a testimony of salvation; it is helping new believers form into the image of Christ. Their life, as well as the life of the church, depends on our faithfulness to this calling.

How do we accomplish this? How do we make devoted followers of Jesus? More importantly for this course, how will *we* develop more Christ-like character? How will we be transformed from a state of brokenness and self-centeredness to a state of wholeness and usefulness in God's kingdom? Part of the answer is in the practice of the classic spiritual disciplines. Richard Foster says, "Superficiality is the curse of our age.... The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.... The classical disciplines of the spiritual life call us to move beyond surface living into the depths."<sup>349</sup>

By "classic" we mean that they have been practiced by faithful Christians in every generation.

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<sup>347</sup> Illustration and application adapted from Dr. Michael Avery

<sup>348</sup> Matthew 28:19

<sup>349</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 1

## THE BIG IDEA

The practice of the spiritual disciplines, along with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, will provide training for a victorious life. They are absolutely essential for moving beyond a nominal, lukewarm, often-defeated Christian life. Every faithful generation of Christians has proven this.

## THE IMPORTANT PLACE OF THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES IN THE LIFE OF EVERY BELIEVER

The spiritual disciplines were important in the life of Jesus; if we would be formed into his image, they must become increasingly important in our lives as well.

### Spiritual Disciplines Fight against the World, the Flesh, and the Devil

It is best to understand the Christian life as a battleground.<sup>350</sup> The need for fervent, faith-filled effort and spiritual militancy is clearly emphasized by Jesus and the apostles. Jesus said, “And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence; and the violent (one armed, fervent hearted and deeply devoted) take it by force.”<sup>351</sup> Paul refers to the Christian life as a battle.<sup>352</sup> This battle requires alert, vigilant, wakeful Christians. Nominal, lukewarm believers just won’t survive.

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**“The disciplines call us to move beyond nominal living into the depths of Jesus. They call us beyond casual Christianity to an energetic spiritual athleticism which will allow us to experience more and more of the ocean depths of God.”**

**Richard Foster**

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In the allegory, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, by John Bunyan, the main character, Christian, visits Interpreter’s house. There, Christian is shown a vision of an armed man rushing the gates of Heaven, overcoming the guards, and then entering the gates of the holy city with great rejoicing. Christian didn’t understand this vision, so Interpreter explains it. The vision means that urgent, zealous determination is required of every Christian who intends to enter Heaven, because all of Hell is out to stop us.

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350 1 Timothy 6:12

351 Matthew 11:12

352 2 Timothy 4:7

Practicing the spiritual disciplines will fortify our hearts and condition us mentally and spiritually for battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil.<sup>353</sup>

## Spiritual Disciplines Are a Means of Grace, Equipping Us for Battle

On this battlefield, we need grace. You and I are no match for this world, the flesh, or the devil. Indeed, all human striving for righteousness is insufficient. Righteousness is a gift from God. There is nothing we can do to receive the fullness of Jesus. But God has given us the spiritual disciplines as a means of receiving grace. Richard Foster writes,

A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plant, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain. This is the same way it is with the spiritual disciplines—they are a way of sowing to the Spirit. The disciplines are God’s way of getting us into the ground; they put us where he can work within us and transform us.<sup>354</sup>

Spiritual formation teacher and author Robert Mulholland writes,

**In the final analysis, there is nothing we can do to transform ourselves into persons who love and serve as Jesus did, except make ourselves available to God to do his work of transforming grace in our lives.**<sup>355</sup>

He goes on to explain that there are three ways we are made available to God for spiritual formation: confrontation, consecration, and the spiritual disciplines:

### 1. Grace flows through confrontation.

Through some channel—the scripture, worship... a brother or sister in Christ...—the Spirit of God may probe some area in which we are not conformed to the image of Christ.<sup>356</sup>

### 2. Grace flows through consecration.

We must come to the point of saying “yes” to God at each point of unlikeness. We must give God permission to do the work he wants to do... because transformation will not be forced upon us.<sup>357</sup>

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353 Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 2:16

354 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 6

355 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 26, emphasis added.

356 Ibid, 37

357 Ibid, 38

We must open the door of our soul to God.

### 3. Grace flows through the spiritual disciplines.

These are the acts of opening the door to God in a consistent manner.

» Questions for discussion:

- Is there any similarity between what happens in a military camp and what happens in your church?
- What about in your personal life?
- Do the Christians in your local congregation remind you of soldiers on an active battlefield or children on a playground?
- How differently do you think you would live if you really believed you were living on a battlefield?

## The Spiritual Disciplines Provide Greater Enjoyment of God

Yes, we are soldiers. But we are soldiers on our way to a wedding feast. We often think of Christians who practice the spiritual disciplines as very serious and stern, even unhappy. Sometimes this is true; but we need to think of the Christian life not only as warfare but also as a wedding.<sup>358</sup>

We are the bride of Christ on our way to our wedding. Our wedding day will be a day of perfect union with Christ and a day of eternal feasting and celebration. As Christians on the way, the joyful anticipation we experience and the growing affection we have for Christ, our Bridegroom, gives us joy—joy which often spills out of our hearts and into our daily lives. The saints of God around the world who have most impacted my life are not sad and mournful. They aren't depressed or negative. Their practice of the spiritual disciplines doesn't make them spiritually proud or distant from other people. They are alert and sober-minded for sure; but, like Jesus, they are the most humble, optimistic, and joyful people in the world.

Christians who walk around with the weight of the world on their shoulders aren't practicing prayer, fasting, or scripture meditation biblically. Practicing the presence of God, which is what the disciplines will help us do, will bring spiritual freedom. Anxiety, fear, and oppression will lose their grip on us in the presence of Jesus.

It is so important that Christians learn to celebrate the goodness and blessings of God, even on the battlefield. Our little celebrations along the way are foretastes of our wedding day! John Wesley taught that to love God is “to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire

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358 Revelation 21:9

continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him, and to thirst day and night for a fuller enjoyment of him.”<sup>359</sup> **The spiritual disciplines should never become mere habits, but practices which lead to a fuller enjoyment of God and his many blessings.**

We should be very careful not to view prayer, fasting, or any of the spiritual disciplines as a way to earn God’s favor, to put God in our debt, or even to gain some material blessing. Some Christians feel that if they make certain sacrifices, then God owes them something and will have to give them what they ask for. The spiritual disciplines are about cultivating a deeper relationship with God, not making him our debtor.

## **The Spiritual Disciplines Are Means of Grace to Form Ordinary Disciples into the Image of Christ**

The spiritual disciplines are not for super Christians. There are none. The spiritual disciplines are for stay-at-home moms, farmers, factory workers, immigrants, professors, students, business owners, and... everyone.

The disciples of Jesus were just ordinary fisherman; and yet, they learned from Jesus the practices of solitude, meditation, prayer, fasting, sacrifice, worship, service, and the Lord’s Supper. As they practiced, they became more like him. And through the practice of these disciplines, God’s power flowed in and through their lives.

James was quick to encourage very ordinary Christians that though

Elijah was a man with a nature like ours... he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain.... And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.<sup>360</sup>

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**“God intends the disciplines of the spiritual life to be for ordinary human beings: people who have jobs, who care for children, who wash dishes and mow lawns. In fact, the disciplines are best exercised in the midst of relationships with our husband or wife, our brothers and sisters, or friends and neighbors.”**

**Richard Foster**

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God meets with ordinary people and uses them for his glory.

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<sup>359</sup> See John Wesley’s sermon, “On Love.” Retrieved from <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-139-on-love/> December 21, 2019.

<sup>360</sup> James 5:17-18

## DEFINING THE CLASSIC SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

In this lesson and the following, we will briefly explore some of the classic spiritual disciplines and seek practical ways to incorporate them into our walk with God.<sup>361</sup> Some of them will require more explanation than others.

### The Spiritual Discipline of Solitude

Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, he went out and departed to a solitary place; and there he prayed.<sup>362</sup>

#### The meaning of solitude

Solitude is simply withdrawing from people in order to be alone with God and draw closer to him. As a spiritual discipline, solitude is not simply about being alone, but about being alone with the Lord. Solitude is a fast from friendships in order to focus on our primary friendship with God.

But we must understand solitude as not just withdrawing to a physical place, but to a mental place as well. Solitude is shutting the door of our mind, for a little while, to the outside world, in order to renew the inner man. If we think of solitude in this way, then perhaps a subway commute or a crowded doctor's office could become a place of solitude when physical solitude cannot be found.

#### Solitude in the life of Jesus

Luke tells us that Jesus often “withdrew to desolate (lonely, solitary) places and prayed”<sup>363</sup> Why did he do it? Because serving people depleted his spiritual resources—resources which needed to be replenished constantly. Though he only had a few years to finish his earthly work, Jesus intentionally arranged his life to slip away from his followers and to be alone with his Father.

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361 For these lessons on the classic spiritual disciplines I am relying heavily on the following three books:  
Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013)  
Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998)  
Dr. Dan Glick, *Disciplines of Grace*. (booklet).

362 Mark 1:35

363 Luke 5:16 (see also, Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42)

## The power of solitude in spiritual formation

One of the church fathers, Diadochos of Photiki, observed that if the door of our lives is left open to other people for too long, the heat of our souls will escape.<sup>364</sup> I have observed this in my own life. I begin to become impoverished spiritually when I fail to sit at Jesus' feet. Anxiety, impatience, loss of confidence, a pessimistic frame of mind, a sense of emptiness, a critical spirit—these are often the result of neglecting solitude.

In solitude, we lose our unhealthy attachment to people. In solitude, we get our eyes off men and the ways they hurt or disappoint us and put them back on the Lord. In true solitude, we offer the Holy Spirit our full attention. He realigns our perspective and priorities to his and pours fresh peace, love, and joy into our hearts. In solitude, we find grace to return to our communities and responsibilities with the anointing of the Holy Spirit to make a lasting impact.

Solitude weans us from the deadly disease of busyness and a performance mindset. In solitude, we learn that God doesn't value us because of what we do for him, but who we are—our inner being. Worldly-minded people value visible accomplishment far more than the renewing of our minds in the presence of God. Spiritually-minded people know the reshaping of our innermost being into the image of Christ is God's primary purpose in redemption.

In solitude, we discover that the Holy Spirit can accomplish far more through our abiding in him than through our hopeless efforts to do something great for him.<sup>365</sup>

## Practical tips for getting started with solitude

### 1. Find a place that works for you.

Be creative. One student in an Asian Bible school crawled under her bed to be alone with God because it was the only quiet place she could find! Others, like myself, find that walk-

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**“It can hardly be, that we should spend one entire day in a continued [conversation] with men, without suffering loss in our soul, and in some measure, grieving the Holy Spirit of God. We have need daily to retire from the world, at least morning and evening, to converse with God, to commune more freely with our Father which is in secret.”**

**John Wesley**

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<sup>364</sup> Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 27

<sup>365</sup> John 15:4



ing alone in a park near my home gives God space to speak. In the Philippines, a densely populated country, at least one pastor said he found solitude in the CR (Comfort Room) because it was the only place he could get away from people! Perhaps your circumstances right now make finding a quiet place nearly impossible. The Lord understands where you are and will help you if you'll let him.

## **2. Schedule a regular time of solitude.**

For solitude to become a transformational discipline, it's important that you find a regular time that works for you and stick with it. John Wesley said that "any time" is "no time." In other words, unless we set a regular time to be alone with the Lord, it's likely not to happen.

## **3. Keep your focus on God.**

Do not look for spiritual visions, dreams, or supernatural signs. Seek only to quiet your heart and commune with God, by his Holy Spirit, through his Word.

## **4. Be patient.**

Discipline always precedes delight! This is true of all discipline. Before we begin to experience the benefits of solitude, we'll probably need to practice it awhile.

- » Give group members an opportunity to express the most helpful teaching on solitude.

# **The Spiritual Discipline of Meditation**

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night.  
And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers....<sup>366</sup>

## **The meaning of meditation**

*Hagah* (Hebrew) – To talk to oneself; to ponder.<sup>367</sup>

*Meletao* (Greek) – To carefully resolve in mind; to muse upon.<sup>368</sup>

Meditation is pondering God's Word by talking to oneself. We meditate on scripture when we prayerfully turn specific portions of God's Word over and over in our minds until the Holy Spirit begins to quicken it to our heart; until our heart receives its instruction, warn-

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366 Psalm 1:2-3a

367 Joshua 1:8, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from thy mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night."

368 1 Timothy 4:15, "Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all."



ing, and correction; until our soul tastes its transforming sweetness. As in every discipline, meditation requires the illuminating grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>369</sup>

- » Have someone read 1 Corinthians 2:9-14. Discuss what this passage teaches about the role of the Holy Spirit in illuminating God's Word.

King David pondered God's Word until he found it "more to be desired... than gold, yea than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb."<sup>370</sup> The Christian who meditates on God's Word will not just read and forget, but will savor every bite and speak it into his life. This is one of the most transforming of all the spiritual disciplines. Many Christians read their Bibles, but few take time to savor it.

### **Biblical meditation is not emptying the mind but filling it with God's Word.**

Eastern meditation (Zen, yoga, and Transcendental Meditation) teaches mind-emptying and is very dangerous. The mind that is left empty will be inhabited by demonic lies or even demons themselves.<sup>371</sup> Biblical meditation is focused on filling the mind with the Word of God. The psalmist exclaimed, "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."<sup>372</sup>

In Philippians 4, Paul exhorts believers not to empty their minds but to "meditate on these things."<sup>373</sup> What things? Not past sin, past failures, or the faults of others; but things that are noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, things of virtue, and things that are praiseworthy. If every child of God would choose moment by moment to replace negative, critical thoughts with thoughts of good, their spiritual lives would be transformed.

### **The purpose of biblical meditation in spiritual formation.**

The power of meditation is that it provides the opportunity for a daily washing by the Word of God.<sup>374</sup> The Word changes the way we think and behave. The light of the Word<sup>375</sup> exposes every hidden sin<sup>376</sup> and every destructive lie of the Devil. The Word saturates our souls regularly with truth until we are trained to think and act like Jesus.

The reason so many Christians are losing spiritual battles is that they are exposed on the battlefield without a sword—the only sword of the Spirit.<sup>377</sup> When Satan whispers, "God

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369 1 Corinthians 2:9-14

370 Psalm 19:10

371 Matthew 12:44

372 Psalm 119:97

373 Philippians 4:8

374 Ephesians 5:26

375 Psalm 119:105

376 Psalm 19:12

377 Ephesians 6:17

doesn't really love you," or, "You'll never make it;" "You are not really a Christian;" "You can't live a holy life;" "Everyone's against you;" "God won't forgive you..." again, they have no defense. But through the discipline of meditation we replay God's truth day after day, month after month, year after year until our faith is established in God and until every flaming lie of the Enemy is resisted and defeated.

### The results of meditation on scripture

1. **The Word produces faith,**<sup>378</sup> therefore meditation will strengthen our confidence in God.
2. **The Word purifies the thoughts and life,**<sup>379</sup> therefore meditation will replace wrong thoughts with right ones.
3. **The Word provides an effective shield against Satan,**<sup>380</sup> therefore meditation will protect us.
4. **The Word prospers the believer's life,**<sup>381</sup> therefore meditation will lead to greater and greater measures of God's blessing.

### Practical tips for getting started with meditation

#### 1. Don't make it complicated.

I love John Wesley's simple approach to meditation:

Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read?... I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: "Lord, is it not thy Word, 'If any man lack wisdom, let him ask of God'?..." I then search after and consider parallel passages of scripture, "comparing spiritual things with spiritual." I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the [historical] writings.... And what I thus learn, that I teach.<sup>382</sup>

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378 Romans 10:17

379 Psalm 119:9; 1 Peter 1:22; Ephesians 6:17

380 Matthew 4:1-11; Ephesians 6:17

381 Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:3

382 This is taken from the preface to *John Wesley: Man of One Book*.

2. Find a quiet place. “Be still and know that [he is] God.”<sup>383</sup>
3. Read and ponder with prayer for insight and a willingness to obey.<sup>384</sup>
4. Be careful to guard your expectations. Don’t seek after signs or supernatural revelations. Seek only to know God and to be known by him.
5. As you leave your quiet place, take at least one thought with you and ponder it through the day.
6. Through the day, practice replacing defeating, intrusive thoughts with the Word of God.
  - » Let’s take 5 minutes to practice meditation together. Let everyone get very quiet and simply meditate on Joshua 1:8. Do not try to form this verse into an outline for a Bible study. Rather, put yourself in the story. Be Joshua! Meditate on what this message meant for him. Then think about your own life. What message does the Lord have for you?

## The Spiritual Discipline of Fasting

And he said to them, “Can you make the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then **they will fast** in those days.”<sup>385</sup>

Fasting is one of the most spiritually transforming, but also one of the most difficult—and therefore neglected—of all the spiritual disciplines. When practiced with sincere heart and combined with prayer, it is one of the most effective means of renewing our hunger for God, capturing wandering thoughts, restraining wayward desires, burning up the chaff of self, clarifying direction, receiving fresh spiritual insight from God’s Word, and retaining the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit.

### The meaning of fasting

Scriptural fasting is abstaining from food, (or exercising moderation in food intake), for spiritual purposes. Fasting is not dieting! Fasting seems to be distinct from other forms of abstinence—entertainment, sex (for married couples<sup>386</sup>), social events, or any other thing, though moderation and self-denial in these areas can be valuable for cultivating spiritual growth.

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383 Psalm 46:10

384 John 7:17

385 Luke 5:34-35, emphasis added.

386 1 Corinthians 7:5

## **Fasting is not commanded, but it is assumed among Christians.**

Scripture doesn't directly command fasting, but it does assume its practice among Christians. In the text above it should be clear to us that Jesus assumes that every believer will fast.<sup>387</sup> I was reminded of this one afternoon at a conference in the Philippines, where veteran missionary statesman Wesley Duewel was the lecturer. "Jesus said that his disciples will fast," he said. "So, are you a disciple? Are you practicing this discipline?" The Word of God convicted me, and I realized that my Christian walk lacked power because of my neglect of this discipline.

Fasting held a very important place in the life of Jesus, the lives of the apostles, and the New Testament church. And it has been an important discipline in every great work of God. John Wesley said, "Everyone knows that every good Methodist fasts twice a week (Wednesdays and Fridays)." Epiphanius, church father and bishop of Salamis, Cyprus (315-403) said, "Who does not know that the fast of the fourth and sixth days of the week are practiced by Christians throughout the world?"

## **Biblical examples of fasting**

The scriptures are full of examples of fasting. Moses, Hannah, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, the prophets, Anna, John the Baptist, Jesus, Paul, the apostles, the elders at Antioch, and Cornelius all fasted.

As Moses fasted, God spoke with him face to face as a man speaks with a friend.<sup>388</sup> As Hannah fasted and prayed, God opened her womb and gave her Samuel.<sup>389</sup> As Daniel fasted and prayed, he was given skill to understand God's Word,<sup>390</sup> the power of God was manifested to defeat the prince of Persia, and the answer to Daniel's prayer was granted.<sup>391</sup> As Saul (Paul) prayed and fasted, he was filled with the Holy Spirit and his

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**"First, let [fasting] be done unto the Lord with our eye singly fixed on him. Let our intention be this, and this alone, to glorify our Father in Heaven."**

**John Wesley**

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**"Some have exalted fasting beyond all scripture and reason; and others have utterly neglected it."**

**John Wesley**

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387 Luke 5:34-35

388 Exodus 33:1

389 1 Samuel 1:8, 17-18

390 Daniel 9:3, 22-23

391 Daniel 10:3, 12-13

eyes were opened.<sup>392</sup> As Cornelius prayed, fasted, and gave alms, these sincere offerings rose as a memorial to God,<sup>393</sup> who answered Cornelius's prayer by saving his entire household. These are just a few of the many biblical examples of the power of God released through fasting and prayer.

## Five powerful results of fasting

### 1. Fasting humbles the soul.

The psalmist said, "But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled my soul with fasting."<sup>394</sup> Ezra knew that taking the Jewish exiles back to their homeland would require divine grace. In light of the many dangers and temptations ahead, he wrote: "Then I proclaimed a fast there at the river... that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him the right way for us and our little ones... and he answered our prayer."<sup>395</sup>

How does fasting humble the soul? Abstaining from physical food reminds the soul of its utter need for, and dependence upon, God; it reminds us that we are sustained by spiritual things rather than physical, material things. Biblical, Christ-centered fasting is a testimony to God and to our own soul: "God, I'm hungry for you. Holy Spirit, I need you more than food, more than physical or material blessings, more than anything in this world!"

I have found fasting to be a cure for spiritual barrenness. When I am dry and barren spiritually, fasting and prayer cultivates the hard-packed soil of my heart and makes it receptive to the implanting of God's Word.

### 2. Fasting subjects our natural appetites to our spiritual appetites.

Fasting exposes areas of ignorant sin and selfishness, mortifying our strongest natural appetite. Fasting keeps our bodies subordinate to spiritual things. Or, as one church father said, "Fasting ensures that the stomach will not make the body boil to the hindering of the soul."<sup>396</sup> My Filipino brother, David Yucaddi, once told me that he knew he needed to fast when he felt improper desires begin to rise within! In other words, the slightest rising of pride or wrong desire is, for him, the trigger point for fasting. Other godly men have also testified that fasting quenches the fire of improper sexual passion.

After I had taught on fasting one Sunday, a Christian man felt convicted to incorporate this discipline into his walk with God. Sometime later he testified that fasting had made him aware of needs in his heart. "I never realized how impatient I was until I started fasting,"

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392 Acts 9:9, 17-18

393 Acts 10:4

394 Psalm 35:13

395 Ezra 8:21, 23

396 Asterius, in the fourth century

he said. “When I said ‘No’ to my body, I found myself becoming very impatient with my children!” We laughed with him because we could identify. Self-denial brings attitudes to the surface we have not known were in our hearts.

Richard Foster reminds us that, “The stomach is like a spoiled child, and a spoiled child does not need indulgence, but... discipline.” We all know what happens when we begin to discipline a spoiled child, don’t we? The more spoiled the child is, the louder the tantrum. Until he or she learns to submit to the word “no,” we will have a challenge on our hands. So it is with our own inner spoiled child!

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**“Our human cravings  
are like rivers that tend  
to overflow their banks;  
fasting helps keep them  
in their proper channels.”**

**Richard Foster**

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### **3. Fasting increases our spiritual appetite.**

Jesus found far more satisfaction in doing the will of his Father than he did in physical food,<sup>397</sup> and he calls us to be like him. He said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”<sup>398</sup> When I fast, and the hunger pains become strong, I will say to God, “Lord, these hunger pains are hunger pains for you. I want to be this hungry for you.” It doesn’t necessarily make me feel better at the moment, but I have never known God to ignore this sincere prayer. We must endeavor to turn our pains into prayers, believing that God will satisfy us with more of himself.

### **4. Fasting makes us more spiritually discerning.**

Through fasting, the New Testament church of Antioch discerned the will of God for the beginning of their mission ministry: “As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’”<sup>399</sup> Focused prayer with fasting often brings more clarity in our lives and helps us make important decisions.

Jesus’ life of prayer and fasting kept him more aware of the spiritual hunger of people around him, kept his heart brimming with love for them, and kept his spirit alert to what his Father wanted him to do and say to spiritually hungry people. Like the disciples, we are often so preoccupied with ourselves and our own needs that we lose our affection for souls. Fasting helps to keep our appetites in check, so that we can see and hear the work of the Holy Spirit around us.

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397 John 4:31-32

398 Matthew 5:6

399 Acts 13:2

- » Read John 4:27-34 together. Discuss the contrast between Jesus' and the disciples' relationship with food. What did Jesus mean by the statements, "I have food to eat that you do not know," and "My food is to do the will of him who sent me"? Do you think it's possible that the disciples' love for food might have caused them to miss seeing what the Holy Spirit was doing in Samaria?

## **5. Fasting strengthens our faith and, therefore, enables us to engage and defeat the enemy.**

I believe that the reason so many good men and women are often weak and powerless is because they do not practice regular fasting. In Matthew 17, the disciples find themselves powerless to cast the evil spirit out of a young man. Jesus makes it very clear that the problem was unbelief: "Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, 'Why could we not cast it out?' So Jesus said to them, 'Because of your unbelief.'"<sup>400</sup> Jesus then goes on to teach, "However, this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting."<sup>401</sup>

What is the relationship between fervent prayer and fasting and faith? Fervent prayer (prayer with fasting) strengthens faith and increases our power and effectiveness in service to God. We are engaged in spiritual battle; without prayer and fasting, we will never experience God's deliverance as he wants to reveal it. Paul often found himself in the midst of great spiritual conflict and therefore fasted often.<sup>402</sup>

My brothers and sisters who serve in developing countries often face demonic opposition. They know that without prayer and fasting they will never see spiritual strongholds broken through. They take Jesus' words seriously here and therefore experience great manifestations of divine power.

### **Two primary forms of fasting in the Bible**

1. Normal fasting—abstaining from all food, solid or liquid, but not from water
2. Partial fasting or moderation—restricting the diet, but not abstaining totally<sup>403</sup>

### **Practical tips for getting started with fasting**

1. Take into consideration your physical condition and follow doctor's recommendations.
2. Begin with a 24-hour partial fast. Go from lunch to lunch (two meals). Drink only fruit juices. Attempt this once a week for several weeks or months.

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400 Matthew 17:19-20a

401 Matthew 17:21

402 2 Corinthians 11:27-28

403 Daniel 10:3



3. Attempt a normal fast of 24 hours. Drink only water. Take vitamins if necessary. Do this weekly.
  4. After some time, move to a normal 36-hour fast. Fast from supper to breakfast on the second day (three meals). Do this once a week for several weeks or months.
  5. Try fasting for several days. Here you may find a significant spiritual breakthrough in your life.
  6. Make fasting a regular part of your life! Feel the pain of an empty stomach and depend on God to fill you with his grace.
- » Feel free to share testimonies regarding this discipline. Practice fasting this week and be prepared to come back next week to talk about your experience.

## The Spiritual Discipline of Simplicity

Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For he himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”<sup>404</sup>

### The meaning of the discipline of simplicity

The discipline of simplicity is the discipline of focusing on God’s priorities and arranging one’s lifestyle accordingly. It begins with an inner attitude of detachment from all but life’s highest pleasure—knowing and serving God. It results in lifestyle choices consistent with this attitude.

Outer simplicity is about doing our part to make our lives more spiritually and practically efficient; about ridding ourselves of everything which is stealing our joy; about removing from our lives the clutter which is troubling us, the chaos which is distracting us, the debt which is drowning us, and the activities which are controlling us.

God calls every Christian to an inner simplicity—a single-minded love for God and people and a single-minded devotion to seeking first his kingdom.<sup>405</sup> But inner simplicity will only be sustained when we intentionally arrange our daily lives in simple ways. Many Christians want to live more free and contented lives, but the bad habits of over-scheduling, over-speaking, over-committing, over-spending, over-collecting, over-working and even over-serving prevent them from the life they desire.

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404 Hebrews 13:5

405 Psalm 27:4, Psalm 40:8; Matthew 6:33



## Simplicity in the life of Jesus

Jesus modeled the discipline of simplicity in his words and deeds. When we read the stories of his life, he never seems in a hurry, yet he accomplishes so much. His activities were always purposeful.<sup>406</sup> The Holy Spirit was always directing him in meaningful, purposeful ways. He didn't just work hard; he worked wisely, always doing the things that pleased his Father.<sup>407</sup>

Jesus' life was not easy, but it was simple. He knew what his life was about and from early childhood went about his Father's business.<sup>408</sup> When Jesus spoke he used an economy of words.<sup>409</sup> His "Yes" meant "Yes," and his "No" meant "No."<sup>410</sup> He chose a simple lifestyle.<sup>411</sup> Jesus responded to interruptions with grace.<sup>412</sup> People, not material things, were always his priority—especially people who needed redemption and disciples who needed training. He lived the life of an itinerant evangelist, supported by others. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. As he died on the cross, his only earthly possessions were the clothes on his back. The discipline of simplicity in Jesus' life kept him focused on the priorities his Father had given him.

## The discipline of simplicity in the Bible

The Bible does not offer a set of rules for how we ought to simplify our lives, but it does present a number of warnings and admonitions. Jesus declared war on materialism. He taught that we cannot serve God and money. He warned us against laying up treasures on earth<sup>413</sup> and about covetousness, declaring: "A man's life does not consist of the abundance of his possessions."<sup>414</sup> He even demanded that the rich young ruler sell everything he owned in order to follow him.<sup>415</sup> Paul said that those who desire to be rich fall into temptation.<sup>416</sup> The psalmist warns, "If riches increase, do not set your heart on them."<sup>417</sup>

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406 Luke 4:43

407 John 4:34

408 Luke 2:49

409 John 14:10

410 Matthew 5:37

411 2 Corinthians 8:9

412 Matthew 9:20

413 Matthew 6:21

414 Luke 12:15

415 Matthew 19:16-22

416 1 Timothy 6:9

417 Psalm 62:10

## The power of simplicity in spiritual formation

The purpose of simplicity is simply to set us free. The simplification of our lifestyle will set us free from the tyranny of materialism and enable us to invest more and more time and resources into God's kingdom, and it will deliver us from bondage to the approval of men. The simplification of our work and ministry will set us free to do what we have been called and equipped to do, and to do it better. The simplification of our words will free us from making promises and commitments we can't keep and enable us to keep the promises we do make.

## Dangers of simplicity

We must be very careful of certain dangers:

### 1. There is the danger of legalism.

The Holy Spirit will not lead us all to the same lifestyle choices. The quality or style of clothes we wear, the homes we live in, the amount of money we save or give away is according to God's personal dealing with us. Let us not judge one another.

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**"Jesus calls us to a carefree unconcern for possessions (Luke 6:30)."**

**Richard Foster**

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### 2. There is the danger of renouncing material things as bad.

Simplicity doesn't renounce all possessions (unless Jesus demands it) but keeps them in their proper place.

### 3. There is the danger of renouncing God's gracious gifts.

Paul came to a place of contentment with both sacrifice and abundance.<sup>418</sup> He could accept plenty as gratefully as accept sacrifice. If God is blessing you, rejoice and don't be ashamed! Just don't set your heart on the blessing. If you are suffering, "count it all joy!"<sup>419</sup>

## Practical advice for practicing the discipline of simplicity

1. Do not be enslaved by debt.<sup>420</sup>
2. Buy things for their quality and usefulness rather than their trendiness.
3. Develop the habit of giving things away.<sup>421</sup>

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418 Philippians 4:12

419 James 1:2

420 Proverbs 22:7

421 Luke 3:11; Proverbs 11:24

4. Learn to enjoy things without having to own them.
  5. Learn to love the simple things of life, especially the natural wonders of God's world.
  6. Avoid get rich schemes, which feed a covetous spirit.<sup>422</sup>
  7. Only make promises and commitments you know you can keep.<sup>423</sup>
  8. Help break the tyranny of money by being generous.<sup>424</sup>
  9. Shun anything that distracts you from seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.
- » In the space below, write down at least three ways you know you could simplify your life to focus more on your biblical priorities. Be willing to make these changes by the grace of God, and be prepared to share your testimony with your group during your next meeting.

### THREE WAYS I COULD SIMPLIFY MY LIFE

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422 Proverbs 28:20

423 Psalm 76:11; Proverbs 20:25; Matthew 5:37

424 Proverbs 11:25, Proverbs 22:9

## LESSON 8 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 8 TEST

1. What are two benefits of the spiritual disciplines as taught in this lesson?
2. Give a Bible reference that shows the importance of solitude in the life of Jesus.
3. What does meditation mean?
4. List four of the powerful results of fasting.
5. According to Richard Foster, “Our human cravings are like \_\_\_\_\_ that tend to overflow their \_\_\_\_\_.”
6. Name two forms of fasting.

# LESSON 9

# PRIVATE PRAYER

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF DEVOTION

### LESSON 8 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points of Lesson 8. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 8.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Learn to pray as Jesus prayed.
2. Practice prayer by following the pattern Jesus established.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

A young man wrote the following letter to my friend Dr. Phil Brown:

I feel like I am not praying enough for a family member's physical recovery. Although he is constantly on my mind, and I find myself laying him at God's feet regularly, I still feel my praying is inadequate. One of my biggest struggles is that not only can I never be good enough, but I never read my Bible enough or pray enough.... How do I balance the feelings of guilt over inadequate praying with the fact that I know God can heal him, the fact that I want God's will, and the fact that I don't know what God's will is?

One evening during Bible study my friend Danny, a new Christian, spoke for most of us when he confessed, "Prayer is really hard for me! I just don't know how to have a good prayer life."

Many Christians struggle with prayer. Many are unsatisfied with their prayer lives. Since we can't see the one we're talking to, we find it difficult to concentrate, or even to believe

that God is listening. We wonder what to say. Some question prayer's importance since God already knows our concerns and needs before we pray. We wonder how much prayer is enough. We wonder why we don't see more results. All these struggles are common.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Jesus could be our teacher in the school of prayer? Through his example, through his Word, and through his Spirit, he is! If we'll take the time to listen, many of our questions about prayer can begin to be answered by studying the prayer life of Jesus.

- » Give members of the group an opportunity to share their prayer struggles and questions related to prayer which they have wrestled with.

## THE BIG IDEA

Spiritual formation into the image of Christ is directly connected to a consistent prayer life.

In this lesson, we will let Jesus teach us to pray. His simple pattern of prayer, the Lord's Prayer, has instructed Christians for almost 2,000 years and cannot be improved upon. But it is not a prayer formula. It is a pattern which helps us establish a proper order and priorities of prayer, especially private prayer:

1. Come into his presence with reverence.
2. Pray for the success of God's kingdom on earth.
3. Pray for personal needs.

In this lesson, we will endeavor to form our private prayers according to this pattern and, at the same time, look to him as the example of this pattern.

The Gospel of Luke gives us many windows into the prayer life of Jesus. We will look through these windows in this lesson. By observing Jesus' prayer life and by listening to his teaching on prayer, we will better understand how to have a deeper, more fulfilling, and more effective prayer life.

Luke tells us that there was something so compelling—so attractive—about Jesus' prayer life that his disciples wanted to pray as he did: "Now it came to pass, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, that one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.'"<sup>425</sup>

- » Quote the Lord's Prayer together. If you don't know it, memorize it.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us

our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.<sup>426</sup>

## FALSE CONCEPTS OF PRAYER

### There Is Power in the Act of Praying

Many Christians seem to believe this. But there is no power in the act of praying, only power through praying! And not just any kind of praying, but praying in a way that pleases God. All the power belongs to God. The 400 prophets of Baal put their faith in the act of praying, while Elijah put his faith in the God who answers prayer.<sup>427</sup> Our focus should not be on prayer itself, but on the God to whom we pray.

### More Praying Leads to More Results

Not always. Jesus told us not to be like the heathen who think their prayers will be answered because they pray many prayers.<sup>428</sup> God is not a vending machine from whom we can get the candy we want as long as we put in enough prayer coins. Prayer doesn't work like that. When I travel around the world, I notice that this is the thinking of every major world religion, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. I've been to numbers of shrines and seen Hindu and Buddhist monks chanting their prayers, spinning their prayer wheels, and moving their fingers through their prayer beads. They believe they will receive help when they pile up enough prayers. The quantity of prayers must be matched with the quality of our prayers. More prayer meetings alone won't bring God's blessing.

- » Discuss these false ideas about prayer with your group. Are there other false concepts you have observed?

## THE PRINCIPLES OF REWARDING, EFFECTIVE PRIVATE PRAYER, AS TAUGHT BY JESUS

**Jesus teaches that the first priority of secret prayer is intimate fellowship with God:** "So he said to them, 'When you pray, say: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."'"<sup>429</sup>

The secret of a more fulfilling and effective prayer life is to delight in our relationship with God. "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and he shall give you the desires of your heart."<sup>430</sup>

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426 Luke 11:1-4

427 1 Kings 18:36-38

428 Matthew 6:7

429 Luke 11:2

430 Psalm 37:4



This is how Israel was always to come into the presence of God,<sup>431</sup> and this is how God wants every child of his to come. Requests which do not rise out of delightful fellowship are faithless, misguided, and self-centered.<sup>432</sup>

Luke informs us that **fellowship with his Father was a priority of Jesus**. He often withdrew from the business of ministry to pray.<sup>433</sup> In prayer he lingered in the presence of his Father and listened to his Father's voice. In solitary prayer with his Father, Jesus' thoughts, words, and behavior were formed.<sup>434</sup> In prayer even his requests were formed. In prayer, Jesus aligned his will with the will of his heavenly Father so that everything he asked for was in harmony with the plans and purposes of God. This is what prayer is meant to be. Unless intimate communion with the Father is the priority of prayer, our time with the Lord will lack joy and our prayers will be selfish and empty.

When George Mueller, a man who was used by God to rescue thousands of orphaned street children in Bristol, England, was asked about the effectiveness of his prayer life, he responded:

I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, **to have my soul happy in the Lord**. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man may be nourished.

Out of communion with God flows a desire that his name be honored and his reputation protected. This is what Jesus meant by "hallowed be thy name." God will honor our prayers when we always put his glory and his reputation above all. One of the first principles of prayer is that as we take care of the things that matter to God, he'll take care of the things that matter to us.

Many wonder: "How do we know when we've prayed enough for a particular request? How much time is the right amount to spend with the Lord in prayer every day?" These kinds of questions are symptoms of a wrong prayer focus. My friend Dr. Phil Brown answered these so well:

If "pray without ceasing"<sup>435</sup> means that every waking thought is to be occupied with praying, then nobody, including Jesus himself, prayed enough. Jesus' example includes

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431 Deuteronomy 12:18, Deuteronomy 14:26, Deuteronomy 16:11, 15; 1 Kings 1:40

432 James 4:3

433 Luke 5:16, emphasis added.

434 John 5:20, 30

435 1 Thessalonians 5:17

short prayers of thanksgiving,<sup>436</sup> early mornings of prayer,<sup>437</sup> late nights of prayer,<sup>438</sup> daytime prayer,<sup>439</sup> and a night of prayer.<sup>440</sup> However, neither Jesus nor any other scripture author gives a standard amount of time that constitutes “enough” prayer....

What helps (and convicts) me is measuring my praying in terms of **relationship and responsibility**. I have a relationship with my wife, but I don’t ask myself “Have I talked with her enough?” The issue in relationships is understanding and intimacy. I am committed to conversing with my wife as a means to understanding her and having her understand me. When we understand one another at a given time, it is enough. Of course, creating mutual understanding today does not mean that we won’t need to communicate tomorrow. We are in a relationship with God, and prayer is God’s appointed means for us to develop the relationship. We must pray however often and however much it takes to keep growing our relationship with God. That will be more sometimes and less other times.

In terms of **responsibility**, we all have spiritual responsibilities in prayer. The Bible tells us we are to pray for all men,<sup>441</sup> for “kings and all who are in high positions,”<sup>442</sup> for the Lord of the harvest to send forth laborers,<sup>443</sup> for those who persecute us,<sup>444</sup> for his name to be sanctified, his kingdom to come, his will to be done, our daily needs, forgiveness for any sin committed, protection from the evil one,<sup>445</sup> and for all saints.<sup>446</sup> In addition to these specified prayer responsibilities, we also have a responsibility to pray for those over whom we have spiritual oversight and influence. Samuel recognized that to fail to pray for those over whom God had placed him as a spiritual authority would be to sin against God.<sup>447</sup> The same is true for us.

When the focus of prayer is the relationship and responsibility, we won’t be thinking so much about time.

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436 Matthew 15:36

437 Mark 1:35

438 Matthew 14:25

439 Luke 9:18

440 Luke 6:12

441 1 Timothy 2:1

442 1 Timothy 2:2

443 Luke 10:2

444 Matthew 5:44

445 Matthew 6:9-11

446 Ephesians 6:18

447 1 Samuel 12:23

## THE EFFECT OF PRAYER IN JESUS' LIFE AND MINISTRY

Luke records a fascinating detail of Jesus's baptism scene that the other Gospel writers did not:

And **while he prayed the heaven was opened**. And the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven which said, "You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased."<sup>448</sup>

We have no record of what Jesus was praying, but he stood dripping wet in the middle of the Jordan, praying quietly. His Father honored, affirmed, endorsed him, and filled him with the Holy Spirit.

### Jesus Received Encouragement and Grace from His Father

John Wesley notes that on three separate occasions in the gospels when a voice spoke from heaven it was "either while he was praying, or quickly after it."<sup>449</sup>

Men and women who enjoy regular time of fellowship with God in the place of prayer are more confident, courageous, and victorious because they live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is witnessing with their spirit that they are sons of God; and by the Spirit of God, they are crying out Abba, Father!

Prayerless men and women are insecure and therefore seek affirmation from people. Their fears ensnare them.<sup>450</sup> When I begin to feel fearful and insecure, I know there's a problem in my prayer life. When passion and fervency, conviction, and love are gone from my heart and voice, I know there's a problem in my prayer life. When I become too worried about what others think, there's a problem in my prayer life. If I am drawn into self-promotion, I know there is a problem in my prayer life. When I become forceful in my teaching, critical in my spirit, fake in my public prayers, I know there's a problem in my prayer life. Courage and confidence come through prayer.

### Jesus Received the Holy Spirit

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit descended as a dove and rested upon Jesus as he prayed.<sup>451</sup> (Similarly, it was while the apostles were praying that the Holy Spirit came and filled them.)<sup>452</sup> Then the Spirit led Jesus into the desert<sup>453</sup> where after forty days he "returned in the power

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448 Luke 3:21-22, emphasis added.

449 Luke 9:35; John 12:28

450 Proverbs 29:25

451 Luke 3:21-22

452 Acts 4:31

453 Luke 4:1

of the Spirit to Galilee.”<sup>454</sup> The humanly impossible challenges ahead of him demanded a presence and power beyond his own human power. Jesus needed the fullness of the Holy Spirit, and this fullness came through prayer.

It is not possible to be great in the kingdom of God without prayer, because it is in prayer that the Holy Spirit fills, directs, equips, and empowers Christians. Charles Spurgeon said, “If you can be great without prayer, your greatness will be your ruin. If God means to bless you greatly, he will help you pray greatly.”

Over a hundred years ago, a young English pastor by the name of Samuel Chadwick began an earnest search for the power of God. What he discovered was far better than anything he had ever imagined: the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Here is his testimony:

Early in the year 1882, there came to me an experience that lifted my life to a new plane of understanding and of power. **I received the gift of the Holy Spirit.** I was led in ways I did not know, for I had hardly so much as heard that such an experience was possible. The demands of an impossible task awakened me to a sense of need. I had neither power nor might in either service or prayer. I began to pray for power for service.... It was power I wanted. I wanted power that I might succeed, and my chief concern for power was the success it would bring. I wanted success that would fill my church, save the people, and bring down the strong fortifications of Satan with a crash. I was young, and I was in a hurry. Twelve of us began to pray in band, and the answer came.... He led us to Pentecost. **The key to all my life is in that experience.** It awakened my mind as well as cleansed my heart. It gave me a new joy and a new power, a new love and a new compassion. It gave me a new Bible and a new message. **Above all else, it gave me a new understanding and a new intimacy in the communion and ministry of prayer.**<sup>455</sup>

- » Look up Acts 1:14; Acts 2:42; Acts 3:1; Acts 4:31; Acts 6:4. From these verses, what was the priority of the New Testament Church? What were the effects of their prayers?

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454 Luke 4:14

455 Samuel Chadwick, *The Path of Prayer*, (Originally published 1938). Chapter 7. Retrieved from [http://www.justbychrist.org/images/PDF/The\\_Path\\_of\\_Prayer\\_by-Samuel\\_Chadwick.pdf](http://www.justbychrist.org/images/PDF/The_Path_of_Prayer_by-Samuel_Chadwick.pdf) September 12, 2020.

## HOW TO CULTIVATE A MORE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN PRAYER

### Come into His Presence with Reverence

#### 1. Come with adoration and worship.

Always begin prayer by looking upward rather than inward at yourself or outward at your problems. Worship God for who he is. Meditate on his greatness. Say his names and his attributes out loud. Then thank him for all he has done. Always have as your motive his glory!

#### 2. Come with joy.

This is what the Psalmist meant when he said,

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! Know that the LORD, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.<sup>456</sup>

Come into prayer joyfully, even if you don't feel like it. Remind your soul of who God is, and of his care for you, and be glad! Be thankful! Brighten your spirit and your place of prayer with songs and hymns of praise to God. Sing a new song. Always rejoice in God first, and your prayer life will be transformed. Do this and there will be moments when your soul enters into the joys of heaven and when heaven comes down into your world of trouble. I know this because I've experienced it!

#### 3. Come with humility and boldness.

God's invitation to you and me reads like this: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."<sup>457</sup> Praise the Lord!

If coming into God's holy presence required sinless perfection, none of us could come. But we come through the perfection of Jesus Christ and through his merit! We can come with confidence when we come—not first looking inward, but upward. This is where grace and mercy are received.

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456 Psalm 100, *English Standard Version*

457 Hebrews 4:16, *English Standard Version*

#### 4. Come with clean hands and a pure heart.

Again, the psalmist sings, “Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully.”<sup>458</sup>

Never think that you can enjoy intimate fellowship with God if you have a casual attitude toward sin and if your relationship with a person is fractured and you’re not doing what you can do to heal it.

#### 5. Come with patient expectation.

David prayed, “Truly my soul silently waits for God; from him comes my salvation.”<sup>459</sup> And again, “My soul, wait silently for God alone, for my expectation is from him.”<sup>460</sup>

One of the marks of praying men and women is that they spend time listening to the Spirit of God as he reveals God’s perspective (from the scriptures) on our real-life situations. It’s amazing what God will say when we give him a chance, when we cry out to him, and when we wait for his response.

- » Moses and the apostles serve as examples of how important fellowship with God is to one’s prayer life. Take a few moments to compare Exodus 33:11, 17 & John 15:14-16. Discuss the role of friendship with God in our prayer lives.

### Pray for the Success of God’s Kingdom on Earth

“Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>461</sup>

Jesus taught his disciples that in their daily prayers they are to always put God’s concerns before their own. He taught that out of communion with him, he will form our thoughts and prayers toward what he wants to do in our family, community, and among the peoples of the world.

What is God’s will? It isn’t that sinners or saints live easy, painless, temptation-free, comfortable lives; but that through all the adversities of this life, his redeeming love and grace will become visible in our homes, our churches, our communities, and through the whole world. This is God’s will which we should pray. This is heaven coming to earth!

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458 Psalm 24:3-4, *English Standard Version*

459 Psalm 62:1

460 Psalm 62:5

461 Luke 11:2

God's will is that his spiritual kingdom virtues and values<sup>462</sup> be manifested in all believers, and through them spread through the entire world. He wills that his kingdom humility, kingdom meekness, kingdom righteousness, kingdom mercy, kingdom purity, kingdom peace, kingdom patience, and kingdom love be spread through the world.

At this point in our own prayer time, we should pray for our marriages, our children and grandchildren, Christian workers around the world, the salvation of souls, the suffering church, and the nation we live in and its leaders. We should pray, not man-centered prayers, but prayers that his saving, sanctifying, and sustaining grace would reach them.

It's almost unbelievable that through prayer we get to participate with God in the success of his spiritual kingdom around the world, even though we may not get to see all the results. Through prayer we do battle for the souls of men, and those prayers are "mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds."<sup>463</sup> As God burdens us with what he wants to do, people he wants to reach, and service he wants us to perform, we pray for each need. And as we direct our prayers toward his kingdom priorities, he blesses our prayer life and extends his dominion in the hearts and lives of men and nations!

### **Pray in harmony with God's kingdom and will.**

One of the most important things to understand here is that to pray successfully we must pray for those things that are in harmony with God's will. As God brings to your mind things you know to be his will—the salvation of sinners, the healing and restoration of broken relationships, unity in his church, the calling and sending of Christian workers, the making of disciples in all nations—pray these things.

Christians are sometimes confused about God's will. The first step to clearing up our confusion is to pray for, and do, everything we clearly know to be God's will; then God will help us discern the rest.

### **Things we clearly know to be God's will**

- We know it is God's will for all mankind to be saved.<sup>464</sup>
- We know it is God's will that all Christians live holy lives and abstain from sexual immorality.<sup>465</sup>
- We know it is God's will for us to give thanks in everything.<sup>466</sup>

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462 To understand what God's kingdom is all about, we must study the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7.

463 2 Corinthians 10:4

464 2 Timothy 2:4

465 1 Thessalonians 4:3

466 1 Thessalonians 5:18



- We know that it is God's will that we sometimes suffer.<sup>467</sup>
- We know it is always God's will that Christians do good.<sup>468</sup>
- We know it is God's will to send forth workers into his harvest field.<sup>469</sup>

Two of my children play the guitar. One thing I notice about guitar players is that every time they want to make music they must first pause to tune their instrument. They tighten and loosen strings until the discord becomes harmony. This is a good illustration of what should happen in prayer. Private prayer is a way to tune our will with God's will and to let go of every concern which is out of tune with the purpose and plan of God.

The problem with so many of us is that we are overly concerned with temporal concerns rather than eternal concerns. It's no wonder that our prayers are sometimes ineffective. Rather than harmonizing with God's will, we pray our own will over people, plans, and projects. Though we have no peace or assurance and our hearts are filled with discord, we pray anyway. This is not biblical praying.

If prayer is anything, it is tuning our soul to God's soul, to what matters to him. Prayer is learning to see what he sees, to hear what he hears, to feel what he feels, and to become more and more like him. And just as instruments must be tuned on a regular basis, so our souls must be constantly tuned to God's will through prayer.

Our prayers will never rise higher than the ceiling of our prayer room if our prayers aren't harmonized with the mind of God. Why? Because the Holy Spirit, who is the key to power in prayer, only agrees with those prayers we pray according to the will of God. "Now he who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because he makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God."<sup>470</sup> The Holy Spirit will never be involved in prayers which are not according to the will of God. He will not be manipulated, coerced, or tricked into blessing us outside of this divine will; so we must find out what his will is and become subject to it.

## **How to harmonize our prayer life with God's kingdom and will**

### **1. Be nourished in the scriptures.**

Scripture must inform and shape our prayers. God loves his Word and never leads us to pray for anything which contradicts it. If we want to draw closer to God in prayer, we must always treasure his Word. Always begin your private prayers with meditation on scripture. If you will study the prayer lives of people like Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and Anna, you will

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467 1 Peter 4:19

468 1 Peter 2:15

469 Matthew 9:38

470 Romans 8:27



notice that they prayed well because they knew God's Word. They persistently held God to his promises.

When one of our children turned away from God for a season, many times my wife, Becky, and I would pray the scriptures over her. We prayed for thorns and briers to discomfort her in her rebellion.<sup>471</sup> We pled God's promise to bless the home of the righteous.<sup>472</sup> We prayed for conviction.<sup>473</sup> We prayed for God's mercy.<sup>474</sup> We prayed that her spiritual eyes would be opened and that the Father would draw her to himself.<sup>475</sup> We persistently prayed many scriptures over our daughter; and as we did, our faith was strengthened. It took time, but God heard and answered prayer. Today our oldest daughter is walking with the Lord and is a great joy to us!

## **2. Pattern your prayers after prayers in the Bible.**

There are hundreds of prayers in the Bible, many of them in the Psalms. Use these prayers in your own private time with the Lord, and practice applying them to your own circumstances.

George Mueller said, "I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the Word of God and to meditation on it."

## **3. Follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.**

There are times when God makes it clear that there is a particular thing he wants us to pray for that will glorify him; the only way to know this is to be led by the Spirit.<sup>476</sup> As a missionary leader, a husband, and father, there have been times when the Lord prompted me to pray for a specific thing (such as divine healing), even when no specific promise was given for it in the Bible. I have found that with strong inner confirmation, faith is emboldened, and the answer comes. At other times, I couldn't pray for a similar need with any measure of confidence or certainty but realized that I should not try to force my will on God. The Holy Spirit helps us know what to pray for and how to pray for it.<sup>477</sup>

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471 Hosea 2:6; Proverbs 22:5

472 Psalm 127-128

473 John 16:8

474 Psalm 103:8

475 John 6:44

476 Romans 8:14

477 Romans 8:26-27

#### 4. Seek confirmation from the body of Christ.

If God is leading us to pray for a specific thing, he will use our spiritual family to affirm this and even to unite in praying for it. If there is no agreement, it is certainly not the Holy Spirit who is leading us.<sup>478</sup>

### Pray for Personal Needs

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation but deliver us from the evil one.<sup>479</sup>

Now that we have cultivated a heart of worship and adoration, now that we have sought the success of his kingdom, we are ready to present our requests. And he is glad to hear and answer them!

#### 1. We pray for daily bread.

We pray for everything essential to spiritual and physical life for the coming day. God wants this kind of dependence from us, for childlike trust glorifies his goodness. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray for daily bread, he is reminding them, and us, to live contented lives.<sup>480</sup> As one teacher put it, “We are to limit our (personal) desires to necessities and to leave the future in his hands.”<sup>481</sup>

#### 2. We pray for daily forgiveness, while forgiving others.

While true believers do not live in habitual, flagrant sin, Jesus taught us to humbly petition for the forgiveness of sin. None of us knows his own heart. We not only say and do things in spiritually weak and unguarded moments which grieve or quench the Spirit,<sup>482</sup> but we also leave undone things we ought to have done. These also need the washing of the blood of Jesus.<sup>483</sup> Therefore we should pray with the Psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.”<sup>484</sup>

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478 Matthew 18:19

479 Luke 11:3-4

480 Philippians 4:11

481 Alexander MacLaren

482 1 Thessalonians 5:19

483 In John Wesley's notes on the Lord's Prayer he prays, “Give us, O Lord, redemption in (Your) blood, even the forgiveness of sins: as you enable us freely to forgive every man, so do thou forgive all our trespasses.”

484 Psalm 139:23-24, *English Standard Version*

This prayer of daily repentance from *The Book of Common Prayer* has been prayed by Christians for over two hundred years, and it would be a good practice for us:

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, spare thou those who confess their faults, restore thou those who are penitent, according to thy promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord; and grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy name. Amen.<sup>485</sup>

### 3. We pray for daily victory.

To daily pray, “lead us not into temptation,” is a prayer for spiritual watchfulness. To make this petition is to pray, “Father, you know my weakness and where the Enemy has ensnared me in the past. Don’t let me fall into shame and regret. Make me watchful over temptation. Set a guard, O Lord, over my lips, my mind, and my choices today. You know the paths I will walk today (including on the Internet), so please, Father, help me today to always choose the path of holiness. Help me to make choices today which will keep me far from the edge of spiritual defeat.”

I have found that as I pray this prayer thoughtfully and sincerely every day I become more spiritually alert; more aware of the Holy Spirit’s presence and power; and, therefore, more victorious!

## PRACTICAL ADVICE

### 1. Pray persistently.

If prayer was so vital to Jesus, it is even more vital for us.

In Luke 18, Jesus teaches that believers must be persistent in prayer:

Then he spoke this parable to them, that men ought always to pray and not lose heart.... And shall God not avenge his own elect who cry out day and night to him, though he bears long with them?<sup>486</sup>

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485 *The Book of Common Prayer*. Retrieved from [https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/book\\_of\\_common\\_prayer.pdf](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/book_of_common_prayer.pdf), 41, September 12, 2020.

486 Luke 18:1, 6

In Luke 21, Jesus warns us that watchful prayer is the secret to preserving our souls from backsliding and escaping God's wrath:

Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch, therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.<sup>487</sup>

In Luke 22, Jesus reveals that prayer is the key to overcoming temptation. While he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus warns his weary disciples: “‘Pray that you might not enter into temptation.’ And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw and knelt down and prayed,”<sup>488</sup> with growing intensity. As he arose from prayer, himself victorious, he rebuked the disciples again with these words, “Why do you sleep? Rise and pray lest you enter into temptation.”<sup>489</sup>

I’ve noticed that without prayer my soul becomes disquieted and restless. I’ve noticed that temptations become more powerful. I’ve noticed that the fear of man begins to ensnare me. I’ve noticed that the weaknesses of others become more pronounced. I’ve noticed that challenges become more intimidating. I’ve noticed that everyday problems begin to feel overwhelming. But through persistent prayer my soul finds rest, my mind is renewed, spiritual perspective and courage is regained. Through persistent prayer, faith is quickened and conviction more deeply rooted in my being.

## 2. Pray in faith, and rest in God’s will.

One of the most important requirements for effective prayer is faith.<sup>490</sup> But what is faith? How can we know if we have enough faith? Perhaps we are praying for something, healing for instance, but God doesn’t seem to hear us.

Three facts are crucial for understanding the prayer of faith.<sup>491</sup> **Biblical faith is believing that God can<sup>492</sup> and will<sup>493</sup> do what he has said he will do.** Faith is *not* believing that God will do whatever you ask him to do without regard for his will. This is perhaps the most common misunderstanding of faith.<sup>494</sup>

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487 Luke 21:34-36

488 Luke 22:40-41

489 Luke 22:46

490 James 1:6

491 James 5:15

492 Matthew 8:5-10

493 Hebrews 10:23; Titus 1:2

494 Notes on prayer from Dr. Philip Brown

Never use prayer to manipulate God; but to know him and to let him align your heart, your intercessions, and your petitions with his sovereign will in his presence. This is the key to effective praying.

### 3. Pray with others.

There is tremendous power in the united prayers of God's children. When moms join other moms in praying for their children, God hears and answers. When men join together in prayer for purity and victory, God hears and answers. When young people join together in prayer for revival, God hears and answers. When the Christians join together in fervent prayer for the lost and for the advancement of God's kingdom, God hears and answers those prayers.

## CONCLUSION

A biblically-structured, consistent prayer life, in which intimacy with God is experienced, in which God's reputation and glory come before our requests, in which God's kingdom and will are earnestly sought, and in which petitions for our daily needs, daily forgiveness, and daily victory are made, will certainly be an effective prayer life. When our prayer life is patterned according to the instruction of Jesus, we can then take hold of the prayer promises he gives: "And whatever you ask in my name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in my name, I will do it."<sup>495</sup> Again,

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you.<sup>496</sup>

So... "Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full."<sup>497</sup>

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495 John 14:13-14

496 John 15:16

497 John 16:23b

## LESSON 9 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 9 TEST

1. What are two false concepts regarding prayer?
2. What is the first priority of secret prayer, according to Jesus?
3. According to Luke's account, what was the effect of prayer in Jesus' life and ministry?
4. List the five ways we reverently come into God's presence.
5. What is the simple pattern for private prayer established by Jesus?
6. What are four ways to harmonize our prayers with God's kingdom and will?

# LESSON 10

# CONFESSION, SUBMISSION, AND SERVICE

## SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES OF ACTION

### LESSON 9 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points of Lesson 9. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 9.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of confession, submission, and service.
2. Gain practical wisdom for overcoming besetting sin.
3. Put these disciplines into practice.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### Testimony 1

I was saved at the age of 17.<sup>498</sup> I had a wonderful conversion experience at the altar in our little country church. It was so wonderful that I just knew I would never fail God again—in any way whatsoever. Yet, several weeks later, I had failed in some way and a cloud was over my spirit. I felt as if I needed to go back to the altar. I went to my mother and asked her what I should do. She said, “Son, just build an altar in your heart, confess it all to God and move on.” I did, and the sunshine of clear assurance returned. After 40 years of living for the Lord, lots of study and training—I have

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498 From Dr. Michael Avery



found out that few people have the ability to give such a simple, practical answer to the problem of sin!

## Testimony 2

From an early age, I was skilled in the art of hypocrisy.<sup>499</sup> My parents were in music ministry; and as a young child I learned how to say the right things, sing the right songs, and raise my hands at just the right times. I made a profession of faith all through high school and all through college, including four years at a Bible college. However, there is a difference between profession of salvation and possession of salvation. Though most people, including good friends, thought I was a Christian, I knew that it was all a show. I lived a secret life of sin, hidden from my friends and family. I was even involved in ministry during this time. At times, I would seek out God's forgiveness, but I would always tell him I was going to do better, be better and try to fix myself. Within days or weeks of praying that prayer, I would be right back to my sinful ways.

In March of 1999, while driving to a revival at which I was to lead music, I hit rock bottom. On that 45-minute drive, God revealed to me the depths of my sin and I hated what I saw. I cried out to God and told him that I didn't think I could be a Christian. I told him I was tired of trying to fix myself and failing. I still remember praying these words: "God, either you're going to save me or you're not, but either way I'm done faking it!" In an instant, God did for me what I had tried to do for myself many times: he saved me! There wasn't a doubt in my mind that he had done the work. My life has never been the same since.

Over the next few years after my conversion, God gave me ministry opportunities, graciously using me for his glory. However, I was afraid of letting people see the real me. I was afraid that if, somehow, they found out who I used to be, they wouldn't listen to a word I said or would somehow discredit my ministry. While I had confessed vertically to God, the last thing I wanted to do was confess horizontally to someone else.

As I knelt to pray one morning while having my personal devotional time in March of 2006, God clearly spoke to my heart and told me that I needed to confess my past. For over a week I wrestled with sharing my former life. Finally, one Tuesday morning, I called my former college president and shared my story, confessed my hypocrisy, and asked for forgiveness. While I don't remember exactly what he said in response, what I do remember is the feeling of a burden being lifted. I was free!

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499 From Pastor Keith Waggoner

These two stories provide helpful insights for victorious living. Dr. Avery's testimony teaches young Christians how to deal with failures as they are learning to walk with the Lord:

1. Build an altar.
2. Confess it all to God.
3. Move on.

I appreciate the simplicity of this, don't you? Too often we make the Christian life far too complicated.

But what about persistent struggles, besetting sins, or a sense of shame which binds us? Pastor Keith's testimony of confession is an example of how the spiritual disciplines can set us free from more deeply rooted problems in our spiritual life.

## THE BIG IDEA

The practice of the spiritual disciplines, along with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, will provide training for a victorious life. They are absolutely essential for moving beyond a nominal, lukewarm, often-defeated Christian life. Every faithful generation of Christians has proven this.

## INTRODUCTION

We've been learning the important place of the spiritual disciplines in the life of every believer. They were important in the life of Jesus; and if we would be formed into his image, they must become increasingly important in our lives as well.

We've also been learning that these spiritual disciplines militate against the world, the flesh, and the devil; that they are a means of grace, equipping us for the battle; that they provide greater enjoyment of God; and that they are means of grace to form ordinary disciples into the image of Christ.

In this lesson, we will briefly explore several more of the classic spiritual disciplines and seek practical ways to incorporate them into our walk with God.

## DISCIPLINE OF CONFESSION

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed....<sup>500</sup>

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500 James 5:16

According to Jesus, the practice of confessing to God in private prayer is a way to receive continual forgiveness.<sup>501</sup> But the Holy Spirit also teaches that confession to one another is a means of spiritual healing. James seems to teach that spiritual healing sometimes results in physical healing as well.

## Discipline of Confession Defined

The discipline of confession is humbly admitting to another person specific spiritual failure(s) (sins) and areas of known unchristlikeness as a means of spiritual healing.<sup>502</sup> Confession to another Christian is especially needed in areas of besetting sin and when a sense of guilt and shame for past failure just won't go away. While forgiveness comes through confession to God, yet many have discovered that confession to a trusted member of the body of Christ is often a humbling step of deliverance.

- » Read James 5:16 together. Notice the connection between confession and healing.

## Disagreements about Sin and Confession

The biblical practice of confession makes some Christians uncomfortable because it seems to rule out the life of holiness and a victorious walk with God. Some may wonder, "How can one claim to live a holy life and yet have things to confess?" One of the central areas of controversy has to do with how various Christian teachers define sin.

Some Christians tend to define sin very broadly as any falling short of God's perfect righteousness. In this definition there are often no biblical distinctions made between premeditated, willful sins, sins which overtake a Christian suddenly (due to spiritual weakness), or unchristlike attitudes and affections. Other Christians define sin very narrowly as conscious, willful transgression against God's law and nothing more. Both extremes tend to ignore real-life concerns sincere Christians have.

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**"It would be healthier to give the term 'sin' some flexibility without going to the extreme of forgetting 1 John 3:9 which rules out habitual sinning. A righteous person does not sin 'in thought, word, and deed every day.' Yet he may occasionally fall short and need repentance and forgiveness."**

**Richard S. Taylor**

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501 Matthew 6:12

502 Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 83

On the one hand, if we believe that willful rebellion is equal with spiritual slip-ups or unchristlike attitudes, then we might take a light view of willful, habitual sin, which the Bible says true Christians cannot commit.<sup>503</sup> Some people say, “We’re all sinners,” without making distinctions.

On the other hand, some Christians become self-righteous because they say that only flagrant violations of God’s law should be considered sinful. These Christians are not sensitive to some of the sins that grieve the Holy Spirit: impure thoughts, faultfinding, a complaining attitude, prayerlessness, deceitfulness, failure to be led by the Spirit, bigotry, arrogance, and so on. They excuse unchristlike attitudes and behavior because they see them only as human weaknesses or mistakes, rather than sins.

We should not be as concerned about definitions of sin as about the real-life problems in our lives and character that are coming between us and God and hindering our relationship with other people. Remember, God’s purpose in redemption is to form us into the image of his Son.

We must allow the Word of God to form our understanding of wrong as well as the standard of what is right.

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**“Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off your relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind, that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself.”**

**Susanna Wesley**

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### **Some of the Ways the Bible Describes Sin<sup>504</sup>**

Just as Eskimo people in North America have numerous words to describe snow, the Bible defines and describes sin in various ways.

- » Look up each of the following footnoted scriptures and discuss them.
- **Sin as neglect<sup>505</sup>** – Not doing all the good I know I should do.
- **Sin as a choice<sup>506</sup>** – A willful choice to do what I know is against God’s law.

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503 1 John 3:8-9

504 From notes provided by Dr. Michael Avery

505 James 4:17

506 1 John 3:4

- **Sin as a violation of conscience**<sup>507</sup> – Doing something we think is sin, even if it doesn't directly violate God's Word.
- **Sin of ignorance**<sup>508</sup> – An unintentional violation of God's commandments which needs the covering of the blood of Jesus even if we never become aware of it.
- **A single sin**<sup>509</sup> – A single act which displeases the Lord.
- **The practice of sin**<sup>510</sup> – Sinning as a way of life, which no true child of God will do. This is the kind of sin Jesus commanded the lame man and the adulterous woman not to do any longer.
- **Blindness to our own prejudice and hypocrisy**<sup>511</sup> – This is the ignorant sin of Peter and other Christians with him.
- **Grieving the Holy Spirit**<sup>512</sup> – Any unchristlike thought, word, or deed which saddens the Holy Spirit.
- **Worldly attitudes or desires**<sup>513</sup> – Murmuring and complaining against God or craving wrong things.
- **Unintended sins**,<sup>514</sup> or **sins of surprise**<sup>515</sup> – A sin which overtakes a Christian in a moment of temptation and weakness.

The many descriptions of sin found in scripture should make us humble and cause us to feel our constant need for the cleansing blood of Jesus. They should remind us that Jesus died and rose again—not only to atone for willful sin, but every thought, word, and act which causes pain and falls short of his glory. They should remind us that no matter how far we have come in our walk with the Lord, we constantly need Jesus as our advocate: “My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”<sup>516</sup>

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507 Romans 14:22-23

508 Leviticus 4:2, 22

509 1 John 2:1-2

510 1 John 3:4-9

511 Galatians 2:11-21

512 Ephesians 4:30

513 Numbers 11:1, 4

514 A term used by Dr. John Oswalt

515 Galatians 6:1

516 1 John 2:1

## Sin and the Christian<sup>517</sup>

Christians do not practice sin. However, there remains a possibility of sin until we get to heaven. That is why 1 John 2:1-2 was penned.

Dr. Avery offers the following practical advice regarding sin:

1. Never minimize sin, thinking it doesn't matter.
2. Never maximize sin, thinking it cannot be forgiven.
3. Never justify sin because of circumstances.

How a person deals with their sin tells a great deal about them and their maturity. A sincere, mature Christian will not play with words; but will quickly acknowledge their failure, repent of it, find grace, make restitution if necessary, and move forward. An immature Christian will wrestle with God, justify themselves, and perhaps even deny the sin. This is religious pride. Remember, "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."<sup>518</sup>

When we have sinned, we have two choices:

1. **We can cover our sin and suffer the consequences.** "He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whosoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy."<sup>519</sup>
2. **We can confess our sin and find healing.** "Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed."<sup>520</sup> Those who confess their sin will be free. Those who deny their sin cannot be free.

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**"It would be holier to call our breakdowns in Christlikeness 'sins,' in good old honest humility, make amends, and learn from our failures. We never learn from failures denied..."**

**Richard Taylor**

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The good news is, we can conquer sin as we depend on the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

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517 This section was adapted from Dr. Michael Avery, "Going Deep" (Study Guide, Part 3). Retrieved from <https://www.weisbachchurch.com/sermon-speaker/dr-michael-avery/> September 18, 2020.

518 James 4:6

519 Proverbs 28:13

520 James 5:16

## The Power of Confession

Confession to a trusted brother or sister is a powerful weapon against sin and temptation.

### 1. Confession causes temptation to lose its power.

Secret battles are the most difficult to win, and temptation is strongest when we are isolated and alone. What sin is Satan enticing you toward? What sinful attitudes could grow in your heart if you don't expose them to the light? Confession brings the strength, comfort, and counsel of a spiritual friend into my battle and makes victory much more likely.<sup>521</sup> Many families place light poles outside their homes at night as a deterrent to intruders. Confession is a deterrent to sin because it puts our temptations where another can see them and help us defend against them.

### 2. Confession deals a decisive blow to our greatest enemy—pride.

The tendency to protect our image is in all of us. We want people to think well of us and, therefore, are tempted to put on a mask and pretend we are someone we are not. The humbling act of confession will uproot hypocrisy and prepare the soil of our hearts for a harvest of righteousness.<sup>522</sup>

### 3. Confession will often release a guilty conscience and result in the assurance of forgiveness.

We know that only God can forgive; but, as members of the body of Christ, indwelt by his Spirit, we have been appointed to represent him on earth. When, through the Holy Spirit, we forgive each other, the spiritually healing grace of God is released. When Spirit-filled brothers and sisters speak words of mercy to one another, it is as if Jesus himself is speaking those words. We set one another free. In this sense, we loose on earth what has been loosed in heaven.<sup>523</sup>

Under the Old Testament covenant, the Levitical priests were God's human representatives, affirming to men on earth God's forgiving and restoring grace. These priests not only offered sacrifices and prayers, but they were God's human agents to pronounce his people ceremonially clean and forgiven.<sup>524</sup> When a leper, for instance, was cured of his leprosy—a disease which made him unfit for worship and fellowship—he had to present himself to the priests for a confirmation of this healing. God's priests were God's human representatives, empowered to restore a person to fellowship.

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521 Proverbs 11:14, Proverbs 17:17, Proverbs 27:17; Ecclesiastes 4:9

522 Proverbs 28:13

523 Matthew 16:19, Matthew 18:18, Matthew 20:23

524 Leviticus 13:23



- » After Jesus miraculously healed the ten lepers in Luke 17:14, what did he require them to do?<sup>525</sup> Why did he require this? This illustrates the truth that God rarely bypasses his church but pours his grace through the church.

The New Testament teaches the priesthood of believers. As priests, filled with the Holy Spirit, we not only offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God,<sup>526</sup> but we also represent God's love to one another. When we extend forgiving love, it is as if God is extending his forgiving love. When, by the Spirit, we discern the true brokenness and repentance of another Christian and say to them, "God forgives you, and we forgive you," there is healing grace poured into their hearts, washing them from feelings of guilt and shame. The same goes for us when we confess. Anyone who has experienced this will testify to the awesome authority God has given his church to administer healing grace.

## Practical Tips for Practicing Confession

1. Seek a godly (not perfect) person to whom you can confess some besetting sin or secret struggle and come clean. Ask them to pray for you.
  2. Be honest and be sure not to blame others. Do not confess unnecessary details. Seek wisdom.
  3. If you feel you have nothing to confess, ask your spouse, roommate, or friend to give you some suggestions! Ask, "Do you see things in my life that are hurtful?"
  4. Accept God's Word through your confessor. "This is the best understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Listen for God's assurance that you are forgiven and believe it."<sup>527</sup>
  5. Do not broadcast your confessions. Some moral failures of a spiritual leader may require confession to the church, but most of our confessions require only a very small circle of one or two. Keith Drury says, "The circle of confession seldom needs to be larger than the circle of offense."<sup>528</sup>
- » Reflect on the discipline of confession with your group. What insights are helpful? Are there parts of this teaching that are confusing? Allow a few minutes for personal reflection as well.

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525 Luke 17:14

526 1 Peter 2:5

527 Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 93

528 Ibid, 92



## THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF SUBMISSION

Likewise, you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.<sup>529</sup>

No discipline is more important than the discipline of submission, though it presents some challenges and has often been misunderstood and abused. (We will briefly identify some of these challenges, misunderstandings, and abuses in this section.)

### The Discipline of Submission Biblically Defined

Richard Foster defines the discipline of submission as “the ability to lay down the terrible burden of always having to get our own way.”<sup>530</sup> This discipline follows the example of Jesus, who emptied himself, took a servant’s form, and became obedient unto death.<sup>531</sup>

- » Read the following verses carefully. Underline all words that have to do with submission.
- “I urge you, brethren—you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the first-fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints—that you also submit to such and to everyone who works and labors with us.”<sup>532</sup>
- “Submitting to one another in the fear of God.”<sup>533</sup>
- “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and he is the Savior of the body.”<sup>534</sup>
- “Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.”<sup>535</sup>
- “Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”<sup>536</sup>

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529 1 Peter 5:5

530 Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 111

531 Philippians 2:7-8

532 1 Corinthians 16:15-16

533 Ephesians 5:21

534 Ephesians 5:22-23

535 Ephesians 5:24

536 Ephesians 6:5-6

- “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.”<sup>537</sup>
- “Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well pleasing to the Lord.”<sup>538</sup>
- “Therefore, submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme...”<sup>539</sup>
- “Likewise, you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another and be clothed with humility, for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”<sup>540</sup>
- “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”<sup>541</sup>

These verses leave no one out! Submission is a discipline for everyone: “servants,” “brethren,” “one another,” “wives,” “children,” “yourselves,” “younger people,” “all of you.” The scriptures call us to submit to God, to kings and rulers, to spiritual leaders, to husbands, to parents, to masters and to one another.

### **Submission is an act of obedience.**

Paul says, “Therefore, whoever resists the (government) authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist incur judgment.”<sup>542</sup> Submission to authority is commanded by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons we could ever learn is to submit just because God says it. This is submission to the Word of God.

### **Submission is an act, but also an attitude.**

Submission involves more than just acts of submission, but an attitude of submission as well. We can do what people ask outwardly, while inwardly harboring resentment or anger toward them. I’m reminded of the story of the little boy who was misbehaving. His mother told him to sit down, which he did. But someone overheard him saying, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but standing up on the inside!” God wants us to be people who submit both on the inside and the outside!

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537 Colossians 3:18

538 Colossians 3:20

539 1 Peter 2:13

540 1 Peter 5:5

541 Hebrews 13:17

542 Romans 13:2

## Submission to God-ordained authority is an act of trust.

First of all, it is an act which testifies to our trust in God's sovereign choices. Paul exhorts us to "be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are **appointed by God**."<sup>543</sup> If we believe that God is truly sovereign and that he is ultimately in charge of who gets elected, who my instructor or overseer is, who my parents are, who my husband is, or who gets the position, then submission becomes a testimony of faith in his wisdom.

Remember, Paul lived under cruel Roman dictators; and yet he did not justify rebellion. He knew that God is sovereign. Centuries before him, God had said to Nebuchadnezzar, through Daniel, "the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever he chooses."<sup>544</sup> Trust that God is sovereign.

Second, submission is often an act of trust in God's ability to change the heart of our leader. When we don't like decisions being made, but there's nothing we can do to change things, we pray the promise, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; he turns it wherever he wishes."<sup>545</sup> I have heard wives testify that when they stopped fighting with their husbands and began praying for them and showing them respect, God began changing their husbands' hearts!

## Submission can become an act of worship.

Make Christ the focus of your submission, then you will be set free from fear! This is how Paul admonishes the Ephesian church: "Wives submit... **as to the Lord**,"<sup>546</sup> "Children obey... for this is well pleasing **to the Lord**,"<sup>547</sup> "Servants obey... **as to Christ**."<sup>548</sup> It's as if while Paul is writing he knows the difficulty of what he's asking. He knows very well how flawed human leaders often are, so he says, "Look past the leader to the Perfect One who is above them, and the One who appointed them! Do it for him! Do it out of reverence for him! Make submission to the flawed earthly leader an act of worship to the One who never fails or makes a mistake." When we submit out of reverence for Christ, our submission to an earthly authority is an act of worship.

- » In the verses we read earlier, notice how most of the commands to submit are followed by, "as unto Christ," "in the fear of God," "as unto the Lord," etc. How do you think your attitude toward submission would change if you made the Lord the focus of your submission rather than your spouse, your boss, your teacher, or your pastor?

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543 Romans 13:1, emphasis added.

544 Daniel 4:25

545 Proverbs 21:1

546 Ephesians 5:22, emphasis added.

547 Ephesians 6:1, emphasis added.

548 Ephesians 6:5, emphasis added.

We will all have to serve leaders and work for people who are difficult at times. The key to freedom is to make submission an act of worship; to pray, “Jesus, this leader you have ordained in my life is flawed, but I’ll submit for your sake! I see their weaknesses, but I will not use their weaknesses as an excuse for open criticism or quiet revolt. I’ll look past the leader to you, God, and worship you for your wisdom in this choice you have made for us. You know what is best for me, my family, and my country. You know what your purposes are in the future. So I will not rebel against your will, but submit to your sovereign plan.”

This does not mean, of course, that we become passive; that we don’t pray or work for change; that we don’t do our part to bring about justice. But it does mean that all efforts are rooted in faith and in the confidence that God is in control of our lives and our world.

Peter writes these words to slaves: “Servants be submissive to your masters... not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh (unjust, ESV)... Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow in his steps.”<sup>549</sup> These are not easy words to hear today, but we must hear them.

### **The scriptures teach a mutual submission of Christians to one another.**

The Bible clearly speaks of submission to God-ordained authorities but also of mutual submission to one another as Spirit-filled members of the body of Christ. Often, where submission is taught, it is only wives and children who are admonished. But the scriptures also emphasize a mutual submission of each Christian to one another. “Yes, **all of you** be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility.”<sup>550</sup> Submitting to one another means learning to yield our rights, responding to one another’s needs, listening to one another’s opinions, sacrificing for the sake of peace and harmony. This is one of the hardest disciplines for college students, children, spouses, and church members to learn. But, there is freedom in learning it!

God-ordained leaders in the home, church, and government are to exercise oversight but never to be “domineering over those in your charge.”<sup>551</sup> We must never use authority to hurt but only to help. The gospel elevates and dignifies every member of the body of Christ, and therefore there are ways in which we all submit to one another. Wives submit to their husbands, but husbands must also love their wives and serve them as Christ did. Church members must submit to church leaders, but these leaders are never to “lord it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock.”<sup>552</sup> When every Christian is clothed with humility, accepting their God-given place in the body and joyfully serving one another, submission will be a blessed experience. Submission remains healthy when Christians are filled with love and clothed with humility.

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549 1 Peter 2:18, 21, parenthetical note added.

550 1 Peter 5:5, emphasis added.

551 1 Peter 5:2-3

552 Ibid.

**Submission to authority is critical to spiritual maturity.**

No one will ever be formed into the image of Christ who cannot submit to authority or make his or her wants, desires, and opinions subordinate to another's. We will never lead until we learn to follow. We will never be trusted to command until we learn to obey orders.

This lack of yielding to one another and laying down our rights is the root cause of so many conflicts in the home, the school, the workplace, society, and the local church. Submission to authority is God's way of protecting us, prospering us, uniting us, and forming Christ in us.

I'll never forget the disappointment and indignation I felt one Monday morning as a teacher in the Philippines. A few days before, I had given our soon-to-be-graduating ministerial students a simple, but important, final assignment. I had made it clear that the assignment was due on Monday morning, that every student must be present, and that this assignment was a requirement for graduation. To my shock, when I arrived for class, I learned that three of our graduating ministerial students chose to skip the class and the assignment. I realized that their absence was a protest against what they believed was a stupid assignment.

I left the class, marched over to the men's dorm, and found these three students lounging in one of their rooms laughing and having a good time. They thought they were clever. They thought they could do what they wanted to do without consequence. They thought the assignment was unimportant, and that they shouldn't have to do it. They learned otherwise! I was very hard on them because what I knew was that they would never qualify to lead God's flock until they learned to follow a shepherd. All three young men submitted to my discipline, and years later they thanked me. Two of those young men are pastors today.

**Limits of Submission—When Does Submission Become Destructive?**

There are occasions when submission becomes destructive and may even need to be refused. Here are a few guidelines for discussion:

**1. Submission becomes destructive when it is demanding and abusive.**

Wives should remove themselves from abusive husbands and get help. Christians should stay away from leaders who demand blind loyalty and mindless subordination. "Just do what I say and don't ask questions!" is the language of abuse, especially when spoken to an adult. Many today have been wounded by this kind of abuse. Submission does not mean that we never voice our opinion, confront problems, or raise controversial issues. These can be done with a spirit of respectful submission.

Submission, like love, is a gift we give to one another out of reverence for Christ. It is a weak leader who has to demand submission. When our authority comes from God, we will not need to demand it. God will defend his leaders. God will fight their battles. God will grant them spiritual authority others will willingly follow.

Aaron and Miriam learned the hard way that God will defend the humble leader. They excused rebellion against Moses' leadership because of the flaws they saw in his family.<sup>553</sup> Their insurrection began with a dislike for Moses' wife and led to a questioning of Moses' authority: "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" Moses handled this problem by keeping quiet and letting God handle it.<sup>554</sup>

## **2. Submission becomes destructive when it is a covering for someone else's sin.**

In Acts 16:37, Paul refused to obey an order because it was designed to cover sin. If any authority demands that we cover their sin or participate in their sin, we have a right and obligation to refuse submission.

## **3. Submission becomes destructive when it causes us to violate God's Word.**

When officials from the Sanhedrin demanded that Peter and John no longer teach or speak in the name of Jesus, they respectfully responded, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things we have seen and heard."<sup>555</sup>

## **The limits of submission are not always easy to determine.**

Teaching on this subject is always difficult because it involves human relationships, and relationships are complicated by sin. Human beings are flawed, including presidents, dictators, directors, husbands, managers, etc. Should a citizen submit to their government even when it is corrupt? Should an employee act respectfully to his boss when respect isn't deserved? Richard Foster gives us a very wise word here:

Sometimes the limits of submission are easy to determine. A wife is asked to punish a child unreasonably. A child is asked to aid an adult in an unlawful practice. A citizen is asked to violate the dictates of scripture and conscience for the sake of the State (the government). In each case, the disciple refuses, not arrogantly, but in the spirit of meekness and submission.

Often the limits of submission are extremely hard to define. What about the marriage partner who feels stifled and kept from personal fulfillment because of the spouse's professional career? Is this a legitimate form of self-denial, or is it destructive? What about the teacher who unjustly grades a student? Does the student submit or resist? What about the employer who promotes his employees on the basis of favoritism...? What does the deprived employee do, especially if the raise is needed for the good of his or her family?

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553 Numbers 12:1-2

554 Numbers 12:3

555 Acts 4:19b-20

These are complicated questions simply because human relationships are complicated. They are questions that do not yield to simplistic answers. There is no such thing as a law of submission that will cover every situation. We must be highly skeptical of all laws that purport to handle every circumstance....

In defining the limits of submission, we are [placed in] a deep dependence upon the Holy Spirit.<sup>556</sup>

- » Take a few moments to discuss these limits of submission. Perhaps there are limits you would add or testimonies you could share of the dangers of blind submission.

## Practical Advice for Practicing Submission

1. If you are a college student or work for a ministry or company, there are always institutional policies and rules to keep. Practice keeping them. Stop cutting corners.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to teach you how to develop a more submissive attitude to authority.
3. Learn to yield to those around you rather than demanding your rights.
4. Train yourself to submit in little ordinances: “Keep off,” “Don’t litter,” etc.
5. Review the scriptures on submission in this lesson and ask the Lord to help you know how to apply them in your life.

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**“The discipline of service enables us to say ‘NO!’ to the world’s games of promotion and authority.”**

**Richard Foster**

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## THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF SERVICE

And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them.... But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.”<sup>557</sup>

The discipline of service will train us in deeper, more Christ-like humility. Among pastors, teachers, musicians, and ordinary Christians in the global church, envy is one of the most poisonous sins rooted in the human heart. Many times we’re unaware of its deadly pres-

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<sup>556</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 121

<sup>557</sup> Luke 22:25-26



ence there. Do you ever feel hurt when you're not recognized and honored as you think you deserve? Do you feel resentful when others get the credit for work you have done? Do you find it difficult to rejoice in the successes of others? Are you secretly glad when others fail? Do you feel insecure when others are praised? When others perform, do you harbor secret thoughts that you could do better? The discipline of service will take us back to Jesus, the perfect model of a lowly-minded servant.

All of us have been tempted in these ways, to some degree. We've been tempted to envy the better life we perceive others to have. We've been tempted to covet the positions, gifts, name recognition, clothing, spouse, congregation, and lifestyle of others. Our competitive drive for prominence can only be burned out of our nature by Pentecost, by the consuming fire of the Holy Spirit.<sup>558</sup> But even after the Pentecost, we must cultivate the lowly, humble mind of Christ—the mind of a servant.

## Defining the Discipline of Service

The discipline of service is to cultivate the mind and deeds of a servant in every season of life. And Jesus defines what a servant is. He was greater than any other, gave up more than any other, and made himself lower than any other.

» Read Philippians 2:5-11 together.

Philippians teaches us that the life of a servant begins with the mind of a servant.

### 1. A servant is characterized by humility, not self-promotion.

Jesus existed in “the form of God” (verse 6). Jesus possessed the “essential attributes of deity.”<sup>559</sup> Hebrews says, “He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.”<sup>560</sup> Jesus claimed, “I and my Father are one,”<sup>561</sup> and “If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father.... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?”<sup>562</sup>

But Jesus did not count “equality with God a thing to be grasped” (verse 6).<sup>563</sup> All that God is, Jesus is; and yet he didn’t cling to it. In every sense, Jesus was equal with God. He even claimed this equality for himself, and for this the Jews hated him: “You being a man make yourself equal with God,”<sup>564</sup> and Thomas worshiped him: “My Lord and My God.”<sup>565</sup> The

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558 Matthew 3:11-12

559 *Pulpit Commentary*

560 Hebrews 1:3, *English Standard Version*; see also Colossians 1:15.

561 John 10:30

562 John 14:9-10

563 *English Standard Version*

564 John 5:18

565 John 20:28



Hebrew writer described Jesus as the “exact imprint”<sup>566</sup> of God’s nature, a word used for engraving in wood, etching on metal, branding on hide, impressing on clay, and stamping on a coin. Jesus is God made flesh!

Jesus “made himself of no reputation” (verse 7). The words “made himself” come from the Greek word *kenosis*, translated “emptied himself,” or “laid aside.” This means that though Jesus Christ never gave up his deity, yet for a time he did set aside the rights and privileges of his divine nature. Though Jesus Christ never gave up his deity, for a time he did choose to lay aside his royal garment and to put on the rags of humanity. John Wesley says, **“Though he remained full,<sup>567</sup> yet he appeared as if he had been empty; for he veiled his fullness from the sight of men and angels.”**

Jesus’ essence and identity would never change; but for redemptive purposes, he became willing to lay aside his distinction and honor and reputation to become weak and helpless and to appear common, ordinary, and under-privileged. Herein is the heart of a servant and our example to follow.

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**“There is no limit to what God can do when he finds a man or woman who does not care who gets the credit, as long as God gets the glory!”**

**Unknown**

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As I contemplate what our Lord laid aside, I am forced to see the foolishness of the things that I have clung to and protected as my right. Are we not often more concerned about what people think of us—our reputation or feeling good—than in doing the right thing? “Lord, let Jesus’ humble mind be in us!” Jesus’ way of thinking is a strong rebuke to selfish ambition in every form.

## **2. A true servant is characterized by complete devotion to the will of his master.**

Jesus took “the form of a bondservant” (verse 7). To be a bondservant was to be in the lowliest condition of life. A bondservant lived only for the will of his master.

When Jesus entered the world, he surrendered his will to the will of his Father and chose to live a life of humble dependence. He did not think in terms of personal promotion or how much he would earn. The bondservant mindset is that of a steward whose success is found in caring for the things that please the Master.

Be careful about thinking the way our little seven-year-old son, Timothy, did some years ago. When I had to be gone from the house for a while, I said, “Son, Daddy will be back in a couple of hours, and when I return your bedroom must be cleaned.” “Okay, Daddy!” he said

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<sup>566</sup> Hebrews 1:3, *English Standard Version*

<sup>567</sup> John 1:14

cheerfully. When I returned, he met me with a big smile and said, “Look, Daddy, I washed all the dishes in the sink!” “Oh, that’s really good,” I responded. “Did you also clean your room?” Now his head fell, and the smile vanished. “Uh... no Daddy.” “Then you know the consequence of disobedience,” I said sadly. And I corrected my son because he chose his own path of obedience, rendering his so-called “sacrifice” nothing less than a selfish act of rebellion. Others may have applauded his industry, but I knew better. This story reminds us that even the most heroic perseverance in our own selfish pursuits is rebellion against God. A servant does the will of his master.

### **3. A true servant is willing to share the weaknesses of those he is called to serve.**

Paul teaches that Jesus came “in the likeness of men,” and “in appearance as a man” (verses 7-8). This means that Jesus took on all the essential attributes of humanity. In Christ, God condescended from his eternal glory, to look like us, to experience our pain, suffer as we do, and to be tempted just as we are. Why did he do it? Because of love!<sup>568</sup> To be our substitute! To sympathize with our weaknesses:

- “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the Devil.”<sup>569</sup>
- “Therefore, in all things he had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”<sup>570</sup>
- “For we do not have an High Priest which cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”<sup>571</sup>

In Jesus, God became fully man. And the mind of Christ is a willingness to share in poverty, hunger, thirst, homelessness, exhaustion, anger, sadness, physical pain, betrayal, and even emotional despair for the sake of others. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was sorrowful even to the point of death so that we might experience redemption.<sup>572</sup> He absorbed our rebukes, scorn, hatred, anger, and pride. And yet he was the most joyful man who ever lived.<sup>573</sup> This is what servanthood looks like. And we are to have this same mind. Is it even possible?

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568 John 3:16

569 Hebrews 2:14

570 Hebrews 2:17

571 Hebrews 4:15

572 Matthew 26:38

573 Psalm 45:7

## **Christ-like Servanthood through Discipline and Grace-Enabled Human Effort**

Christ's humility was so deep, so vast; but we are tempted by selfishness. Those we are called to serve are not only needy, but often selfish, rude, and ungrateful, and at times show very little consideration for our weariness and need for solitude. We are often criticized. Our conversations are often interrupted and our recreation cut short by their demands and emergencies. Without the mind of Christ, we'll lose his tenderness of heart and cheerfulness of disposition; and our ministries will be more characterized by irritability than humility. So how do we receive this mind?

### **1. The mind of a servant is cultivated through discipline.**

Paul says in Philippians 2:5 that we are to have the mind of Christ. That means we must choose to have the attitudes and motives of Christ. In everyday life, with all its challenges, we must choose Jesus' way over our own!

### **2. The mind of a servant must be humbly received.**

We can't create the mind of a servant. We must let the Holy Spirit produce it more and more in us. Because Christ now indwells us by his Spirit, there is a sense in which each believer already has the mind of Christ; but we must yield to it. We must choose to possess it by grace.

## How to Discern Self-Righteous Service from True Service<sup>574</sup>

SELF-RIGHTEOUS SERVICE	TRUE SERVICE
Comes through human effort.	Flows from our relationship with God.
Is impressed with the big deal.	Doesn't distinguish between the big and the small.
Requires external rewards.	Is content with hiddenness.
Is highly concerned with results.	Feels no need to calculate results.
Picks and chooses whom to serve.	Serves anyone.
Is affected by moods.	Disciplines itself to meet needs even when it's hard.
Is temporary.	Is a lifestyle.
Is insensitive, insisting on serving even when it's not wanted.	Can withhold its service if necessary.
Fractures the body of Christ.	Builds unity within the body of Christ.

### The Reward of Servants

I conclude this lesson with a heartfelt letter I wrote some years ago to pastors we've had the privilege of serving in the Philippines. It marks many acts of service we've witnessed in them over the years, demonstrates the many ways Christians can serve one another, and looks forward to the day our service will be rewarded.

Dear Brothers,

Many of you pastors and workers have beautifully exemplified the mind of Christ to our family, and we have learned incredible spiritual lessons through your faith.

When you've patiently and lovingly cared for the disabled child who will never be able to thank you, cared for a spouse through long periods of illness until God worked a healing miracle, returned to serve a congregation that had hurt you, and allowed God to break your pride and then lift you up to a place of spiritual authority, you demonstrated the mind of Christ.

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<sup>574</sup> Adapted from Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 128-129

When you've returned good for evil, labored faithfully with little recognition or appreciation, cared for the widows and indigent among you, served the Lord cheerfully without the nurturing love and support of a companion, allowed past mistakes to humble you and make you the person of prayer and anointing you are today, you demonstrated the mind of Christ.

When you've consistently given the Master your best through crisis and poverty, stood for truth and righteousness even when it was unpopular, gave up your sideline work in order to devote yourself to the ministry, served God in quietness and meekness in your humble place, you've demonstrated the heart of a servant.

Heaven has recorded your service. I can hardly wait for the day Jesus crowns you! I want to be there when you receive your glorious reward for living out the mind of Christ!

- » In the space provided, write down at least three ways you know you could develop more of a servant's heart. Be willing to make these changes by the grace of God and be prepared to share your testimony with your group during your next meeting.

### THREE WAYS I COULD DEVELOP A SERVANT'S HEART

1.

2.

3.

## LESSON 10 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 10 TEST

1. What passage in the New Testament instructs us to confess our trespasses to one another?
2. Name five ways the Bible describes sin.
3. What practical advice did Dr. Avery offer regarding sin?
4. When is submission to an earthly authority an act of worship?
5. When does submission become destructive?
6. Give three characteristics of true service.

# LESSON 11

# THE TONGUE AND THE THOUGHT LIFE

## PERSONAL DISCIPLINE

### LESSON 10 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points of Lesson 10. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 10.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of personal discipline to being formed into the image of Christ.
2. Learn how to discipline the tongue and begin practicing this discipline.
3. Learn how to take captive every thought and begin practicing this discipline.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### Personal Discipline in Speech

Even as a college student preparing for ministry, I began to feel the spiritually draining influence of my undisciplined tongue. I'm afraid I grieved the Spirit often. I began to see the wisdom of the Holy Spirit when he inspired these words: "In the multitude of words sin is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is wise."<sup>575</sup> I promised the Lord that if he would give me the grace, I would yield my tongue to him. Admittedly, practicing restraint in the area of the tongue has been one of the most difficult exercises of my Christian life;

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<sup>575</sup> Proverbs 10:19



but I am realizing that the more skilled we become in this area, the more peace, anointing, and respect we will enjoy.

## Personal Discipline in Fasting

At the beginning of a new year, a spiritual leader challenged his team to 21 days of fasting and prayer. For several weeks he announced it. He asked team members to sign up if they would participate. But right before the fast was to begin, he stood before his team and laughingly said that he was going to delay the start of the fast because of a meeting he was scheduled to attend where some of his favorite food would be served. Needless to say, the planned corporate fast was a failure.

- » These snapshots illustrate the impact of personal discipline on our personal and spiritual lives, and even on our leadership. How do you think a lack of personal discipline adds to spiritual instability?

## THE POWER OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE

In his classic book *The Disciplined Life*, Richard S. Taylor writes, “**Discipline is what most modern men need the most but want the least....** Too often young people who leave home, students who quit school, husbands and wives who seek divorce, church members who neglect services, employees who walk out on their jobs are simply trying to escape discipline.”<sup>576</sup>

In Lesson 6, I gave the illustration of my father-in-law’s beautiful Bradford Pear tree. It is a beautiful tree... with a leaning trunk which, because of its size, can no longer be straightened. This tree reminds us that the forming of healthy disciplines and practices while your mind, heart, and relationships are still young is so important. A pure mind, a disciplined life, excellent skill, healthy relationships, and a close walk with God will not just happen. These must be nurtured and cultivated with utmost diligence. If you wait too long, everything truly good in your life may be bent in ways you won’t be able to straighten.

Just as an athlete cannot become excellent in their sport apart from constant practice, no believer will be formed into the image of Christ apart from training. We have learned in this course that part of our training exercises include the **classic spiritual disciplines**—prayer, solitude, meditation, service, and so on. But in these next two lessons we will focus on another aspect of our training—**personal discipline, or self-mastery**.

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576 Richard S. Taylor, *The Disciplined Life* (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2002), Kindle LOC 22

## THE BIG IDEA

Growing in the image of Christ cannot be separated from personal discipline. In the next two lessons, we will discuss six areas where personal training or discipline is vital to spiritual formation:

1. Tongue
2. Thought life, including sexual desires
3. Appetite
4. Temperament
5. Time
6. Personal convictions

In this lesson, we will examine two of these personal disciplines and explore the influence that each of them holds over our spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. We will seek to gain practical wisdom for bringing our whole being under the rule of Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

### What is Personal Discipline?

**Personal discipline is the ability to regulate conduct by principle and sound judgment rather than emotion, desires, pressure, or cultural customs.**<sup>577</sup> In personal discipline, we labor to subordinate every thought, every desire, and every appetite to the Holy Spirit, for the sake of knowing Christ and winning the imperishable crown:

Every athlete **exercises self-control in all things**. They do it to receive a perishable wreath (winner's medal), but we an imperishable. So, I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But **I discipline my body and keep it under control**, lest after preaching to others I myself should be **disqualified**.<sup>578</sup>

- » What does Paul say could happen to him without self-discipline?

It is important to note that personal discipline alone doesn't make us better Christians, or even Christians at all. Discipline for the sake of self-improvement is often motivated by pride. The proper motive for self-control is to be controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit—to allow his glory to shine in and through his temple!

The spiritual disciplines, as well as personal disciplines, are a **means of grace**. They do not make me more righteous, but they do place me in a position to receive more from God.

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid, LOC 160.

<sup>578</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, *English Standard Version*, emphasis added

Discipline is a way to draw near to God so that God can meet with me. Discipline is a way to hold a clean, empty cup up to God so that he can fill it!

## Is Personal Discipline Really That Important?

It's interesting that Paul's writing to Timothy includes "without self-control" among the sins of the perilous times of the last days.<sup>579</sup> From these two passages alone, we learn that a lack of self-control is a serious problem in the Christian life with painful, and sometimes eternal, consequences.

- » Have you heard Christians joke about their lack of self-control—overeating, oversleeping, overspending, etc.? Do you think Christians around you take this topic seriously enough? Why? Or why not?

## Why Personal Discipline, or Self-Mastery, Is So Important

1. God wants to be glorified in our bodies, not just our hearts. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit.<sup>580</sup>
2. Discipline, or lack thereof, affects our influence on others. There is nothing so unbecoming as a spiritual leader who is incapable of restraining his own fleshly desires. His influence is ruined by an unconquered body—a body not being daily brought under the control of the Holy Spirit.

An unrestrained passion, an undisciplined use of time, an untamed tongue, an uncontrolled temper, and an unrestrained desire for food, money, or sex will quench the Spirit, cast shadows on the Christian worker's credibility, and lessen their reward. The first rule of success for the spiritual athlete, competing for the prize, is to rule ourselves.

Richard Taylor tells the story of Igor Gorin, a famous Ukrainian-American singer who loved to smoke. One day his voice teacher said, "Igor, you will have to make up your mind whether you are going to be a great singer or a great pipe smoker." The pipe went. Self-discipline is necessary to become the person God wants you to become.

## CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: MASTERING OUR TONGUES

There are two passages that will help form our understanding of the tongue and its influence over our lives: James 3:1-12 and Matthew 15:18-19.

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<sup>579</sup> 2 Timothy 3:3

<sup>580</sup> Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 6:19

- » Read these two passages.

In Matthew 15, Jesus reminds us of the inseparable link between the heart and the tongue: “But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart.”<sup>581</sup>

## The Influence of the Tongue in Everyday Life and Relationships

Jesus is teaching here that **we are** what **we say**. This is simple, but very hard for some of us to admit. If our words are angry it’s because we are still angry to a degree. If our words are insensitive, it’s because there remains in our hearts elements of insensitivity. If our words are sharp, cutting, or manipulative it’s because there remains within us disrespectful regard for the personhood and freedom of others. If we speak boastfully or defensively, there is doubtless a degree of pride remaining in us. If we speak critically of others, it’s because we still have a critical spirit to some degree. If we murmur and complain, it’s because we are yet unthankful. The fruit of our lips is, doubtless, the most flawless judge of our character.

- » Take a few moments to reflect on Jesus’ words here. Are you willing to admit that if character is measured by what comes out of your mouth you still need God’s transforming grace? Are you willing to share some areas of need?

James talks about a perfect man. What does he mean by “perfect”? Perfect in what sense? Perfect in the sense that he is able to control his or her tongue, and therefore has absolute or perfect control of his entire self. Perfect in the sense that he has reached a level of self-restraint in his speech which makes it possible to restrain or govern every other action and passion of his life as well. According to James, there is a man who has gained such control over his tongue that every other area of his life comes to order as well, “If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a **perfect man**, able also to bridle the whole body.”<sup>582</sup>

The following quotations help reinforce the meaning of this text:

“The same is able to bridle the whole body”—that is, the whole man. And doubtless some are able to do this, and so are in this sense perfect.<sup>583</sup>

[James’] object is not to represent the man as absolutely spotless in every sense and as wholly free from sin... but the design is to show that if a man can control his tongue, he has complete dominion over himself, as much as a man has over a horse by the bit or as a steersman has over a ship if he has hold of the rudder. He is perfect in that sense, that he has complete control over himself and will not be liable to error

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581 Matthew 15:18, emphasis added.

582 Emphasis added.

583 John Wesley

in anything. The design is to show the important position which the tongue occupies, as governing the whole man.<sup>584</sup>

Think about this practically. Isn't it true that when the tongue is silent and poised, even when provoked it has a calming, quieting effect on the whole life? And isn't it true that when we speak our words thoughtfully and respectfully, heated exchanges are often turned into constructive ones, and love and unity are preserved?

Don't you find that a timely word gently spoken is often rewarded by love and affection? Or that an exhortation or loving rebuke is often rewarded by the preservation of a soul? Truly, our tongue is the rudder of our life. When it's working well, it will steer you safely through troubled waters; but when it's broken, it will put your life at the mercy of storms you yourself have created.

When I was a boy, I heard a humorous fable of a boastful turtle who wanted to fly. One day when a large bird landed in his pond, the turtle had a very clever idea. He asked the bird to take him on a flight. "That's impossible!" the bird scoffed. "No, it isn't!" said the turtle. "All you have to do is bite down on one end of this stick while I bite down on the other end. Then, fly!" The bird agreed. All went well until people on the ground looked up and saw this amazing sight of a bird flying with a stick in his beak and a turtle holding on to the other end with his strong jaws. "I wonder who thought up such a clever, brilliant idea!" someone shouted, and the turtle heard him. He opened his mouth to boast, "I did...!" Those were, of course, his last words! Like many of us, his tongue was his destruction.

## Practical Tips for Training Your Tongue

### 1. Learn the value of words and use them sparingly: "Idle chatter leads only to poverty."<sup>585</sup>

Too much talking will impoverish the soul as too much spending will drain the budget. Many have discovered that too much conversation can lead to mental and spiritual poverty, especially when it lacks purpose. Part of being formed into the image of Christ is to weigh our words more carefully, as He did. This is not as easy as it may seem, because silence makes many of us uncomfortable.

### 2. Learn the destructive potential of words and rule your spirit: "Even so the tongue is a little member and boasts great things. See how great a forest a little fire kindles!"<sup>586</sup>

Proverbs reminds us, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty. And he who rules his spirit, than he who takes a city."<sup>587</sup> The words of an immature person burn out of control.

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584 Albert Barnes commentary on James 3

585 Proverbs 14:23

586 James 3:5

587 Proverbs 16:32

Rather than healing, they wound; rather than calming, they stir up strife; rather than cooling, they heat up the passions to the boiling point. We must learn the discipline of stopping every conversation when emotions get overheated.

**3. Learn that reputation is built by words, and use them wisely:** “Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.”<sup>588</sup>

It may surprise you that the scriptures have much to say about the wisdom of a quiet spirit.<sup>589</sup> It would be a pretty dull and boring world if everyone lived in quiet reserve; but as Christians we must develop the skill of listening and thoughtful interaction rather than careless, aimless speaking.

Attention is often given to the most vocal man or woman in the crowd, even if they have little to say; but God values the person who knows when to speak and when to hold his peace. God values the person who thinks before he speaks.

God sees the gentle and quiet woman as most irresistibly beautiful and attractive. History has proven that the gentle and quiet spirit of a godly woman has the power to move the hearts of kings and nations.<sup>590</sup>

**4. Learn the power of words to kill and to give life:**<sup>591</sup> “Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.”<sup>592</sup>

The things we say have the power to heal or wound, restore or destroy, encourage or dishearten. As a father, I have witnessed the effect of words and healthy expectations on my children. One day, several of us dads were watching our boys try to shimmy to the top of a tall metal pole. After three or four unsuccessful attempts, my son Timothy was about to give up when I said, “Hey, don’t give up yet, son! I believe you can make it if you really try!” The effect of those words was amazing. The fact that his dad believed in him encouraged my boy to try harder than he ever had. As he started climbing again, this time he gave it every effort. As he climbed I shouted, “Keep going, son! Don’t quit! You can make it! Keep climbing!” And he did make it!

I’m convinced that oftentimes the difference between success and failure in the church and in the home is a word of comfort or encouragement. Remember how we said in another lesson that even God the Father spoke audible words of affirmation to God the Son at

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588 Proverbs 17:28

589 Proverbs 17:1; 1 Thessalonians 4:11; 1 Timothy 2:2; 1 Peter 3:4

590 1 Samuel 25:23-33

591 Proverbs 12:18, Proverbs 15:1, 4

592 Proverbs 18:21

critical moments in the Son's earthly life.<sup>593</sup> If Jesus needed to hear words of comfort, how much more do we.

Our words are often prophetic. If we say to a child, "You're a failure," they will be more likely to fail. If we say, "You're not as beautiful or gifted as your siblings," then they will begin to think of themselves as ugly and their attitude will turn ugly as well. If, on the other hand, we focus on our children's strengths, rather than their weaknesses, and look for ways to bolster their confidence, we will be amazed by the results. Sadly, many children and adults live their whole lives thinking they have been nothing but a disappointment to those who are supposed to love them unconditionally; and it should not surprise us when they consistently underachieve—socially, academically, and spiritually.

Is your church and home a place where words are used for edification? Husbands, do you tell your wife she is beautiful? Do you express your appreciation for her love and service with words of affirmation? A wife who hears such things from her husband will most likely become an even more beautiful, spiritual person! This goes for daughters, as well. Wives, do you compare your husband with other men, maybe your father, and constantly remind him of his failures; or do you focus on those qualities for which you can be grateful? Men who are respected and encouraged become better men.

Pastor, have you helped establish an atmosphere of encouragement in your church, or do you just focus on the negative qualities of people? Paul said that as the time of Christ's coming draws nearer and the day of the Lord approaches, we will need more and more comfort and encouragement within the body of Christ: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting [*parakaleo*—comfort] one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."<sup>594</sup>

We must balance our words of rebuke with sincere words of encouragement. It has been very helpful for me to think of my words as currency which I am constantly depositing and spending. Every time I encourage someone, I am making small deposits in their hearts which, after many such deposits, has earned for me the right of withdrawal (correct or rebuke). I have learned, through some painful experiences, that attempting to rebuke or correct a person we have rarely or never encouraged will only create a gap in our relationship which is difficult or impossible to bridge.

**5. Know that the tongue cannot be tamed by ourselves alone, but by the Holy Spirit:** "For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind. But **the tongue can no man tame**; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison."<sup>595</sup>

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593 Luke 3:22

594 Hebrews 10:25

595 James 3:7-8, emphasis added.



It would be easier for us to tame a wild animal than to tame our tongue without the grace of God! Our battle with the tongue reminds us of our need to be cleansed and filled with the Holy Spirit. This is Isaiah's story. In the presence of God, it was his unclean tongue which caused him the most shame and conviction.<sup>596</sup> As the young prophet grieved over his iniquity and wallowed in hopeless despair, God did what only God can do: he sent his seraphim to graciously touch Isaiah's lips with a hot coal from the holy altar and make them clean. "Here, this has touched thy lips," said the seraphim, "your iniquities are forgiven, and your sin purged."<sup>597</sup> Now Isaiah was able to say, "Here am I, send me."

There is always a direct connection between the cleanness of our lips and our usefulness to God.

**6. Know that a disciplined tongue leads to the love of life and hope of good days ahead:** "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit."<sup>598</sup>

An uncontrolled tongue will be like a wild, unbridled horse, breaking down fences, destroying property, and trampling fruit. The rudderless ship, driven by the wind, will endanger everyone in its path and be driven against the rocks. And the flaming tongue will light a fire that sweeps across the landscape of the church and destroy years of planting, cultivation, and growth.

Most of the damage done in the kingdom of God has been done by people who have failed to keep a guard posted at the door of their lips. But if we would love life to the fullest and enjoy all the good and productive days God has planned for us, let's determine to watch the front gate with all vigilance! Set a guard in the morning, awaken him at noon, and check on him at night! Determine that by the grace of God, your lips will never be unguarded.

Good days are ahead for the one who guards this front gate of his life. There will be good days ahead for him because by his words he has established honor and earned respect. There will be good days ahead for his family because he has spoken words which build and strengthen family relationships. There will be good days ahead in his church because he has spoken words which encourage and edify the body of Christ. And the end result of his investment will be the love of life—the true, pure enjoyment of God's gifts.

## A Personal Journey

Truly, the tongue is the rudder of our lives, steering us toward one destination or another. To be honest, any misery or pain I endured early on in my marriage and ministry usually

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596 Isaiah 6:5

597 Isaiah 6:7

598 1 Peter 3:10; Proverbs 21:23



walked through the unguarded gate of my unsanctified tongue.<sup>599</sup> I'll never forget the time, as a young missionary, that I began to realize the connection between my words and my heart. Through a very dramatic, painful experience with a dear friend, where I offended him deeply with words, the Lord opened my eyes to see my need for the gentle, kind heart of Jesus. I wept and confessed before the Lord as he caused certain scenes to pass before my mind where I had judged, hurt, manipulated, and shown disregard for the feelings, freedoms, and opinions of others. As the Lord graciously cleansed my heart that day and flooded my soul with indescribable joy, I knew that a milestone had been reached in my spiritual journey. I knew that I had turned a corner, and I never wanted to turn back.

- » Read Galatians 6:6-8. Now, think of your words as little seeds being planted in the hearts of people around you. If every word is a seed which will bear either good fruit or bad fruit, what kind of harvest do you expect in the future? Take a few minutes and ask the Lord to help you evaluate your words. Write down what he shows you. Feel free to talk about your answers with your group.

## **CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: MASTERING OUR THOUGHT LIVES**

We can measure our maturity, our likeness to Jesus, not only by our words, but by our thoughts, as well. We are what we think, or what we dwell on!<sup>600</sup> Not every thought which passes through our minds is who we are; but every thought we choose to dwell on, every thought we allow to control us. As Martin Luther said, "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair."

### **The Influence of Our Thought Life in Everyday Life and Relationships**

I well remember the day as a young missionary when the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "Son, you're an angry man." I was dealing with some frustrations with the culture, as well as problems in the ministry, and found myself teaching and leading from irritation rather than love. One morning in my devotional time, I read those convicting words, "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." With these words the Holy Spirit pierced my heart. But I argued, "Lord, I'm not an angry man; I'm a missionary!" I think I heard the Lord say in return, "Well then, my son, you are an angry missionary!" I laughed out loud! He would not let me hide behind any title or position. Confession brought cleansing and freedom.

Are you tempted to harbor angry, resentful thoughts toward another person? Are you plagued by anxiety and fear? Do you wrestle at times with secret self-destructive thoughts? Are lustful thoughts causing you defeat? There is hope, but it won't be easy! Over two

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<sup>599</sup> Psalm 141:3

<sup>600</sup> Proverbs 23:7

hundred years ago John Wesley taught, “The soul and body make a man; but the Spirit and discipline make a Christian.” Victory over lustful, negative, self-destructive thoughts will happen by grace, through the means of personal discipline. You can change the way you think.

A victorious thought life is important because as we think we become. “If we think positive, uplifting, wholesome, healthy thoughts, we will eventually become positive, uplifting, wholesome, healthy people. If we think gloomy, negative, sickly thoughts, we will turn out to be gloomy, negative, sickly people.... Thoughts lead to actions.”<sup>601</sup>

When it comes to our thought life, one of the greatest battles many men face is the battle with lust. “Lust is purposefully dwelling on sinful, sensual thoughts. These are the wild horses of our minds that must be tracked down, captured, and made obedient to Christ.”<sup>602</sup> They are not innocent, but addictive and destructive.<sup>603</sup> How do we capture them?

## Practical Disciplines for a Pure Thought Life

(These principles can help us gain victory over untrue, negative, critical, and self-destructive thoughts as well.)

### 1. **Be alert:** “Keep a close watch on yourself.”<sup>604</sup>

Know when temptation is strongest; know when you are most vulnerable to temptation and build safeguards in your life. When I was a young pastor, I remember reading *Lectures to My Students*, by Charles Spurgeon. In one of the chapters, “Fainting Fits,” he teaches spiritual leaders to beware of temptations which follow times of ministry success, weariness, or conflict. This has been solid advice for me.

We are most vulnerable when we are hungry for affection or hungry for food; when we feel we’ve been unjustly treated; when we feel isolated and alone; and when we are mentally, spiritually, and physically exhausted. Satan loves to take advantage of us in our most vulnerable moments. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.”

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601 Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 167-168

602 Ibid, 165

603 Ibid, 164-165

604 1 Timothy 4:16, *English Standard Version*

## 2. Commit to purity in action.

God gives Christians all of the grace they need to be pure. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce [say ‘No’ to] ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”<sup>605</sup>

Grace teaches us self-control. No Christian can say, “I just have no control over my thoughts.” God’s saving grace at work within our hearts, through the indwelling Holy Spirit, enables every Christian “to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions.” The Holy Spirit within you is the Spirit of self-control.<sup>606</sup> By the grace of God, we do not have to give in. Believe this. Count on this moment by moment. Practice stopping intrusive thoughts and replacing them with true thoughts.<sup>607</sup>

Know what arouses fleshly thoughts. Know what causes **you** trouble. Cut it out of your life. Put it to death! If this sounds too radical, then don’t just take it from me; take it from Jesus. In the context of lustful thoughts, he said: “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.”<sup>608</sup>

Are you this earnest about holiness? Are you willing to make painful, uncomfortable sacrifices in order to guard your mind and your affection for God? Long time Bible college president, Dr. Michael Avery, tells the story of a young man who came to his office to make a confession. He had been visiting pornographic websites, but said he was so sorry and wanted President Avery to forgive him and to hold him accountable to purity. He *seemed* very sincere, very broken. A few weeks later the same young man came again with the same confession; and a few weeks later, yet again. Finally, President Avery looked the young man in the eyes and tested him. “I think you want purity, but I’m not sure. Would you be willing to make a commitment today that if your computer causes you to sin again, you will either give it away, sell it, or break it in pieces with a hammer?” The young man said there was no way he would do that. That would be too much of a sacrifice. He said he needed the computer for school. “Then you aren’t yet truly serious about purity!” President Avery replied.

Those who are not willing to build safeguards and to deprive themselves of certain comforts and conveniences in their pursuit of spiritual joy do not really want purity. Job testified, “I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?” This is a testimony of **decisiveness** which leads to victory.

If you want to be holy, don’t watch programs, read books, or visit internet sites that cause temptation. Flee from places and people you know will appeal to your flesh. Don’t open the

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605 Titus 2:11-12, *English Standard Version*

606 Galatians 5:23

607 Philippians 4:8

608 Matthew 5:28-29

door to temptation no matter how curious you are about what's on the other side. If you want to be victorious, you must do as Joseph did and flee the tempter's appeal. Make it a habit!

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Flee also youthful lusts."<sup>609</sup> Lust is like a hungry lion. Don't let it get its clawed foot in the door of your mind. Once you have opened the door of your mind, the lion (lust) will devour until its appetite has been momentarily satisfied; and he will never leave on his own. Paul is telling Timothy that if he really wants to be holy, he must run from the jaws of lust. He must not rationalize, justify, or even consider gratifying himself with what God has forbidden.

**3. Pursue joy in God:** "But pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."<sup>610</sup>

The best way I have found to lose my taste for things that are out of bounds for me is to savor the far surpassing joys and delights of heavenly, eternal things. One moment in the presence of God makes sinful pleasures seem dull by comparison. Fleeing lust without pursuing righteousness will never keep lust away. Victorious men and women are those who are in hot pursuit of righteousness—filling their hearts and minds with things which will strengthen their walk with God and increase their enjoyment of God! They enjoy fellowship with God, cultivate healthy intimacy, read good books, develop and use their God-given talents, and build God's kingdom. They don't allow their minds to become idle. They know that an idle mind is the devil's playground!

**4. Take every thought captive to the Word of God:** "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ."<sup>611</sup>

The key to victory is to make every thought a slave of the Word of God. In other words, examine every thought against the truth of scripture. Stephen Arterburn and Fred Stoeker have written a series of books to help men overcome sexual temptations. One of the practical things they teach men is to learn the discipline of what they call "bouncing the eyes." In other words, practice the discipline of quickly looking away from forbidden fruit.<sup>612</sup> This can be a powerful, life-changing discipline. But they also say that the discipline of eye-bouncing will not be complete without the training of the mind to constantly affirm biblical truth:

- "I have no rights of my own."
- "I have been bought with a price."
- "I am a love-slave of God."

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609 2 Timothy 2:22

610 2 Timothy 2:22

611 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, *English Standard Version*

612 Genesis 2:17

Fred Stoeker writes,

To get out of prison completely, you can't stop with just bouncing your eyes... you must take one more step through the second door, which is to be transformed by the Word of God to think like Jesus....

How did Jesus think? Like a servant without rights. He loved righteousness and hated wickedness (see Hebrews 1:9) for his Father's sake; and he chose to give up his rights to become a servant that might buy us for his Father at a price.

And now that we have been bought at a price, we must think like Jesus. We are no longer our own, and we have no rights of our own outside of him.... "Flee from sexual immorality.... You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body" (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

During my battle for sexual purity, I (Fred) distilled this verse down to the core kernel, which eventually transformed my mind totally:

**You have no right to look at that or think about it; you haven't the authority.**

When your mind is truly transformed to think like this, you will experience what we call "the death of temptation."<sup>613</sup>

If you want a pure thought life, capture every untamed thought about God, sin, yourself, and other people which is not obedient to the Word of God. Meditate on the Word day and night.<sup>614</sup> Let it teach you who you are in Christ, and to whom you belong. The more saturated you become with scripture, the more you will think rightly about sexuality. Perhaps you've suffered abuse. Perhaps even as a Christian man you struggle with same sex attraction, which is not unusual in today's world. Saturate yourself in the Word of God and take every thought captive.

Men, practice thinking about others, not as objects to be used for fantasy or self-gratification, but as persons made in the image of God, as loved and cared for by God, as so valued by God that he sent his only Son to die for them. By the Holy Spirit, train yourself to think of men and women as persons of eternal worth who deserve dignity and respect. Paul taught Timothy to treat "younger women as sisters, with all purity."<sup>615</sup> Train yourself to think this way, by the grace of God, and you will experience transformation.

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<sup>613</sup> Stephen Arterburn & Fred Stoeker, *Every Man's Challenge* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2004), 53-54

<sup>614</sup> Psalm 1:2

<sup>615</sup> 1 Timothy 5:2

**5. Practice confession and become accountable:** “Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”<sup>616</sup>

If you are struggling in your thought life, I can testify that there is healing power in the humble act of confession. As we taught in the lesson on brokenness, pride is the greatest hindrance to grace. But God responds to the broken and contrite heart. This is my story.

Almost twenty years ago, when our son Jesse (4 years old then) was suffering with cancer (of the eyes), I decided to go on a seven day fast. My wife, Becky, and I were concerned that perhaps our unbelief was preventing God from healing our little boy. Some well-meaning Christian friends had implied this. Our hearts were hurting. We were so troubled. We knew that the only answer was God and his Word. We would seek him. We would seek his will until our hearts found rest. During this fast, the Lord met with me (Becky, too) in a wonderful way. He assured me of his care for Jesse and for our family. And, he gave us complete rest in his will.

But during this fast, God set me free in another way I did not expect. On the sixth evening as I was reading a Bible story to my children, the Holy Spirit spoke as clearly to my heart as I’ve ever heard. His voice came as a powerful and completely unexpected thought—not just a thought, but an invitation to freedom: “If you will confess what has plagued you from time to time throughout your Christian life, I will set you free.” I knew instantly who I needed to confess to. I was stunned and, for a moment, frightened. “I can’t talk about that,” I thought. “That’s humiliating!” But the next moment, I found my heart saying “Yes!” This voice had come with such love, and I wanted to be free.

The next day I sat down with my trusted friend and simply confessed everything I had hidden deep inside where no one but me and God could see it. I hadn’t been living in sin; but because I had never opened up my heart and brought my failure into the open, it had not completely lost its grip on me. From time to time I would fall. The moment of confession was the moment the process of healing and freedom began for me. From this moment, confession and accountability became a habit which the Lord has used to continue his process of transformation in me. One thing I have learned is that temptation loses its grip when it is continually brought into the open.

If you struggle in your thought life, if you struggle with lustful thoughts or any other form of impurity, I challenge you to find a Spirit-filled friend or mentor; share your need; and let them pray for you. And make yourself regularly accountable. There is power in the practice of confession and accountability. But don’t forget the other admonitions, as well. You will still have to be watchful, still have to flee, still have to say “No!,” still have to pursue righteousness, and still have to take every thought captive.

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<sup>616</sup> James 5:17



- » Ask two or three people in your group to talk about which practical disciplines for a pure thought life impacted them most. Why?

One final reminder from Keith Drury:

You'll never completely beat [lust] through striving, though strive you must. You'll never defeat this clinging habit through hard work, though work you must. Only Jesus can bind this evil spirit of the mind. It is only the Son of God who can drive these thieves from the temple of your heart. God can deliver you. And he will if you let him.<sup>617</sup>

## LESSON 11 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

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617 Keith Drury, *Soul Shaper* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2013), 173

## LESSON 11 TEST

1. What is the definition of personal discipline given in this lesson?
2. What are two reasons personal discipline is important for the Christian?
3. What are the two personal disciplines referred to in Lesson 11?
4. Who is a perfect man according to James?
5. Give three practical tips for controlling the tongue, with references.
6. Name four practical suggestions for a pure thought life.





## LESSON 12

# APPETITE, TIME, TEMPERAMENT, AND PERSONAL CONVICTIONS

## PERSONAL DISCIPLINE

### LESSON 11 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the areas of personal discipline learned in Lesson 11. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 11.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Understand the importance of personal discipline to being formed into the image of Christ.
2. Have a more practical understanding of how to train his/her appetite, time, and temperament, and how to put these disciplines into practice.
3. Learn the importance of developing personal convictions.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### A Pastor

While working on this course, I enjoyed fellowship with an elderly pastor friend. During our conversation, he confessed that his greatest struggle throughout his life and ministry has been slothfulness. “I’m tempted to sleep too much and to pray too little!” he admitted. “When I feel discouraged or bored, rather than pray or study, I take long naps, more than necessary.” The good news is that my friend is still tender and seems committed to letting

the Lord transform him. One evening, shortly after our conversation, he spoke to his congregation about his intention to become a man of prayer. He realizes that following through with this commitment will not be easy but will require personal discipline enabled by the Holy Spirit.

## **A Mother**

A young mother we once tried to disciple was quite unstable spiritually. She had a sincere hunger for God, but her lack of personal discipline caused grief to herself and her family. Laundry would pile up, and dirty dishes would fill the sink and cover the countertop before she would wash them. Her devotional life was very irregular. She was unhealthy due to poor eating habits and a lack of exercise. Her husband and children were uncared for. By her own admission, her lack of self-discipline made her spiritual life very unsatisfying. After years of struggle, she finally became serious about personal discipline, and her story began to change.

## **THE BIG IDEA**

Growing in the image of Christ cannot be separated from personal discipline. In this lesson and the last lesson, we are discussing areas where personal training or discipline is vital to spiritual formation:

1. Tongue
2. Thought life, including sexual desires
3. Appetite
4. Temperament
5. Time
6. Personal convictions

We have examined the first two of these personal disciplines. In this lesson, we will talk about the last four.

Success in the Christian life—bearing the image of Jesus Christ—is directly related to how effective we are at mastering ourselves. Personal discipline will increase our happiness in God as well as our ability to glorify God and advance his gospel. The life of David illustrates this.

As a young shepherd boy, David mastered the harp, the sling, and poetry. These little masteries opened doors to greater influence and provided opportunities beyond his imagination. The harp brought him before the king; the sling won him honor, and eventually a kingdom; and through his poetry, he still encourages, influences, and helps shape the devotional lives of millions every single day.

Perhaps you are tempted to think that little things don't really matter, but they do. Faithfulness in the little things matters. Amy Carmichael challenged her readers,

Everything is important, even the tiniest thing. If you do everything, whether great or small, for the sake of the Lord, then you will be ready to do whatever work he has chosen for you to do later.<sup>618</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Personal discipline is not as easy as we wish it were! One day my wife, Becky, disciplined one of our daughters, Carrie, for getting angry at her sister. Carrie was only three or four years old at the time. "You really need to ask the Lord to help you gain self-control," Becky said. Carrie disappeared into her room and reappeared a few minutes later with a big smile on her face! "Why are you smiling, honey? Why are you so happy?" her mommy asked. "Because I prayed for self-control!" she said. Like many Christians, Carrie thought self-control was something God would instantly give her; but, as Carrie's father, I have since observed that he didn't!

- » Do you see a tendency within the church to seek instant maturity in areas that will likely require years of personal discipline?

## DISCIPLINED CHRISTIANS ARE THE MOST JOYFUL

There is this idea that disciplined people are serious and joyless. It depends on how we look at it. When Olympic athletes practice their sport, they certainly endure their share of pain; but they do it for the joy of competition and the chance to wear a gold medal. When a farmer cultivates the soil and plants the seeds, he endures his share of pain; but he does it for the joy of harvest: "He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."<sup>619</sup> And when Christians discipline themselves spiritually and personally, they do so because it leads to a life that flourishes in God. We should never pity a disciplined man or woman. By the grace of God, they are getting the most out of life.

## CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: MASTERING OUR APPETITES

Without question, appetite is one of the most difficult of all personal disciplines; especially when it comes to food. Food is provided by God not only to sustain life, but for our personal enjoyment. But, it was never meant to take his place. It was never meant to provide ultimate

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<sup>618</sup> Amy Carmichael, *Candles in the Dark*. (Fort Washington, PA: CLC Publications, 2012), 16

<sup>619</sup> Psalm 126:6

comfort and satisfaction. It doesn't really matter if you live in a poor country or a more prosperous one, training your appetite is vital to spiritual progress.

In the West, some Christians have normalized a spirit of gluttony and self-indulgence. We continue to buy new pairs of shoes even though we have a dozen pairs in our closet! We live beyond our means and go into debt. We choose "all you can eat" restaurants so that we can gorge ourselves. But the scriptures are clear, "Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in **all** things."<sup>620</sup>

## Why Mastering Our Appetite Is Vital to Spiritual Formation

**1. Our appetites determine the direction of our lives:** "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."<sup>621</sup>

Jesus taught that we always seek the things we crave—whether it be the cravings of our stomachs, the passionate desire for sex, possessions, or power, or the longings of our hearts for God. Our hearts are formed by the things we choose to value. If you are a man or woman who has a tendency to overindulge, you should know that it is hindering your spiritual progress.

Proverbs says, "Put a knife to your throat if you are a man given to appetite."<sup>622</sup> John Wesley paraphrased this verse, "Restrain thine appetite, as if a man stood with a knife at thy throat!"<sup>623</sup> This is the same kind of radical self-restraint Jesus taught regarding sexual temptations.<sup>624</sup> Gluttony is not just a food problem. Gluttony by definition is simply consuming more than is needed; and thus, it is an attitude which can be applied to any appetite, whether it be food, money, possessions, or power.

**2. Overindulgence in any good thing diminishes our satisfaction with what is best:** "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled."<sup>625</sup>

Preoccupation with natural appetites will leave less room in our minds for eternal things. As John Piper puts it: "If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God... it is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great."<sup>626</sup>

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620 1 Corinthians 9:25

621 Matthew 6:21

622 Proverbs 23:2

623 John Wesley's notes on Proverbs 23:2

624 Matthew 5:28-30

625 Matthew 5:6

626 John Piper's book, *A Hunger for God*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013) is a great resource.

When I was a boy, my favorite time of the day was supper time! Actually, it still is! The anticipation of delicious, home-cooked meals and the fellowship and laughter of my wife and children around the table are some of the greatest joys of life. But there have been times, especially in my youthful days, when my impatient snacking before supper has spoiled the purest enjoyment of it. I eat, but not with the same depth of satisfaction. There is a lesson here: Impatience takes away a sense of anticipation, which makes eating more enjoyable; and self-indulgence—too much of a good thing—robs Christians of a sense of spiritual satisfaction.

### **3. If hunger for food is too strong, it will block our spiritual vision.**

In John 4, while the disciples went into Samaria to buy food, Jesus led a thirsty soul to salvation. When the disciples came back, they urged Jesus to eat; but he said, “I have food to eat which you do not know.... My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to finish his work.”<sup>627</sup> Jesus needed food to live, just like the disciples; but he was training his disciples not to allow their appetites to blind them to the Spirit’s work all around them. He taught them that doing what pleases the Father is far more satisfying than the best take-out lunch.

Nothing should dominate our minds but the things of God. In the context of food and sexual desire—however this is applicable to all appetites—Paul said, “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.”<sup>628</sup>

In the scriptures the deadly sins of gluttony and drunkenness are said to flow from the same spring of self-indulgence.

- » Look up Deuteronomy 21:20 and Proverbs 23:21. How seriously do you think most people take the sin of gluttony?

## **Practical Advice to Help Us Restrain Our Appetites**

1. Serve others before yourself. This is a great way to battle self-indulgence.
2. Discipline yourself toward moderation in all things.
3. Avoid situations, people, or locations which tempt you to overindulge your appetites.
4. Discipline yourself toward faithful stewardship of your health and resources.

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<sup>627</sup> John 4:32-34

<sup>628</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:12-13

5. Practice fasting, as taught in the lessons on the spiritual disciplines. Hungering for God—fasting—is one of the best disciplines for quenching the fires of appetite that burn.
6. Let your motive for restraint and moderation be the enjoyment of God! Remember that personal discipline should never be an end in itself but a means to more enjoyment of eternal things.

## CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: MASTERING OUR TEMPERAMENTS

He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city.<sup>629</sup>

Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.<sup>630</sup>

People who study human behavior have taught us that every person is a unique combination of personality and temperament. Various personality traits have sometimes been defined as follows:<sup>631</sup>

### Extroversion and Introversion

- Extroverts love being around people but tend to make themselves the center of attention.
- Introverts are more reflective and enjoy solitude but tend to withdraw from much-needed fellowship.

### Sensing and Intuition

- Sensing persons like routine and details and systematic ways of doing things but struggle with flexibility.
- Intuitive persons are problem solvers and do not enjoy repetitive activity but struggle with patience and follow-through.

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629 Proverbs 16:32

630 Proverbs 25:28

631 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 50-56

## Thinking and Feeling

- Thinking persons are analytical, logical, and reasonable but struggle with sensitivity to others.
- Feeling persons are sensitive to how others feel but tend to be people pleasers.

## Judging and Perceiving

- Judging persons like order and control but struggle with impatience and anger.
- Perceiving persons are laid back and relaxed but struggle with procrastination.

Every person must bring their personality and temperament under the control of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the fruit of self-control, empowered by the Holy Spirit, our weaknesses will dominate our lives and destroy our unique potential to glorify God.

## Practical Advice for Gaining Self-Discipline in the Area of Temperament

1. Study the life of Jesus and conform your behavior to his, by the Holy Spirit. The more we become like him, the more our personality and temperament will be sanctified.
  2. Don't make excuses for offending your brothers and sisters in Christ. Be humble. Don't be discouraged by failure but keep seeking grace.
  3. Be grateful for the person God created you to be, and give thanks for the personality and temperaments of others.
- » Ask members of your group to name some of the personality and temperament strengths and weaknesses of biblical characters. Which traits of their temperament and personality do you think needed to be sanctified, and which traits would never be sanctified?

## CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: DISCIPLINE IN USE OF OUR TIME

Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men.<sup>632</sup>

As a door turns on its hinges, so does the lazy man on his bed.<sup>633</sup>

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632 Proverbs 22:29

633 Proverbs 26:14



## Discipline of Time: Pursue What Is Excellent

Discipline in the matter of time doesn't mean that we fill every moment with busy activity, but that we learn to fill every moment with the most excellent good: "And this I pray... that you may approve the things that are excellent."<sup>634</sup> If the most excellent thing you can do at a certain moment is simply sleeping, then sleep. Don't scroll aimlessly through the internet. If the most excellent thing is sitting in silent meditation or prayer, then do that, rather than something less. If the most excellent thing at a certain moment is worship, or study, or reading, or practicing your guitar, or writing, or washing clothes, or learning a second language, or preaching the gospel, then discipline yourself to do that most excellent thing. If the most excellent thing you can do is give tender care to your sick child, cook a meal, provide income for your family, build a house, converse with a friend or colleague, or enjoy the beauties of God's world... whatever the most excellent thing is at any given moment, train yourself to do it, rather than something else.

And we should add to this, that to redeem the time means that whatever our hand finds to do, we do it with all our might, in the name of the Lord Jesus, with thanksgiving, and for his glory. If we train ourselves to do this, we will redeem our short days on earth.

1. **With all our might**—"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might."<sup>635</sup>
2. **In the name of the Lord Jesus, with thanksgiving**—"And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."<sup>636</sup>
3. **For God's glory**—"Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."<sup>637</sup>

This is a very high standard that very few reach, I'm sure. But this is the kind of discipline we should be striving for.

## Discipline of Time: Do What God Has Uniquely Called and Equipped You to Do

Jesus did only those things his Father had uniquely called him to do.<sup>638</sup> He went where the Father asked him to go and said what the Father asked him to say. He is our model in time management.

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<sup>634</sup> Philippians 1:9-10

<sup>635</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:10a

<sup>636</sup> Colossians 3:17

<sup>637</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31

<sup>638</sup> John 8:29

Too many “Davids” waste time trying to wear Saul’s armor<sup>639</sup> or forcing themselves to copy what successful people have done. I’ve done it myself. I well remember the time in my early pastoral ministry that I attended a seminar where a successful pastor challenged us to go house to house and invite people to church. This was the secret of his success, it seemed, so I felt like I should do it, too (even though in America most people are very unfriendly toward strangers who knock on their doors). I forced myself out the door one Saturday morning in terror. “Perhaps this is what it means to take up my cross and follow Jesus,” I thought. I went to a nearby neighborhood and hoped no one would be home. I walked up and down the street trying to build up courage; but, after about an hour, I went home totally defeated without meeting even one person! It took me a while in ministry to learn that while obedience to Jesus often takes us out of our comfort zone, he rarely, if ever, takes us out of our gifting zone.

Don’t allow yourself to be pressured to do good things that are not the right things for you, things you are not called or qualified to do. Think of the early apostles in Acts 6 who refused to be distracted by the good ministry of serving tables, because they needed to stay focused on Jesus’ calling to prayer and the ministry of God’s Word: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”<sup>640</sup>

- » Ask someone in your group to share a time when they felt pressured to copy someone else’s spiritual gift. What was the result?

## Discipline of Time: Plod—Work without Thrills

This generation is a generation of thrill seekers, but those who do the most good in the world keep doing right even when there is no thrill in it. No matter what you do, eventually the excitement of something new turns to drudgery. We are no longer driven and motivated by desire, and that’s where discipline comes in. Some time ago I endured a season of intense boredom! Ministries which once used to excite me now seemed dreadfully hard. The challenge just wasn’t there like it once was. The taste for life had turned bitter. I think everyone understands this temptation. The Christian life often requires grit! In the midst of my boredom, I came across this timely word from Oswald Chambers about walking:

The word “walk” is used in the Bible to express the character of a person.... When we are in an unhealthy condition, either physically or emotionally, we always look for thrills in life.<sup>641</sup>

The Christian life is more about walking than anything else.

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639 1 Samuel 17:38-39

640 Acts 6:1-4

641 Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (July 20 entry). Retrieved from <https://utmost.org/dependent-on-god%E2%80%99s-presence/> on January 16, 2021.

- “I say then: walk in the Spirit.”<sup>642</sup>
- “And walk in love.”<sup>643</sup>
- “But if we walk in the light....”<sup>644</sup>

Walking speaks much more of patient constancy than running. What pleases him is a life of consistency, faithfulness, and disciplined resolve even when there is little to inspire. Walking is tough. Walking requires patience and perseverance. “To them who by **patient continuance** in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life:”<sup>645</sup> Walking builds character. Walking makes us better disciples and will accomplish some purpose of God in our spiritual lives. This discipline makes us more contented.

The kingdom advances through plodders, not thrill seekers. William Carey, great missionary to India, whose translations of scripture were used to bring millions into the kingdom of God, said that the secret to his success was that he had learned to plod: “I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything.”

Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, missionary and devotional writer, observed in *Streams in the Desert*: “**The glory of tomorrow is rooted in the drudgery of today.** Many want the glory without the cross, the shining without the burning; but crucifixion comes before coronation.”<sup>646</sup>

It’s those who learn to faithfully plod through the drudgery of life today who will enjoy the best God has to offer tomorrow. The plodders will be the happy harvesters: “He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”<sup>647</sup> Learn the discipline of focusing right now on your present duties rather than daydreaming about the future or coveting what you can’t have, and you’ll be a more happy Christian.

## Practical Advice for Self-Discipline in the Area of Time

### 1. Sacrifice the good for the excellent.

Good is the enemy of the best. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to activities which are not best for you, activities which are not productive personally or spiritually. Ask him to make you willing to let go of the good things for the sake of the best things. Open your heart to the thought that too much time on sports, or TV and movies, or news, or shopping might be robbing you of activities which lead to greater joy: the perfecting of your gift, fellowship

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642 Galatians 5:16

643 Ephesians 5:2

644 1 John 1:7

645 Romans 2:7, emphasis added.

646 Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert* (April 26 entry). Retrieved from <https://annointing.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/devotional-streams-in-the-desert.pdf> on January 16, 2021.

647 Psalm 126:6

with the Lord, nurturing your marriage, the enjoyment of your children, Christian service, or physical exercise.

## 2. Prayerfully form plans and goals.

One of the greatest weaknesses of many Christian men and women, both young and old, is that they wander aimlessly through everyday life without clear goals. Prayerful goal setting can be a very spiritual exercise—one which keeps us focused.

After high school, my oldest son, Timothy, decided to take a year off before attending college. My wife and I said that we were okay with this decision as long as he had some specific goals he would strive toward. He took the challenge; and as a way to help him form healthy goals, I created this simple growth plan.

INTENTIONAL GROWTH PLAN	
FIVE CRITICAL AREAS I MUST BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT:	BY GOD'S GRACE I WILL... (WRITE YOUR COMMITMENTS)
<b>Spiritual Development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I must cultivate a meaningful devotional life.</li> <li>• I must read books which will instruct and challenge me.</li> </ul>	
<b>Moral Accountability</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I must find and engage with an accountability partner or mentor.</li> <li>• I must be transparent with technology use, media intake, personal modesty, etc.</li> <li>• I must install guardrails to protect and foster moral purity.</li> </ul>	

<p><b>Personal Discipline</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I must discipline my thought life.</li> <li>• I must discipline my time.</li> <li>• I must discipline my appetites.</li> <li>• I must establish convictions.</li> <li>• I must discipline my sleeping and waking habits.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Work</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I must take the initiative to help at home.</li> <li>• I must be a servant-leader at work.</li> <li>• I must pursue excellence in everything my hand finds to do.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Financial Stewardship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I must give (beginning with tithe).</li> <li>• I must save.</li> <li>• I must pay my bills on time.</li> </ul>	

Honestly, the most Spirit-filled men and women I know go about their lives in an orderly way. One of the important ministries of the Holy Spirit in our lives is to bring order to our chaos. To the degree that we cooperate with the Holy Spirit, to that degree our thoughts, words, behavior, and surroundings will be ordered.

Not that every minute or hour is planned, but that they have a clear focus and direction in life. In those seasons when things are not so clear, they wait expectantly on the Lord for direction.

### 3. Do the next thing that needs to be done, promptly.

I went by the field of a lazy man... and there it was, all overgrown with thorns.... When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction: A little slumber, a little folding of hands to rest; so shall your poverty come like a prowler, and your need like an armed man.<sup>648</sup>

During our first few years of ministry, Becky and I would listen as often as possible to Elizabeth Elliot's radio broadcast, *Gateway to Joy*. Of all the missionary stories she told and all the wisdom she presented, nothing helped us more than her oft repeated counsel, "Do the next thing." What she meant by this was that rather than thinking about our boring or less than desirable situation, we should set our mind and effort on the next task—especially if that task seems small and insignificant. If the clothes need to be washed; if there is a book we should read or a letter we should write; if our finances need to be organized; if we should study for a message; if the garden needs to be weeded; if there is one we should counsel; if our children or spouse needs our love, affection, and attention; or if a lightbulb needs to be changed; if there is anything we can do to make life more pleasant for another, then we should do that thing.

We must develop the discipline of doing what needs to be done, promptly, especially when there's no excitement in doing it. We must learn to do hard things, first.

### 4. Remember that faithfulness in time leads to joy.

For everything there is a season,<sup>649</sup> including the seasons of pleasure. God-timed and God-granted pleasures are always more fulfilling and rewarding than those we have sought for ourselves.

I was a twenty-six-year-young pastor in my third year of ministry, and the devil had almost convinced me that I would never accomplish anything for God. I was in despair. I was confused. I felt trapped. For months. I had carried such a weight on my chest that, honestly, at times I even wished to die. One day, the Holy Spirit gave me the grace to look heavenward and say, "Father, I don't know what you have in store for me and Becky. I don't know if you want us to stay in the pastoral ministry, or if you will someday open up a door to cross-cultural ministry for us. But, Father, I consecrate myself anew to you and to your perfect will, whatever and wherever it may be." I also promised the Lord that day that no matter how tempting it was, I would never try to open a door on my own, but would trust in his power to align the hearts of men with his will. God heard this prayer of fresh consecration and the very next day called our family, with undeniable certainty, into missionary service. We knew that this was what God had been preparing us for.

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648 Proverbs 24:30-34

649 Ecclesiastes 3:1

## CRITICAL AREAS OF PERSONAL DISCIPLINE: OUR PERSONAL BOUNDARIES AND CONVICTIONS

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.<sup>650</sup>

One of the signs of maturity is that we no longer ask, “What does the law allow?” or “What can I get by with?” but instead start asking, “Is this helpful to me?” and “Will this bring me closer to God or make me a better follower of Christ?” One of the most important disciplines is the formation of personal boundaries and convictions in our lives—boundaries and convictions related to personal purity, friendships, dress, music, entertainment, the Lord’s Day, and others.

### Points to Remember about Convictions and Personal Boundaries

- 1. These specific convictions and personal boundaries are not necessarily for everyone.** We might not be able to find a specific verse for them in the Bible, except in principle. So we must never demand them of others or use our convictions to judge others.
- 2. These personal boundaries and convictions are based on biblical principles, but the specific applications are unique to you.** As the Lord makes you aware of your weaknesses, you develop personal boundaries and convictions which will help preserve your passion for God.
- 3. These personal boundaries and convictions must be formed in love for others.**<sup>651</sup> There are plenty of times in our Christian walk that we will limit our freedoms for the sake of love. Mature Christians are willing to lay down their rights in this way.
- 4. Personal boundaries and convictions must be motivated by joy.** Thoughtlessly following church tradition or the convictions of good people, when those convictions are not in your heart, will only lead to bondage. George Mueller has a very good word for us here:

I have often remarked the (harmful) effects of doing things because others did them, or because it was the custom, or because they were persuaded into acts of outward self-denial, or giving up things whilst the heart did not go along with it, and whilst **the outward act was NOT the result of the inward powerful working of the Holy [Spirit], and the happy entering into our fellowship with the Father and with the Son.**

Everything that is a mere form, a mere habit... is to be dreaded exceedingly.... Things should not result from without, but from within. The sort of clothes I wear, the kind

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650 1 Corinthians 10:23

651 Romans 14:13-19



of house I live in, the quality of the furniture I use—all such like things should not result from other persons doing so and so, or because it is customary among those brethren with whom I associate to live in such and such a simple, inexpensive, self-denying way; but whatever be done in these things, in the way of giving up, or self-denial, or deadness to the world, should result from the joy we have in God, from the knowledge of our being the children of God, from the entering into the preciousness of our future inheritance.<sup>652</sup>

Be sure that your convictions spring from freedom, rather than enslavement to man-made rules and traditions.<sup>653</sup>

## Practical Advice for the Discipline of Personal Boundaries and Convictions

1. Know your weaknesses and tendencies.
2. Seek counsel from other faithful Christians.
3. Do not form boundaries and convictions hastily or thoughtlessly.
4. Do not make foolish vows you cannot keep.
5. Be motivated by love.
6. Realize that some convictions will change over time as you develop in spiritual strength and maturity. Only God's Word is permanent!

The prophet Daniel is a beautiful example of a man who, in the early days of his Babylonian captivity, established some personal customs: “Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went home. And in his upper room, with his windows open toward Jerusalem, he knelt down on his knees three times that day, and prayed and gave thanks before his God, **as was his custom since early days.**”<sup>654</sup>

Open windows toward Jerusalem? Kneeling three times a day? These customs were not commanded in the scriptures, but Daniel had established them because he wanted to preserve his affection for God, God's people, and God's city. Daniel went beyond law, to love. This is why God used him so powerfully.

## CONCLUSION

To be formed into the image of Christ, we must focus on personal discipline. We must make our minds and bodies our servants. I overheard one of my children express one day (when

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652 I do not know where I originally got this, but it can be found on the following web page: <https://goodnessofgodministries.wordpress.com/2010/07/09/the-wise-sayings-of-george-mueller/> September 12, 2020.

653 Galatians 5:1

654 Daniel 6:10, emphasis added.



I had given them some unpleasant work to do), “I just wish I had a servant!” I told them that if they would make themselves their servant, they would always have one!

- » Which of the personal disciplines discussed in the last two lessons have you found most helpful? Why? Take five minutes to reflect on some of the changes you need to make. Share one or two things with your group if you like.

## LESSON 12 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time, and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown’s *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

## LESSON 12 TEST

1. What are the six personal disciplines we've been learning about in Lessons 11 and 12?
2. List three reasons mastery of appetite is vital to spiritual formation.
3. What does Proverbs 16:32 say about the person who is slow to anger?
4. What did missionary statesman William Carey say was the secret to his success?
5. Share in your own words the good counsel of George Mueller regarding personal convictions.



# LESSON 13

## FORMED THROUGH SUFFERING

### LESSON 12 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the areas of personal discipline learned in Lesson 12. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 12.*

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Know key scripture passages on suffering.
2. Know God's primary purpose for allowing suffering.
3. Understand the benefits of suffering.
4. Be able to articulate some of the key errors of prosperity theology.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### Weisheng

Weisheng<sup>655</sup> is a friend of mine whom God is using to take the gospel to students from predominantly Buddhist backgrounds. Though his work is difficult and dangerous, the Lord is giving him souls. But Weisheng suffers seasons of severe depression. On one of my trips to visit him, he spoke of this: "Sometimes my mind becomes so dark that I must spend some days alone with the Lord," he said. "I ask my wife to bring me only simple food; and in my room alone, I read scripture and pray until the darkness lifts. Though these seasons are

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<sup>655</sup> Not his real name.

so difficult, I wouldn't trade them for anything; because **during these seasons, Jesus has become so precious to me!**"

## A Christian Couple

A young Christian couple I know has been praying earnestly for a child for several years, but God hasn't chosen to grant their request. Their hearts are broken. However, people around them notice that through their pain the Lord is deepening their spiritual lives.

## Jesse

When our son Jesse was blinded by cancer in 2001, he became a very bitter little boy until Jesus powerfully healed his heart, in a moment of time.<sup>656</sup> Through this experience, Becky and I learned that the greatest healing of all is not the healing of the body, but the healing of the heart.

## Charles Spurgeon

Charles Spurgeon, known in England as the "prince of preachers," often suffered from depression. But he once said, **"I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages."**

These snapshots illustrate the power of suffering to draw us closer to Christ and to form us into his likeness.

- » Perhaps there is someone in your group who would like to share how suffering has helped to develop the life of Christ in them.

## THE BIG IDEA

Formation into the image of Christ requires suffering. To gain the most from suffering, we need to develop a biblically formed understanding of it.

## INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a reality for all Christians. Peter wrote these words to suffering Christians: "Wherefore let them that **suffer according to the will of God** commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator."<sup>657</sup>

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<sup>656</sup> This story is found in Becky & Tim Keep, *Eyes to See: Glimpses of God in the Dark*, (Shoals: Whispering Pines Publishing, 2013).

<sup>657</sup> 1 Peter 4:19, emphasis added.

As believers we look at the world through two lenses. Through the first lens, **we see the world as it ought to be and as it someday will be** because of the glorious triumph of Christ. By faith, we see a world without conflict, decay, pain, or death—a world fully redeemed and restored; a world free from decay and made completely new; a world of perfect love, beauty, righteousness, and peace.

For I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.<sup>658</sup>

Through the second lens, **we see the world as it is now**—a world where all creation is groaning as it awaits final redemption. Paul wrote these words to Christians in Rome facing suffering and persecution:

For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.<sup>659</sup>

Those who look only through the first lens, but refuse to acknowledge the second, will paint a distorted image of the world and create expectations never intended by the gospel. Jesus does not promise his sons and daughters a trouble-free life. In fact, he promised this: “These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world **you will have tribulation**; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”<sup>660</sup>

Job’s so-called “comforters” declare over and over that God always blesses the righteous with health, wealth, and prosperity, and that suffering is always his judgment on wickedness. Since Job was in deep suffering, the only conclusion, according to this theology, was that Job was wicked.

The story of Job proves that true prosperity includes suffering. Christian leaders are sometimes guilty of distorting God’s Word, as Job’s friends did. I once heard a dishonest worship leader declare financial “Prosperity!” to an assembly of very poor pastors and church members in a developing country. It made me angry, because it did not allow for the suffering these pastors were enduring as a part of true prosperity. Because this world has not been fully redeemed, faithful Christians often suffer right along with the wicked.

The scriptures declare that all creation groans as a woman giving birth, and that even those who enjoy life in the Spirit have reason to cry out. Those who know the Spirit of adoption, who know God as loving Father, are not exempted from the agony of living in a fallen world.

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658 Romans 8:18-19, *New International Version*

659 Romans 8:22-23

660 John 16:33, emphasis added.

Life in these earthly bodies may not get any easier outwardly. We are not promised better circumstances, but we are promised inner flourishing through faith in Christ. “Therefore, we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”<sup>661</sup>

We need to form a balanced, biblical perspective of suffering.

## WE HAVE BEEN CALLED TO SUFFER WITH JESUS CHRIST

For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps.<sup>662</sup>

Part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is to suffer. To this we have been called. The apostle Paul fully embraced suffering for the sake of knowing Jesus more. He wrote:

Yet, indeed, I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.<sup>663</sup>

Suffering took many different forms in Paul’s life, as it will in ours. He experienced a “thorn in the flesh”<sup>664</sup> from which God did not deliver him. He suffered persecution, abandonment, imprisonment, loneliness, physical discomfort, poverty, fear, pressures of ministry, and the trials of everyday life. But, through it all, God was bringing Paul into a deeper fellowship with himself.

## SUFFERING FORMS THE IMAGE OF CHRIST IN US

In Romans 8, after Paul speaks of the groaning and labor pains all of creation is presently enduring as it awaits the coming of Christ and final redemption, he encourages us with this truth: “And we know that **all things** work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.”<sup>665</sup>

And what is God’s purpose? “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to **be conformed to the image of his Son.**”<sup>666</sup> God has a purpose in our suffering, and that is to restore in us the image of Christ, who is the image of God.

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661 2 Corinthians 4:16

662 1 Peter 2:21

663 Philippians 3:8

664 2 Corinthians 12:7

665 Romans 8:28, emphasis added.

666 Romans 8:29, emphasis added.

The virtues and character of Jesus that we have talked about in this course cannot be fully formed in us apart from pain and adversity. Listen to Paul's words: "And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope."<sup>667</sup>

As sons and daughters of God, the discipline we receive through suffering is a necessary part of our training, and without it we cannot partake of his holiness.<sup>668</sup> "Now, no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been **trained** by it."<sup>669</sup>

## SUFFERING HAS MANY BENEFITS

Suffering forms us into the image of Christ. Suffering is the fire God uses to refine us and to form us into Christ's image. In her book, *A Place of Healing*, Joni Erickson Tada offers five benefits of suffering.<sup>670</sup> I want to share these, with three additions.

- » Read and discuss the following passages together. Discuss how suffering produces character, obedience, purity, direction, strength, love, and glory in Christians.

1. **Suffering can turn us from a dangerous direction.**<sup>671</sup>
2. **Suffering can remind us where our true strength lies.**<sup>672</sup>
3. **Suffering can restore our lost beauty in Christ.**<sup>673</sup>
4. **Suffering can heighten our thirst for Christ.**<sup>674</sup>
5. **Suffering can bring us into greater fellowship with Christ.**<sup>675</sup>
6. **Suffering can increase our fruitfulness for Christ.**<sup>676</sup>

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<sup>667</sup> Romans 5:3-4

<sup>668</sup> Hebrews 12:10

<sup>669</sup> Hebrews 12:11, emphasis added.

<sup>670</sup> Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 80ff

<sup>671</sup> Psalm 119:67; 1 Peter 4:1-3

<sup>672</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>673</sup> 1 Peter 1:6-8

<sup>674</sup> Jeremiah 2:13

<sup>675</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>676</sup> Acts 14:22; John 15:5



**7. Suffering can provide God with opportunities to reveal the glory of Christ in and through our lives.<sup>677</sup>**

Becky and I were desperate for healing in January 2006. Becky had been hospitalized for days at St. Luke Hospital in Manila with German measles. Even after she was discharged, she remained terribly weak. On top of this, when we arrived back to our campus home, we found our six-month-old, Carrie, very sick, running a high fever, and not sleeping or eating. All she would do was cry, and we learned that she had been in this condition for two days. Becky and I were exhausted and frightened, and we felt that we could not take another step.

When Becky saw Carrie's condition, she urged me to rush her to Manila (a four to five-hour drive then), but I told her I was so tired I just couldn't do it. Then, so clearly, the still voice of God spoke to my heart; and I felt that we should do what James 5:14 teaches and call for the elders of the church to pray for our sick daughter. They came gladly; and I'll never forget how that as we prayed the peaceful, assuring presence of God came into our living room. We knew our Father had heard our cry for help, and that he had promised healing. Within about thirty minutes of our prayer, baby Carrie's fever was gone; she nursed and fell sound asleep. From that moment, she was completely healed; and God was glorified!

**8. Suffering can increase our eternal hope.<sup>678</sup>**

Blind poet Fanny Crosby showed an amazing attitude toward suffering, even as a child. At the age of nine, she wrote the following poem:

Oh what a happy soul am I  
Although I cannot see  
I am resolved that in this world  
Contented I will be!

How many blessings I enjoy  
That other people don't  
To weep and sigh because I'm blind  
I cannot and I won't.

One day, a well-meaning Scottish minister remarked to an adult Fanny Crosby, "I think it's a great pity that the Master, when he showered so many gifts upon you, did not give you sight." To this Fanny replied: "Do you know that if at birth I had been able to make one petition to my Creator, it would have been that I should be born blind?" "Why?" ask the surprised minister. "Because, when I get to Heaven, the first glance that shall ever gladden my sight will be that of my Savior." Fanny Crosby then gave the church the wonderful hymn, "My Savior First of All":

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<sup>677</sup> John 11:4, 40

<sup>678</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

1. When my lifework is ended, and I cross the swelling tide,  
When the bright and glorious morning I shall see;  
I shall know my Redeemer when I reach the other side,  
And his smile will be the first to welcome me.

*Refrain:*

I shall know him, I shall know him,  
And redeemed by his side I shall stand,  
I shall know him, I shall know him,  
By the print of the nails in his hand.

2. Oh, the soul-thrilling rapture when I view his blessed face,  
And the luster of his kindly beaming eye;  
How my full heart will praise him for the mercy, love, and grace,  
That prepare for me a mansion in the sky.
4. Through the gates to the city in a robe of spotless white,  
He will lead me where no tears will ever fall;  
In the glad song of ages I shall mingle with delight;  
But I long to meet my Savior first of all.

Suffering weans us from earth and increases our taste for heavenly joys!

## PROSPERITY THEOLOGY

Because many Christians are resistant to suffering, prosperity theology has become prevalent.

Christians around the world are experiencing suffering like never before. For instance, most of the 70 million Christians believed to have been martyred since the time of Christ were martyred in the last two hundred years.<sup>679</sup> In the midst of the unprecedented poverty and suffering among faithful Christians, prosperity theology is spreading through the church like wildfire. Christians need to be able to discern this theology and need to be equipped with answers to its teaching.

### What is Prosperity Theology?

Prosperity theology (sometimes referred to as the prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel, or the gospel of success) is a religious belief among some [professing] Christians, who hold that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for

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679 "Lausanne Conference Addresses Major Challenges for World Mission." Retrieved from <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/lausanne.conference.addresses.major.challenges.for.world.mission/11224.htm> September 12, 2020.

them; and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth....

Prosperity theology has been criticized by leaders from various Christian denominations, including within the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, who maintain that it is irresponsible, promotes idolatry, and is contrary to scripture.<sup>680</sup>

The prosperity gospel must be exposed because of its distortions of the Word of God and its destructiveness to the faith of many Christians. Satan often attacks the Word of God through slight distortions of truth because he knows that a small seed of doubt and false hope will reap a harvest of unbelief.

The questions before us now are not “Does God still heal, or work miracles, or sometimes give material blessings to his people?” but “Can Christians on this side of eternity claim physical and material blessing as their right? Is physical healing promised on this side of eternity, through the atoning death of Jesus Christ?”

In his classic book, *Miraculous Healing*,<sup>681</sup> Henry Frost points out a number of teachings regarding healing (a major emphasis of prosperity theology) which should be tested by the Word of God. From my reading of Frost's book, I have outlined seven teachings of prosperity theology (especially related to miraculous healing) which have brought confusion to many sincere Christians.

## Seven Errors of Prosperity Theology

### Error 1

**Prosperity theology teaches that salvation equally involves the saving of our souls and the healing of our bodies on this side of eternity.**

What does the Bible teach? Scripture agrees that the redemption of Christ will ultimately include our physical body, but healing in this life is not promised. Though scriptures invite us to ask for healing, the gospel does not reverse every effect of the fall in this life.

These bodies, as they now exist, are decaying. At the resurrection, we will be given new bodies “like unto his own glorious body.”<sup>682</sup> This old “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God... but we shall be changed.”<sup>683</sup> Paul says that these earthly tents will be de-

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680 “Prosperity Theology.” Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity\\_theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology) September 12, 2020.

681 Henry Frost, *Miraculous Healing: Why Does God Heal Some and not Others?* (Hagerstown: Christian Heritage, 2000). Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones described this book as the best he had ever read on the subject of divine healing.

682 Philippians 3:21

683 1 Corinthians 15:50

stroyed; but we will be given a “building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”<sup>684</sup> Like a decaying seed,

The [earthly] body is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body; and there is a spiritual body.<sup>685</sup>

Joni Eareckson Tada, a Christian lady who has suffered as a quadriplegic for more than 40 years, writes, “All life, all healing, and all atonement flow from the fountain who is the Lord Jesus Christ. Where else would it come from?” She goes on to explain, “**What Jesus began doing to sin and its results [disease, decay, death] won’t be complete until the second coming.**”<sup>686</sup> Just as seed won’t become a full-grown plant until it is buried, so these bodies won’t experience full redemption until they are buried in death.

We must balance our teaching about physical healing with the truth that sometimes God chooses not to heal because he has something better in mind for us.<sup>687</sup> Through a “thorn in the flesh,” for instance, Paul learned humility and the all-sufficient power of Christ.<sup>688</sup> Joni also says, “God permits what he hates (human suffering) in order to accomplish what he loves (our sanctification).”<sup>689</sup>

When our son Jesse was sick with cancer, we wrestled often with God for healing during the four-year battle. Literally thousands of people were praying for his healing. Some well-meaning and godly people even told us that they had received the divine promise of physical healing for Jesse, and that we need not worry any longer because the next doctor’s appointment would reveal that he was cured. Rather than getting better, however, the cancer continued to spread, until in 2001 he lost his eyes. The miracle that we found as parents through these most difficult days was the miracle of peace and joy and the underlying confidence that God was doing something better than physical healing! This better answer to prayer is still being worked out in our lives and in Jesse’s life today.

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684 2 Corinthians 5:1

685 1 Corinthians 15:42-44

686 Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God’s Sovereignty*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010), 64

687 Hebrews 11:35-39

688 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

689 Joni Eareckson Tada, “Joni Eareckson Tada Interview: Icons of Faith Series.” Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/> September 18, 2020.

## Error 2

### **Prosperity theology sometimes teaches that God's covenant promises to Israel also apply to the church.**

Some teachers of prosperity theology apply God's covenant promises made to Israel as applying to Christians today. In Exodus, for instance, God promises the people of Israel that if they would "diligently heed the voice of the LORD your God and do what is right in his sight... I will put none of the diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians. For I am the LORD who heals you."<sup>690</sup> "Sickness belongs to the Egyptians, not to the people of God. And only as we return spiritually to Egypt, do we return to its [disease] and perils."<sup>691</sup>

According to this view, faithful Christians will never get sick. Disease is reserved for unbelievers. Since God made a covenant of healing with Israel, this covenant must apply to spiritual Israel—the church.

There are a lot of problems with this covenant doctrine, but I will only mention a few:

#### **1. To go back under the old covenant is to go back to the old covenant law.**

Christians are not living under the regulations of the Old Testament law, nor does every promise of the Old Testament law apply to us in the same way it did to Israel. If the regulations of the Old Testament law are still necessary for believers in Jesus, then he died for nothing.<sup>692</sup>

#### **2. Israel was a kingdom ruled by God.**

Through Israel he wanted to demonstrate what his perfect rule would look like, to offer his people a visual portrait of a kingdom yet to come. When Christ does, indeed, reign and rule on this earth, his people will no longer experience pain of any kind!<sup>693</sup>

#### **3. God made Israel an earthly people and gave them physical blessings in order to teach them, and us, spiritual truth.**

This isn't to say that he won't give us physical blessings as he did Israel, but that they are **not promised to us in the same way** they were to the nation of Israel. God overcame Israel's physical enemies; quenched their physical thirst from a material rock; gave them material food; appointed them material land they didn't buy; gave them material houses and cities

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<sup>690</sup> Exodus 15:26

<sup>691</sup> Henry Frost, *Miraculous Healing: Why Does God Heal Some and not Others?* (Hagerstown: Christian Heritage, 2000)

<sup>692</sup> Galatians 5:2

<sup>693</sup> Revelation 21:4

they didn't build, cattle they didn't raise, and harvests they didn't plant.<sup>694</sup> But God has made us a heavenly people and has given us "spiritual blessings in heavenly places."<sup>695</sup> He will conquer our spiritual enemies,<sup>696</sup> give us drink from the spiritual rock—Christ,<sup>697</sup> offers us spiritual food (Christ is the manna),<sup>698</sup> and a heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>699</sup> We are a spiritual temple,<sup>700</sup> a spiritual priesthood, and a holy nation.<sup>701</sup> No spiritual disease (sin) will in any way corrupt us as long as we walk in the light.<sup>702</sup>

It is very clear in scripture that not every covenant made with the nation of Israel applies directly to the church except in a spiritual sense. We must not, therefore, claim promises not meant for us. Such thinking will only create disillusionment. The physical blessings and experiences Israel had were only shadows and symbols of the greater spiritual blessings we Christians enjoy today, "For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are **copies of the true**, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."<sup>703</sup>

### Error 3

**Prosperity theology often interprets Isaiah 53:4-5 as a promise of physical healing *now*.**

Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and **with his stripes we are healed.**<sup>704</sup>

In this wonderful passage, Isaiah prophesies of a two-fold ministry of Jesus Christ:

1. Jesus our burden bearer (verse 4).
2. Jesus the sacrifice for our sin (verse 5).

As Jesus reached out in love to hurting people, casting out their demons and healing their diseases, he became mankind's burden bearer. Matthew teaches this:

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694 Deuteronomy 11:27

695 Ephesians 1:3

696 2 Corinthians 10:3-4

697 1 Corinthians 10:4

698 John 6:33-36; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4

699 Revelation 21:2

700 1 Corinthians 3:16

701 1 Peter 2:9

702 1 John 1:9

703 Hebrews 9:24. See also Hebrews 10:1.

704 Isaiah 53:4-5, emphasis added.

When evening had come, they brought to him many who were demon-possessed. And he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick, that it might be **fulfilled** which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying: “He himself took our infirmities and bore our sicknesses.”<sup>705</sup>

When Jesus was wounded, bruised, and beaten on the cross, he was paying the price for our transgressions: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... and with his stripes we are healed.” The healing Isaiah speaks of is especially focused on our healing from the disease of sin, not physical sickness! The apostle Peter encouraged suffering Christians to follow the example of Jesus who endured harsh treatment from sinners on our behalf: “Who himself bore our **sins** in his own body on the tree, that we, having died to **sins**, might live for righteousness—**by whose stripes you were healed.**”<sup>706</sup>

Still today he invites us to cast all our cares upon him.<sup>707</sup> He says to us, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”<sup>708</sup> When we suffer, he suffers with us, prays for us, sometimes heals us, and always offers healing for our souls. While our present earthly bodies waste away, our souls are being renewed day by day because of the cross.

It should be noted that every reference to the wounds, bruises, and blood of Jesus in Isaiah 53 is connected to **sin**—not directly to physical sickness.<sup>709</sup> Our sin was the horrible disease which caused Jesus such agony, humiliation, pain, and bloodshed. It was our sins which held Jesus to the cross, and by the stripes of Jesus we are spiritually healed.

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**“Christ did die to destroy sickness, and he will yet do it. But he does not say that he will, in a perfect sense, do it now, but rather, at a later time when he comes in power and great glory.”**

**Henry Frost**

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Because of the blood, we are no longer held in sin’s grip, are no longer enslaved to the desires of the flesh, and are no longer enticed by the things of this world. Jesus’ blood has set us free! Physical decay and death cannot take away what Jesus has done for our souls! Physical suffering will hide God’s face at times, but no amount of suffering or misery has the power to separate us from his love.<sup>710</sup> No matter what is happening in your body, in the atonement of Christ your soul will always be safe and secure. Because of the cross, we

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<sup>705</sup> Matthew 8:16-17, emphasis added.

<sup>706</sup> 1 Peter 2:24, emphasis added; see also Romans 5:8-9, 1 Corinthians 15:3

<sup>707</sup> 1 Peter 5:7

<sup>708</sup> Matthew 11:28

<sup>709</sup> See Isaiah 53:5-6, 8, 10-12

<sup>710</sup> Romans 8:31-39



look forward to a future day when every effect of the curse will be gone! Our world will be made new. Weeds and thorns will be no more. Our bodies will be made whole. Suffering, pain, and death will be permanently destroyed.

All healing—both physical and spiritual—is in the cross. Healing from sin is promised now to all who believe on Jesus. Healing from sickness is sometimes granted now but promised later.

#### **Error 4**

**Prosperity theology often teaches that Jesus' promise of "greater works" in John 14:12 means greater miracles.**

Many interpret this passage as Jesus' promise that all disciples will do greater miracles than even he did.

Did the apostles perform greater miracles than Jesus? There are thirty-five specific miracles of Christ recorded in the gospels, though he performed many more; but in Acts, only twelve miracles of the apostles are recorded, though they also worked many more. The point is: while miracles certainly aren't excluded from the New Testament, they were never the focus.

Did any of the early disciples ever perform a greater miracle than the miracle of the loaves and fishes, or the turning of water into wine, or the stilling the storm, or the great catch of fish, or the restoring of sight to two blind men, or raising of Lazarus from the dead? Though some of the disciples did, indeed, work some powerful miracles, nothing ever fully matched the wonder of what the Lord had done. Together, the church has done greater spiritual works than Jesus in the sense that by his death and resurrection Jesus laid the foundation that we have been building on ever since.

To the early Christians, the preaching of the gospel was always central; occasional signs and wonders were used by God to validate the message and the messengers, especially in places where the gospel had never been preached. The reason signs and wonders have such power to grip and astonish people, even today, is because they are so rare. If miracles were to become normal and predictable, they would lose their effectiveness and God's message would be ignored.

When I was a boy I knew a teacher who would once in a while clap his hands very loudly when students fell asleep or stopped listening for one reason or another. He had something very important to say and needed their eyes fully fixed on him. After he had startled the class and recaptured their attention, he wouldn't keep clapping, but rather go on with the lesson at hand. If this teacher had clapped too often, his students would have learned to tune it out. We should understand miracles as God's way of clapping his mighty hands to capture mankind's attention, so that the powerful message of the gospel may be clearly heard, but not as normal, routine events.



I'll never forget the effect of the dramatic healing of a little mountain girl some years ago. As we began to pray for her, a group began to gather—some saved, but some were still lost in pagan darkness. As we Christians surrounded this little girl and held her in our arms, we felt the fearful power of Satan and saw with our own eyes the effect of a demonic attack. But as we cried out to God, sang together, and claimed the victory of the blood of Jesus, the little girl became very still and then fell asleep. After about fifteen minutes, she sat up, asked for a drink of water, and then, to our amazement, walked away as if nothing had happened! This miracle became a powerful sign of Christ's superior authority to a village long held in Satan's grip; and God was glorified.

Beware of the danger of seeking after signs and wonders,<sup>711</sup> but also guard your heart against unbelief. God is still healing and delivering today, according to his will.

## Error 5

**Prosperity theology sometimes teaches that signs should be sought after.**

In Mark 16:17-18 Jesus says, "And these signs will follow those who believe: In my name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

These signs are, indeed, following the gospel as it is being faithfully proclaimed around the world, especially in places where it has not been known. Lord, forgive us for our unbelief!

These signs and wonders, however, should not be sought after. They will naturally follow the faithful preaching of the gospel. As we humbly, obediently, and expectantly go into the world preaching the gospel, God's power will be displayed in and through his church.

As an example, when Paul was shipwrecked and washed ashore on the island of Malta,<sup>712</sup> it was certainly no accident from God's perspective. God saw an island full of lost people Jesus had died to redeem. As Paul helped gather sticks for a fire, a poisonous viper latched onto his hand. Because he did not die, God began to open a door of ministry for Paul on that island.

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711 Luke 11:29

712 Acts 28

## Error 6

**Prosperity theology sometimes teaches that because Jesus is “the same yesterday, today, and forever,”<sup>713</sup> then we should always expect the same answers to prayer.**

Jesus Christ is indeed unchanging in his nature and character, but his activities are quite unpredictable. God is not a machine that we can program, control, or manipulate. He is a person who acts according to his will, for our good and for his glory.

**God’s love for his children who suffer is unchanging.** The one thing we can count on is that Jesus is unchanging in his love! He will never leave us or forsake us. His resurrection power will be mighty in us—power to sometimes move the mountain, sometimes climb it, and sometimes tunnel through it! His all-sufficient grace and peace will always sustain us in suffering and pain. Because he is sovereign, every circumstance we encounter will submit to his control and be woven into the fabric of his perfect design.

I’ll never forget the hour ride home after five-week-old Jesse had been diagnosed with retinoblastoma (cancer in the eye). As any loving parent would be, Becky and I were pained by the uncertainties which lay ahead; but as we rode along, an unspeakable divine peace enveloped us. This peace found entrance as we began to recall the unmistakable, providential circumstances which had brought us to this moment. Here are a few things that flooded our hearts with peace and praise. First, we weren’t supposed to be in the USA, but we were. A few weeks before beginning our first missionary term, I had happened to witness a crime and the state of Indiana agreed to pay our family’s way home if only I would testify. Second, we weren’t supposed to be able to get Jesse’s birth certificate and passport in time to fly out of Manila in time for the trial, but we did. Within three days of his birth, we had checked out of the hospital, fought through Manila traffic, and made it to the US Embassy with fifteen minutes to spare. We were the last customers of the day. Third, we weren’t supposed to be at the doctor’s office in Michigan, but we were. Though we suspected nothing, we decided to have a well-baby check-up before returning to the field. Fourth, as we were already putting our coats on to walk out of the doctor’s office, our pediatrician friend took one last look into Jesse’s eyes. This last look turned out to be the saving of Jesse’s life. We are convinced that if we had come back to the Philippines without catching the disease, Jesse would have surely died.

As we rode along in the car that October day, God opened our eyes like they had never been opened before to his behind-the-scenes, detailed management of our lives; and the overwhelming beauty of his sovereign, providential care took our breath away. Our confidence does not rest in our ability to command and manipulate God, but in his power to make every circumstance in our lives submit to his loving, caring, sovereign control.

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713 Hebrews 13:3

## Error 7

### Prosperity theology sometimes distorts the meaning of faith.

James gives this beautiful invitation to the church:

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.<sup>714</sup>

One afternoon as I hiked through a certain village with some pastors, a very sick baby was brought to us for prayer. The child had been sick for two weeks, as I recall; and as we listened to the sad story from a tearful mother, our hearts were filled with the Lord's compassion. I'll never forget that as we laid our hands on this sick baby and began to pray, the Holy Spirit witnessed to our hearts that it was indeed his will to heal. It wasn't hard to pray, but natural. We weren't imposing our will on God but felt rather that we were his instruments. Our confidence for healing and boldness to ask came not by our own striving, but by the Lord's purpose and grace. The next day when we returned to that village, we found the baby completely well, as expected. I believe this is the prayer of faith James speaks of.

Faith is simply trust. It is not trust for God's children to demand their way. Trust is simply believing that God can and will do everything he wills to do.

Physical suffering often provides us opportunities to grow in trust. Henry Frost writes:

To me this is blessed experience: if sickness has come to put myself wholly at his disposal, either in sickness or in health; to enquire what he would have me to do in seeking for healing; to ask if the circumstances suggest this he will heal miraculously; to seek, lacking such healing, to know his mind in respect to healing of some other sort; and, finally, to accept the issue of his will, whatever it may be, not only submissively, but also in trust and with praise.<sup>715</sup>

- » Discuss these seven errors of prosperity theology together. Are these errors manifest in churches or among Christians you know? What are some of the results of believing these errors? Feel free to also share stories of healing and deliverance.

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714 James 5:15

715 Henry Frost, *Miraculous Healing: Why Does God Heal Some and not Others?* (Hagerstown: Christian Heritage, 2000), 110

## CONCLUSION

Suffering is a tool held in the hand of a good and loving God. Embrace it. With it he is conforming you and me into the image of the Son. Remembering this will bring peace to our hearts and hasten our transformation.

A little piece of wood once complained bitterly because its owner kept whittling away at it, cutting it, and filling it with holes; but the one who was cutting it... paid no attention to its complaining. He was making a flute....<sup>716</sup>

### LESSON 13 ASSIGNMENTS

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Spend at least thirty minutes this week reviewing this lesson, including the scripture references, asking the Holy Spirit for insight.
3. Record in your journal any specific changes that ought to be made in your life, as the Lord reveals them to you.
4. Meditate on at least one Psalm in your daily devotional time and record in your journal what the psalmist says about the nature and character of God.
5. Record in your journal a personal prayer for spiritual transformation and growth based on this lesson.
6. Practice using Dr. Brown's *Daily Prayer Guide* in your daily private prayer.

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716 M. R. Dehaan, *Broken Things*, as quoted in Charles Swindoll, *Favorite Stories and Illustrations* (Philippines, OMF Literature, 1998), 547

## LESSON 13 TEST

1. Prove from scripture that suffering is part of God's will for Christians.
2. What are the two ways Christians see the world?
3. What passage teaches that Jesus is our example in suffering?
4. According to Romans 8:28-29, God is causing all things to work together for good to those who love him. What is his ultimate purpose? "That we might be \_\_\_\_\_ to the \_\_\_\_\_ of his \_\_\_\_\_."
5. What are four of the eight benefits of suffering mentioned in this lesson?
6. In your own words, explain at least two of the errors of prosperity theology.

# LESSON 14

## FORMED BY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

### LESSON 13 REVIEW

*Note to class leader: Review the main points from Lesson 13. Ask students who are willing to share their personal prayers from Lesson 13.*

#### LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. Learn to treasure the church; the community of Christ.
2. Understand how important this spiritual community is to our spiritual growth.
3. Make a commitment to greater participation in the life of the church.

### SNAPSHOTS OF LIFE

#### Hindered by Hypocrisy

Gracia, a Latino young lady, has been hurt by hypocrites in her church and has become somewhat cynical. She has a hard time trusting. She still attends a service once a week, but rarely connects with anyone apart from the weekly Sunday morning service. She feels that her own personal relationship with God is enough.

#### Hindered by Busyness

Evan, a businessman in Asia, attends a large worship service in his city, but believes he's too busy to serve the church. He gives his tithes but nothing more. He hardly knows anyone in his congregation by name.

## Hindered by Self-Sufficiency

Akachi is a sought-after evangelist in Africa who is always giving out but rarely receiving grace from the family of God. He's becoming lonely and spiritually weak because he doesn't give other Christians the chance to speak into his life.

## Hindered by a Critical Spirit

Jim and Lisa are North Americans who have changed churches several times in the last decade. They still haven't found one they are completely comfortable with, so they haven't committed to any one congregation. They are quick to express their dislikes and concerns about each church they attend, but never volunteer for ministries and rarely connect with fellow believers in small group settings. They don't know what they are missing!

## Fully Engaged

New Testament church Christians:

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.<sup>717</sup>

Though all but the last snapshot are fictitious, they describe the attitude that many Christians have toward church. Around the world, there are a vast number of believers who are not connecting with other members of the body of Christ in deep, meaningful, and transformative ways.

- » Why do you think so many Christians lack participation in the family of God? What part does laziness play? Or indifference? Or selfishness? Or fear? Why are Christians afraid to develop deep relationships with other Christians sometimes?

## THE BIG IDEA

The Holy Spirit forms us into the image of Jesus Christ as we participate in Christian community. This truth is vital! It cannot be dismissed if we would mature spiritually. **God's purpose for every Christian church is to provide the acceptance, edification, accountability, and active ministry opportunities necessary for spiritual growth.**

In this lesson, we will explore why participation in and commitment to the life of the church—through worship, service, fellowship, discipleship groups, prayer meetings, witness-

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<sup>717</sup> Acts 2:46-47a

ing, etc.—is so vital. We will explore the power that participation in Christian community has to form us into the image of Jesus.

- » Read Ephesians 4:11-13 and Romans 12:4-16 together. From these verses, what are some of the ways we serve one another as fellow believers? What is the final goal, according to Ephesians 4:13?

It's important to understand that the goal of everything we do in love and service to one another (Romans 12) ought to be to edify each other so that, little by little, we each bear more and more the image of our perfect Savior (Ephesians 4). This truth, imbedded in our hearts, will add meaning to even the smallest acts.

## What is the Church?

You and I were bought with the precious blood of Christ and baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ's church—his body, his bride, his temple, his redeemed family! Together all believers are the church! The church is not a building; the church is you! It is us. It is our husbands, wives, children, and friends. Let us not think of church simply as the place we go on Sundays or even just the people we meet there. All who are redeemed are part of God's universal church; and connecting with one another, for the purpose of edification, is essential to spiritual maturity.

Why is participation in Christian community so important? Here are just some of the reasons.

## PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY IS WHAT WE WERE MADE FOR

We've been created in the image of the triune God—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These persons of the Trinity have been in intimate, joyful fellowship for all eternity. We were created with this same capacity and need. We were created for fellowship. We were created for one another.<sup>718</sup> We were created for deep and meaningful spiritual relationships. When community is missing from our spiritual lives, we are weaker, more selfish, more vulnerable to sin, more vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy, lonelier, more broken, and more personally and spiritually deformed. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw writes, **"A person does not realize this self-centered bent so long as he lives in isolation. One needs to live in community to realize the problems in his own soul."**<sup>719</sup>

Isolation is Satan's strategy. He is portrayed in scripture as a "roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour."<sup>720</sup> Those who live in Africa know how lions hunt their prey. They run after a herd until one begins to fall behind, until the weakest of the herd becomes isolated from

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718 A phrase repeated over 50 times in the New Testament

719 Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 1998), 65

720 1 Peter 5:8



the protective shelter of the rest of the herd. Then, it's only a matter of time before the lion pounces and devours.

God determined from the foundation of the world to put people in small communities called families. Infants, children, young adults, and even middle-aged and senior adults need a family to belong to. Imagine an infant who is born but then abandoned by her mother. Since she cannot feed or warm herself, she will die! Imagine children and young people who do not enjoy the comfort, guidance, discipline, and instruction of their parents. They will suffer. Imagine elderly people who have no one to look after them. Their lives usually end very sadly.

No matter what season of life you are in, you need family. If you haven't had a healthy earthly family, chances are you have struggled to become a spiritually, emotionally, and socially healthy Christian. But God has provided another family for you—the family of God!

The need for participation in community is expressed all through the New Testament. This makes it clear that we need each other—that we were not created to live independent lives. In the New Testament there are at least 55 references to the ways Christians should relate to one another. God shows us that spiritual community is very important. 20 of these 55 references command us to love one another. But there are many others:

- Have peace with one another (Mark 9:50).
- Wash one another's feet (John 13:14).
- Love one another (John 13:34).
- Be kindly affectionate to one another (Romans 12:10).
- Be of the same (humble) mind toward one another (Romans 12:16).
- Let us not judge one another (Romans 14:13).
- Receive one another (Romans 15:7).
- Admonish one another (Romans 15:14).
- Wait for one another (1 Corinthians 11:33).
- Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25).
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13).
- Bear with one another (Ephesians 4:2).
- Be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32).
- Speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).
- Forgive one another (Colossians 3:13).
- Teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16).
- Comfort one another (1 Thessalonians 4:18).
- Edify one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- Confess your trespasses to one another (James 5:16).
- Pray for one another (James 5:16).
- Have compassion for one another (1 Peter 3:8).
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9).

- Be submissive to one another (1 Peter 5:5).
- Have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7).

Christianity is about family! We are to live interdependent, connected lives. We are to be so spiritually and emotionally connected with other Christians that when they weep, we weep, and when they rejoice, we rejoice.<sup>721</sup> When we see a brother or sister naked, destitute, and hungry, we do what we can to meet their needs.<sup>722</sup> According to James, this is what real Christianity is about.

## JESUS CAME TO FORM A COMMUNITY, NOT JUST TO SAVE INDIVIDUALS

Without a doubt, the reason so many don't get involved with other believers—in worship, in sharing needs, in eating meals together, in confessing sins, in spiritual fellowship and prayer—is because they've never learned to value the church.

### Jesus Is Building His Church

If you ask the average church member why Jesus suffered and died, they would answer, “To save me from my sins,” “So that I might have a personal relationship with him.” These responses are true, but not the whole truth. Jesus gave the whole truth in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The word “church” means a called-out community or assembly. Together we make up this church. Jesus came to call us out of the world and sin to make us one with God and with one another, “that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in me, and I in you; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.”<sup>723</sup>

To say or act as though we don't need the church—that we don't need one another—is to despise the plan of Jesus. To criticize your little piece of the global church (your local assembly)—without praying, loving, and doing all that you can to heal it and beautify it—is to trample on Jesus' most precious possession and on the sacrifice he made for it!

#### 1. The Church is his precious bride.

The church is called the bride of Christ. Together we are Christ's bride, whom he has given his life for, “that he might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that he might present her (us) to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.”<sup>724</sup> Be careful how you speak about Jesus' bride! Any groom would get pretty

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721 Romans 12:15

722 James 2:15

723 John 17:21

724 Ephesians 5:26-27

angry to hear people saying hurtful things about his bride, mocking her blemishes, laughing at her impurities. How hurt and angry Jesus must feel when we professing Christians point out the faults and blemishes of his bride—a bride for whom he shed his precious blood—but make excuses for why we cannot commit our time and resources to seeing her become more spiritually beautiful!

## **2. The Church is a family, named after Christ.**

Paul says, “For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth gets its name.”<sup>725</sup> We must learn to love and treasure one another as family. And we must be careful how we treat the family of Jesus!

## **3. The Church is the body of Christ, made up of many different gifts interdependent on one another.**<sup>726</sup>

We must increase our appreciation for the diversity of gifts God has given us, rather than tearing each other apart. We must not despise Christ’s body, but make sacrifices to bring one another to maturity!<sup>727</sup>

## **4. The Church is a temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit<sup>728</sup> and being built by Jesus out of Christians, called “living stones.”**

We are “living stones... being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”<sup>729</sup> As living stones in the spiritual sanctuary Jesus is building, we are interconnected, interdependent on one another. And we are “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.”<sup>730</sup> This is more amazing and deep than we can comprehend!

So how can we separate from one another and go off in our own private corner with God? We can’t! We must get involved in the little portion of this building, invest ourselves in other “living stones,” so that we all might become a temple filled with the presence of God.

This understanding of the church has been one of the most transformative in my life. I graduated from Bible school in 1993 and three weeks later became the pastor of a small church. Early on I sometimes struggled to appreciate the value of the local church God had assigned to me, especially because it had its share of problems. But while driving through

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725 Ephesians 3:14-15

726 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

727 Colossians 1:28-29

728 1 Corinthians 3:16

729 1 Peter 2:5

730 1 Peter 2:9

town one cold, snowy, wintery night in 1996, listening to a radio sermon by Dr. John MacArthur, I began to see the church in a way I never had. His message was entitled, “Why I Love the Church”; and as he taught, I began to fall in love with my church, too! I wept for joy because the Holy Spirit opened my eyes to the awesome plan of God for the church. Here is just a small portion of John’s teaching:

In the mystery of the Trinity, we see that there is a [wonderful] and eternal love between the members of the Trinity.... That love must find an expression. True love always seeks to give. And in demonstration of his perfect love for his Son, the Father made a pledge to the Son.... He promised the Son a redeemed people—justified, sanctified, and glorified. He promised to bring the redeemed ones to glory, that they might dwell in the very place where Father and Son have dwelt since before time began.... And this collective body of called-out ones—a people for his name<sup>731</sup> from every tribe and people and tongue and nation<sup>732</sup>—would form a living temple for the Holy Spirit, becoming the very dwelling place of God....

The full significance of God’s eternal purpose becomes clear as it is unfolded in the Book of Revelation. There we get a glimpse into heaven, and what do you suppose the triumphant church is doing there? What occupies the glorified saints throughout eternity? They worship and glorify the Lamb, praising him—and even reigning with him.<sup>733</sup> The collective body is pictured as his bride, pure and spotless and clothed in fine linen.<sup>734</sup> They dwell with him eternally where there is no night, no tears, no sorrow, and no pain.<sup>735</sup> And they glorify and serve the Lamb forever. That is the fullness of God’s purpose; that is the reason the church is his gift to his Son.<sup>736</sup>

I realized that snowy night that by grace I have been made a part of something far more wonderful than I could possibly imagine! The bride of Christ is a love-gift from the Father to the Son! A conviction was born in my heart that no matter how damaged a local church might be, no matter how dry its preaching, no matter how poor its music, no matter how unfulfilling its fellowship, no matter how carnal its members, I should love her!

» How has this section caused you to think differently about the church?

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731 Acts 15:14

732 Revelation 13:7

733 Revelation 22:3-5

734 Revelation 19:7-8

735 Revelation 21:4

736 John MacArthur, “Why I Love the Church.” Emphasis added.

## THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IS RELEASED ON CHRISTIANS EXERCISING SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Every time we read of the Holy Spirit being poured out in the New Testament, it happened when a group of disciples were assembled together, praying with united hearts. On the Day of Pentecost as the disciples “continued in one accord in prayer... they were all with one accord in one place.... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit....”<sup>737</sup> The Holy Spirit was poured out on a group, not just an individual. Of course, we know that the Holy Spirit fills individuals, as well; but there is something unique and wonderful that happens when like-minded believers come together in unity, love, and prayer.

Later, under great stress from persecution, as they assembled together and prayed, the whole building “was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”<sup>738</sup> If you want more of the Holy Spirit in desperate circumstances: pray, worship, and serve with other Christians.

### In Desperate Times, We Need Christian Community

My family has had its share of desperate times and have often fled to the refuge of the body of Christ for encouragement, counsel, and strength. Through the cancer diagnosis of our newborn son, Jesse, and four years of treatment, we reached out to the body of Christ and learned how precious the family of God truly is. We were filled with the Spirit of grace through their prayers with us and their sharing in our family’s needs. As missionaries, experiencing times of loneliness, fear, sickness, and spiritual warfare, and the pain of a prodigal, we’ve been filled with the Spirit of peace, healing, victory, and deliverance through every crisis by our spiritual family. This lesson isn’t just good theology; it is practical truth for the challenges of life. There is special power poured out by the Holy Spirit when a church unites together.

Many Christians are weak and vulnerable because of their selfish desire for privacy!

- » Why is it sometimes so hard for Christians to be transparent about their needs, their faults and spiritual failures, their burdens? How can we create a safer environment for one another to be honest?

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737 Acts 1:14, Acts 2:1, 4

738 Acts 4:31

## Through the Holy Spirit, We Are Together Empowered to Be Christ's Witnesses

Jesus said to his disciples together, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses.”<sup>739</sup> I think that when we read this, sometimes we only think of ourselves individually being empowered to witness; but Jesus was speaking to his church together. Together they would be his Spirit-filled witnesses.

There is a special outpouring upon believers to give witness to the gospel when they do it together. I’m thinking of a congregation in Mexico who through much planning, praying, and giving, go out into pagan communities around their town to share the gospel and serve the poor. They do this on a weekly and monthly basis. God is rewarding them with souls. I’m also thinking of a youth group in Mexico who goes into hospitals in Jesus’ name and provides food for the poor whose families can’t help them. Together, they are his witnesses and the Holy Spirit is being poured out on their ministry.

The responsibility of winning souls isn’t on one Christian alone, but on us together. Each of us has a gift, a testimony, a calling. We each have a small part in the witness, but none of us can do it all. Some plant, and some water. God makes it grow.<sup>740</sup>

In the first lesson of this course, I shared about our neighbors who have been saved. It’s been a year since I wrote that testimony. During these past months, Danny and Kim have continued to grow in their faith. Everyone around them has taken notice, and they are both a tremendous blessing to our local fellowship.

Very recently, Kim had an unbelieving friend, Hettie, whom she has known for forty years, express a sincere interest in being right with God. This friend had never known Christ personally, though she has had some exposure to the gospel through the years and has lived a very hard life. So Danny, Kim, Becky, and I went to see her. When I asked Hettie about her interest in spiritual things, this is what she said: “I cannot believe the change that has happened to Danny and Kim. I have known them for forty years and just can’t believe the difference in their lives!” Later in the conversation, she said, “I want to be saved.” I shared a clear gospel Bible study, and together we led Hettie to Jesus. If I had attempted to witness to Hettie, apart from the witness of Danny and Kim, I doubt there would have been much effect. Together we were Christ’s witnesses.

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739 Acts 1:8

740 1 Corinthians 3:6

## **WHAT IF WE DON'T EXPERIENCE THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH OUR LOCAL CHURCH?**

It's important to acknowledge that not every local church is part of Christ's global, spiritual church. There are congregations of believers where death and decay exists and where the Holy Spirit has departed. These are not congregations we should participate in.

Let us also acknowledge that not every true church is equally faithful to the scriptures, equally favored by God, equally filled with the Holy Spirit, or equally redemptive. One must prayerfully seek discernment as to which fellowship will be most healthy for them and their families, and then choose to become an active participant through good days and bad days! This is when the fruit of the Spirit is formed in us. This is when Christ is formed in us.

Many years ago in the Philippines, the teaching of one of our summer Bible camp speakers was very disappointing! His teaching was boring, dry, and powerless. Some present began to murmur and complain. But I'll never forget what one of our pastors said to a group of us gathered after one of the services: "Well brothers," he said in all humility, "this is our chance to grow deeper in love!" It was a simple, powerful word from God to my heart. For as we worship, fellowship, and serve with other believers, there will always be things that disappoint us. God uses these moments of discomfort to build us up in love.

Often I find that when Christians talk about their church being dead they might be speaking more of their own death! This reminds me of the pastor I heard about who became so discouraged with his congregation that he announced in the newspaper that the next Sunday he would hold a funeral for his church! Out of curiosity people showed up on Sunday morning that hadn't been there for years. The building was packed. And there in the front was a casket!

The pastor began the service by opening the lid of the casket and inviting everyone to form a line to have a look at the dead church. When they looked in, they looked into a mirror and saw themselves!

## **CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IS GOD'S WAY OF FORMING US INTO THE IMAGE OF HIS SON**

Many believers have been hurt by their local church, and so they've abandoned every local church; they've decided not to commit to any. They may attend occasionally, but they are not actively involved. What they often don't realize is that when they abandon Christian community, they are abandoning God's means of sanctifying them.

If you would become more self-giving, more joyful, more affectionate, more like the Lord, you must connect with this family regularly. Through congregational worship, small group



discipleship, and one-on-one accountability, we will gradually be transformed into the people we were created to be. But what kind of church/spiritual community is most transforming?

## **Transformational Communities Are Receptive<sup>741</sup>**

The New Testament church had its share of quarrels. In Romans 14, for instance, there were divisions in the churches of Rome regarding doubtful things.<sup>742</sup> Some weren't able to eat non-kosher meat, while others could; some felt obligated to observe Jewish feast days, while others didn't. Both sides were "judging one another,"<sup>743</sup> a term Paul uses a few times in this chapter. Worship and fellowship were becoming strained. Things were becoming very unpleasant! What is the solution?

The solution, Paul says, is to receive, or accept, one another. The spiritually strong must "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things."<sup>744</sup> The weak must also receive him who eats, "because God has received him."<sup>745</sup> And, to the whole church, Paul said, with the same problem in mind, "Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God."<sup>746</sup>

Jesus' church will always be a very diverse one, and there is a great temptation to judge each other over any number of issues. The answer is to receive one another. This doesn't mean that we should compromise with clearly unbiblical doctrines or lifestyles; but it does mean that we cultivate an atmosphere where true believers, who show the fruit of salvation, feel welcomed.<sup>747</sup>

John Wesley, in a famous sermon, said that it is an unavoidable consequence of human weakness and lack of understanding that we all hold somewhat different opinions in spiritual matters. He said the main question we should focus on is this: "Is thy heart right, as my heart is with thy heart. If it be, then give me your hand."<sup>748</sup>

An accepting community is not one that is tolerant of everything, not agreeable in everything, not gifted in the same ways, but united by truth and love.

- » What are some of the challenges of being a receptive person or a receptive congregation?

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741 Matthew 11:34-35, Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 15:7

742 Romans 14:1

743 Romans 14:4, 10, 13

744 Romans 14:1

745 Romans 14:3

746 Romans 15:7

747 See also Mark 9:35-41.

748 John Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit." Retrieved from <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-39-catholic-spirit> January 18, 2021



## Transformational Communities Are Edifying

This principle is covered well in the Shepherds Global Classroom course, *Doctrine and Practice of the Church*, so I will not dwell on it here. How are they edifying?

- Through biblical preaching and teaching
- Through God-exalting worship
- Through genuine fellowship
- Through acts of service

## Transformational Communities Provide Accountability<sup>749</sup>

This is one of the most important reasons we must participate in Christian community. We all need accountability—especially pastors and Christian leaders. Accountability builds character. Accountability makes me more fearful of sin. Knowing that people are depending on me and will be expecting godly behavior from me is sanctifying.

Accountability sometimes leads to confrontation. This, too, is sanctifying and should be welcomed. We all need people to speak into our lives. We need to open ourselves up to others and confess our faults. We need transparency. Without accountability, we become spiritually careless.

King David needed a Nathan to confront him with truth.<sup>750</sup> Peter needed Paul to rebuke him for straying from the gospel.<sup>751</sup>

### 1. We must hold one another accountable to the scriptures.

Always the scriptures!

### 2. We are commanded to “admonish.”

To admonish is to warn, to watch out for, and to give guidance to each other. Paul says to “warn those who are unruly.”<sup>752</sup>

Yet do not count him as an enemy but admonish him as a brother.<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>749</sup> Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:14

<sup>750</sup> 2 Samuel 12

<sup>751</sup> Galatians 2:11

<sup>752</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:14

<sup>753</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:15

### 3. We must offer discipline. Discipline involves rebuke, correction, and instruction.

The early Methodists are some of the purest examples of the impact of accountability. Under the anointing of the Holy Spirit, their leader, John Wesley, preached to masses of (mostly) impoverished, neglected men and women in slum areas, street corners, and fields across England, and saw almost countless conversions to Christ. But he also saw a vast number of these converts become mature, Spirit-filled disciples. What was the key? He insisted that converts become committed to one another.

Wesley... insisted that people join what were called societies, which functioned very much like (house) churches.... In addition, they were asked to join a class which consisted of twelve people and a class leader. Each week they were challenged to come to class meeting to share candidly with one another about the state of their souls. Wesley was so serious about this that if people failed to attend the class meeting, they would not be allowed to return unless they came to him and shared why they were absent.

Though Wesley's practice might not work [everywhere] in today's world, it certainly did at the time. He offered people a method (hence the name "Methodist") to grow in Christlikeness in the context of communities.<sup>754</sup>

The design of the class meeting was to obey that command of God, "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." Here are questions often asked in those meetings:

- What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
- What temptations have you met with?
- How were you delivered?
- What have you thought, said, or done, of which you are uncertain if it is sinful?

Pretty tough questions—but think of how transforming these kinds of questions could be for us if we took this much interest in one another. There is an almost shocking entry in John Wesley's journal, where he grieves that he had failed to organize societies and class meetings in a certain town where he had preached. Many souls had come to Christ there, but when he returned twenty years later there was little fruit. This is what he says:

I was more convinced than ever that the preaching like an apostle, without joining together those that are awakened and training them up in the ways of God, is only begetting children for the murderer. How much preaching has there been.... But no regular societies, no discipline, no order or connection. And the consequence is that nine in ten of those once awakened are now faster asleep than ever.<sup>755</sup>

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754 James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 138

755 Ibid, 139

Without accountability, churches become emotional and superficial. Dr. Dennis Kinlaw believes that you and I need the accountability of other believers in order to see the needs of our own heart. He writes:

I am convinced this need for Christian community was the motive behind John Wesley's creation of... classes in early Methodism. I do not think there was a better way to teach holiness. [These] meetings revealed one's own carnality and the tyranny of one's self-interest. We usually consider the church to be a place for edification, for building up one another in the faith; but it is also a place for examination and self-disclosure. That is a painful part of church life which we do not like; but it is a necessary part. On the foreign mission field, the mission workers' greatest problems are not with the unsaved, but with the other missionaries. That is part of the divine plan [to sanctify us].<sup>756</sup>

## **Practical Advice for Participating in Community**

1. Make yourself available to others and to your church family.
2. Remind yourself often of how precious the church is to Christ and treat one another like family.
3. Commit to some form of ministry to the body, even if it's cleaning toilets!
4. Be committed when you feel like it and when you don't.
5. Make yourself vulnerable to others. If you're a man, seek the friendship and accountability of another man of God. If you're a woman, share your life with another godly lady.
6. When you gather for worship, do it with all your heart.
7. When there are problems in your local church, be part of the solution.

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<sup>756</sup> Dennis Kinlaw, *The Mind of Christ* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Press, 1998), 65-66

## **LESSON 14 ASSIGNMENTS**

1. Take a test based on the material from this lesson.
2. Meet together with your fellow classmates and testify to the spiritual lessons you have received from this course and the ways God has used these lessons in your life.

## LESSON 14 TEST

1. What is the Church?
2. At least how many times does the New Testament refer to ways Christians should relate to one another?
3. Finish this sentence: “Jesus came to form a \_\_\_\_\_, not just to save \_\_\_\_\_.”
4. List three word pictures used to describe the church.
5. What are three characteristics of transformational communities taught in this lesson?
6. What four questions were often asked in the Methodist class meetings under John Wesley?

# ASSURANCE TEST ANSWERS

1. Which phrase says it best? (Choose one phrase and offer biblical evidence)

- Saved by grace through faith, kept by works
- Saved by works, kept by works
- **Saved by grace through faith, kept by grace through faith**

Biblical evidence could include

- Ephesians 2:8
- 1 Peter 1:5

The Bible clearly states that all men must be saved (Acts 4:12). The following questions will help us understand why we must be saved.

2. We must be saved because we are **sinners** (Romans 3:10, 23; Isaiah 53:6).

3. What are three consequences of sin for the sinner?

- Sin **separates** us from God (Isaiah 59:1-2)
- Sin places us under the **wrath** of God (Ephesians 5:5-6)
- Sin results in **death** (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1)

4. How does faith in Jesus' death and resurrection undo these consequences of sin?

- God made Jesus to be **sin** for us (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).
- As our substitute, Jesus was **separated** from God because of sin (Matthew 27:46).
- Jesus bore the **wrath** of God on our behalf (Isaiah 53:6-7).
- By faith in his resurrection, Jesus makes us spiritually and eternally **alive** (Ephesians 2:6; 1 Peter 1:3).

5. What are some of the clearest signs that we have received new life by faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ?

- We have the witness of the **Holy Spirit** that we are children of God (Romans 8:16).
- We have a desire to know and **obey** God's Word (John 8:31; 1 Peter 2:2-3; 1 John 2:3-4).
- We have a **love** for Jesus and for others (John 8:42, John 13:35; 1 John 3:14).

- Though we still need to be pruned, we bear spiritual **fruit** (John 15:8; Galatians 5:22-23), and though some may still struggle with besetting sin (1 John 2:1; Hebrews 12:1), we overcome willful and habitual **sin** (1 John 2:29). John Wesley put it like this: “Sin remains, but it does not reign.”

6. Why did Jesus have to shed his blood? (Hebrews 9:22; 1 Peter 1:18-19)

Because by God’s decree sin cannot be **forgiven** without the shedding of sinless **blood**.

7. Why is it significant that Jesus became a man? (1 Timothy 2:5)

As both man and God, Jesus became the **Mediator** between God and man. He represented both a holy God and sinful men. He became the second Adam who did not fall through sin, and therefore qualifies as the perfect sacrifice in our place.

8. What role do works play in our salvation? (James 2:17; Titus 3:8; Ephesians 2:10)

Good works are the **result** of the new birth.

9. What must you do to be saved?

- **Admit** that you are a sinner and **repent** (Romans 6:23; Acts 3:19)
- **Believe** the gospel (Acts 16:31; Ephesians 2:8)
- **Confess** Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9)

10. We are not only saved by faith in the finished work of Christ but kept by **faith** as well (1 Peter 1:5).

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

These sources, and others, are used as references for these lessons.

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# RECORD OF ASSIGNMENTS

**STUDENT NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

Initial when each assignment has been completed. The tests are considered “complete” when the student achieves a score of 70% or higher. All assignments must be successfully completed to receive a certificate from Shepherds Global Classroom.

LESSON	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Test														
Lesson Review (30 min.)														
Reflection Journal														
Meditation on God from Psalms														
Write Personal Prayer														
Use <i>Daily Prayer Guide</i>														
Other Assignment														

Application for a Certificate of Completion from Shepherds Global Classroom may be completed on our webpage at [www.shepherdsglobal.org](http://www.shepherdsglobal.org). Certificates will be digitally transmitted from the president of SGC to instructors and facilitators who complete the application on behalf of their student(s).

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